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THOUGHT LEADERSHIP SERIES

Dismantling Mindset

The hardest communications problem is the one inside you

A Links Global thought leadership article by M. Sanchez, founder of Links Global, a communications firm working at the intersection of trust science, narrative design, and civic engagement. Part of the Links Global article series: Trust as Infrastructure. Drawn from 25 years of field practice and evidence-based research in strategic communication, public engagement, and institutional trust.

In Brief

Every failed campaign has a visible story and a hidden one. The hidden story is the set of assumptions the team carried into the room before anyone talked strategy. This article names five mindset patterns that quietly limit communications practice, explains why dismantling is the right word for what has to happen, and asks what the practitioner owes the people they work for.

Every communications failure has two stories.

The first is the visible one: the campaign that missed, the message that backfired, the initiative that lost the vote it should have won. This is the story that gets told in post-mortems, learned from in training programs, and cited in case studies. It is useful. It is also incomplete.

The second story is harder to tell because it requires looking at something no professional debrief is designed to examine: the mindset of the people who designed the work. The assumptions they brought to the room before a single strategy was discussed. The mental models that shaped what they were able to see, what they filtered out without noticing, and what alternatives they were structurally unable to consider because their thinking was organized in ways that made those alternatives invisible.

This second story is the one that repeats. The specific campaign changes. The sector changes. The decade changes. But the mindset failures (the particular ways that professional training, institutional culture, and personal cognitive habits limit what communications practitioners and their clients are able to think and therefore do) show up in the same patterns, generation after generation, with remarkable consistency.

Dismantling those patterns is not a communications strategy. It is a prior condition for effective communications strategy. And it is the work the field most systematically avoids.

What Mindset Actually Means in a Professional Context

Mindset, in common usage, has become a self-help term: something to optimize through positive thinking, growth orientation, or resilience practice. That is not what this article is about.

In a professional context, mindset refers to the organized set of assumptions, mental models, and cognitive habits that determine what a practitioner is able to perceive, what questions they are able to ask, and what solutions they are able to generate in response to a problem. Mindset is not primarily about attitude. It is about the cognitive architecture that shapes professional perception before conscious reasoning begins.

The implications of this are consequential. A practitioner operating from a mindset that frames communications as a delivery problem will consistently generate delivery solutions (better messages, better channels, better timing) even when the problem is not a delivery problem. A practitioner operating from a mindset that treats audiences as passive recipients of institutional information will consistently underestimate the degree to which those audiences are active interpreters of institutional behavior, bringing their own histories, expectations, and prior experiences to every communication they receive. A practitioner operating from a mindset that locates the problem outside the institution (in the audience's misunderstanding, the media's bias, the opposition's misinformation) will consistently miss the institutional behaviors that are driving the problem.

Chris Argyris made a version of this point decades ago in Teaching Smart People How to Learn: the most capable professionals are often the worst at examining their own reasoning, because they have rarely had to. Mindset failures are not incompetence failures. They are framework failures: cases where a practitioner or a leadership team is applying a coherent, internally consistent way of thinking to a problem that the framework cannot adequately capture. The thinking is sound within its own logic. The logic itself is the limitation.

The Five Mindset Patterns That Limit Communications Practice

1. THE DELIVERY MINDSET

The most pervasive mindset limitation in the field is the assumption that communications is fundamentally a delivery problem: identify the message, identify the audience, choose the channel, deliver the content, measure the reach. This model is not wrong exactly: delivery matters, channel choice matters, message design matters. But it is radically incomplete, because it treats the audience as a passive receiver of content rather than as an active interpreter of institutional behavior bringing a specific trust history to every communication they encounter.

The delivery mindset produces a characteristic failure pattern: investing significant resources in the quality and reach of communications while failing to address the conditions that determine how those communications will be received. It produces campaigns with millions of impressions and negligible behavioral change. It produces crisis responses that are technically impeccable and operationally ineffective. And it produces the specific, recurring confusion of organizations that communicate well by their own metrics and still wonder why trust doesn't follow.

Dismantling the delivery mindset does not mean abandoning attention to message quality or channel strategy. It means subordinating those questions to a prior question: what is the trust condition of the environment this communication will enter, and what does that mean for how it will be received regardless of how well it is designed?

2. THE INSTITUTIONAL VOICE MINDSET

The second mindset limitation is the assumption that the institution's voice (its official communications, its branded content, its designated spokespeople) is the primary lever available for building understanding and changing behavior. This assumption produces an organizational reflex: when communication is needed, the institution communicates. When trust is needed, the institution communicates about trustworthiness. When a crisis threatens reputation, the institution communicates to defend it.

In intact trust environments, this reflex is partially justified: institutional voices carry credibility and reach, and deploying them is often effective. In damaged trust environments, it is counterproductive. An institution whose communications are received as managed information cannot repair that reception by communicating more. It can only deepen the prior expectation that everything it says is strategic.

Dismantling the institutional voice mindset means genuinely rethinking who speaks on behalf of the institution's claims, and being willing to conclude that the most powerful communications strategy is sometimes to step back from institutional voice entirely, build a genuinely independent evidence base, and let independent credible voices carry claims that the institution cannot credibly carry itself. This requires a degree of institutional humility that the institutional voice mindset structurally resists.

3. THE CAMPAIGN MINDSET

The third limitation is the treatment of communications as a campaign: a bounded event with a launch date, an implementation period, and a completion point. The campaign mindset organizes communications work around discrete initiatives rather than around the ongoing institutional behavior that trust is actually built on.

This mindset produces a specific and costly failure: the investment of significant resources in campaign-period communications while neglecting the between-campaign periods when institutional reliability is actually demonstrated. Trust is built in the ordinary time: the months and years between campaigns when an institution delivers on routine commitments, discloses operational information

proactively, and demonstrates the kind of unglamorous reliability that changes a prior expectation from negative to positive. The campaign mindset is structurally unable to capture this, because it organizes attention around discrete events rather than around continuous institutional behavior.

Dismantling the campaign mindset means reorienting the communications function from event-based production to continuous program management: treating the disclosure calendar, the commitment ledger, and the between-campaign touchpoints as primary communications infrastructure rather than as background maintenance.

4. THE AUDIENCE-AS-PROBLEM MINDSET

The fourth limitation is the treatment of the audience's skepticism, resistance, or disengagement as the problem to be solved through communications. This mindset positions the institution as the solution-provider and the audience as the deficient party (under-informed, misinformed, irrational, or manipulated by bad actors) whose deficiency the communications program is designed to remedy.

This framing is enormously common and enormously damaging. It locates the problem outside the institution and outside the communications function, in the audience's epistemic failures. And it systematically prevents the more important question from being asked: what has this institution done, over time, to earn or to damage the trust that would make its communications receivable as information rather than as institutional management?

The audience-as-problem mindset produces a specific failure mode: the misinformation response. When an institution discovers that false or distorted narratives about its work are circulating in its key constituencies, the typical response, informed by the audience-as-problem mindset, is a correction campaign. Better information, delivered to the people who have the wrong information, to replace their wrong information with correct information.

This is appropriate and often effective in intact trust environments. In damaged trust environments, it fails, and understanding why requires dismantling the mindset that positioned the audience's misinformation as the primary problem. A randomized trial published in Pediatrics found that correcting the claim that the MMR vaccine causes autism did reduce the misperception, and also reduced intent to vaccinate among the parents who were most hesitant to begin with. The correction worked as information and failed as communication. In a damaged trust environment, the misinformation is a symptom. The primary problem is the institutional behavior that created the conditions in which misinformation could spread and be believed. Correcting the symptom without addressing the condition produces a pattern that trust research has documented in specific groups, though backfire effects are rarer than once assumed: corrections that deepen rather than relieve suspicion, because they arrive as further evidence of institutional management in an environment already primed to receive them that way.

Dismantling this mindset requires a fundamental reorientation: from asking "what is wrong with our audience?" to asking "what is our institution's contribution to the trust conditions that make this situation possible?"

5. THE MEASUREMENT MINDSET

The fifth limitation is the treatment of communications metrics as evidence of communications impact. This is perhaps the most structurally embedded mindset failure in the field, because measurement systems shape what practitioners are able to see, and most measurement systems in communications are designed to capture reach, not change.

Impressions, open rates, engagement metrics, share-of-voice scores, net promoter scores: these are measurements of communication exposure and response, not measurements of the behavioral and trust-condition changes that communications is ultimately designed to produce. The gap between the two is large. A meta-analysis of mediated health campaigns in the United States found short-term behavioral effects that were real but small, with correlations between roughly .04 and .15 depending on the behavior. An organization that reaches 13 million people with a well-designed campaign and never asks what changed in those 13 million people's behavior, trust, or relationship with the institution has not succeeded at communication. It has succeeded at reach. These are not the same thing.

The measurement mindset failure produces what might be called the metric mirage: the appearance of communications success, documented in impressive numbers, in the absence of any demonstrated connection between those numbers and the outcomes communications was hired to produce. This is not a measurement problem solvable by better metrics alone. It is a mindset problem: a failure to insist, from the beginning of any engagement, that the question "how will we know if this changed anything?" is answered before the question "what should we communicate?" is even asked.

Dismantling this mindset requires something uncomfortable: insisting on outcome measurement even when outcome measurement is hard, even when the client has not specified it in the scope of work, and even when the results of honest outcome measurement might be less impressive than the reach metrics would suggest.

Why Dismantling Is the Right Word

These five mindset patterns are not easily replaced. They are not replaced by reading a different book, attending a different training program, or deciding to think differently. They are structural: embedded in professional training, organizational culture, incentive systems, procurement processes, and the accumulated habits of careers spent working within frameworks that made the mindset seem self-evident.

Dismantling them is the right word because it implies a deliberate, structural process rather than a change of attitude. And because dismantling, unlike replacing, acknowledges that something real and load-bearing is being taken apart, that the delivery mindset, the campaign mindset, and the audience-as-problem mindset have served real functions in real organizations for real reasons, and that the people who operate from them are not operating in bad faith.

They are operating in frameworks that the communications field built and that professional training reinforced. The frameworks worked well enough, for long enough, in conditions stable enough, that they became invisible as frameworks: became, instead, just how things are. The current environment (its fractured trust landscape, its accelerated information ecosystems, its communities operating from defensive priors earned through accumulated institutional disappointment) has made the frameworks visible precisely because they are failing in ways that can no longer be attributed to execution quality alone.

The dismantling begins with that visibility. With the willingness to ask: what am I assuming in this situation that I have not examined? What is my mental model of how audiences receive institutional communications, and where did that model come from, and what evidence would challenge it? What am I treating as a communications problem that might actually be a trust problem? What am I treating as an audience problem that might actually be an institutional behavior problem?

These are not comfortable questions. They are not the questions that most professional training prepares practitioners to ask about their own work. But they are the questions that distinguish practice that is merely competent from practice that is genuinely effective: practice that not only executes well within an existing framework, but that knows when the framework itself is the limitation.

The Practitioner's Responsibility

The field of communications sits at a peculiar juncture. The environments it was designed to work in have changed. The conditions that made its foundational frameworks functional (stable information ecosystems, intact institutional trust, audiences primarily organized around deliberative engagement with institutional communications) are no longer the norm in much of the world. The frameworks have not changed at the same pace.

The practitioner who can see this (who can examine their own mindset with enough honesty to identify where their frameworks are limiting their perception) has a responsibility that goes beyond professional competence. They have the responsibility to name what they see, clearly and with evidence, to the institutions and leaders they serve. To resist the pressure to deliver a communications solution to a problem the evidence shows requires something else. To make the uncomfortable argument that the work the client is ready to commission is not the work the situation requires.

That argument is easier to make from a position of intellectual clarity about what mindset actually does to professional perception: how it organizes what we see, what we filter out, and what alternatives become invisible to us when our frameworks are no longer adequate to the complexity of the problems we face.

Dismantling mindset is not a one-time event. It is a practice: the ongoing discipline of examining the assumptions you bring to the room before the strategy begins, asking whether those assumptions are supported by the actual evidence of the environment you are in, and being willing to revise them when the evidence says you should.

That discipline is what separates communications that meets its metrics from communications that changes something that needed to change. And in the current environment, the distance between those two things has never been larger or more consequential.

Where This Fits

The five patterns described here are the habits the Links Global Trust Audit™ is designed to interrupt, by putting an honest trust reading in front of the plan. The NSI™ white paper describes what a communications function looks like once the campaign mindset and the delivery mindset have been set aside.

Schedule a conversation with Links Global: www.linksglobal.org

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