

Forget the General Public

There is no "General Public." Trying to reach or mobilize the general public will fail by definition, because the general public does not exist. When someone uses the phrase, they don't mean everyone – otherwise, they would say "everyone," which includes infants, the President, and the mentally ill.

Think about how people usually characterize the general public: apathetic, uninformed, easily led, too busy with their own lives to pay attention to important issues. Rarely does a speaker mean to include themselves when they speak of the general public. Usually, "the general public" means *Them* – not *Us*. Unless, of course, it's used to mean *Us* – not *Them*, as in "the general public does not support their extreme ideas."

There are times when the use of "the general public" isn't intended to be divisive; sometimes it's just lazy. A grant proposal might say, "Our project is designed to raise awareness of farmers, small business owners, teachers, students and the general public." "The general public" stands in to mean everyone else we can't think of.

Effective communication requires thinking about exactly who we want to reach – the specific publics, and the specific individuals. The idea of "the general public" skips over the work of identifying the targets, and keeps the communication from being strategic.

To become better communicators, we have to be better listeners. It is hard to listen to part of what we are told without overlaying our own assumptions, and prematurely jumping to our own conclusions. Instead, we have to listen for the conclusions of the people talking. Learning to be better listeners is critical, because unless we convince others that we really care about what they have to say (proven only by listening), we won't get beyond the superficial ideas and language, down to the underlying values and perspectives.

People intentionally speaking out for change can begin with listening critically to themselves, and each other, examining informal as well as public speech for the story behind the words. Advocates can simply ask each other, "Who do we mean by we? What story does that tell? Who else is in the story? Who ought to be?" A fundamental question for people working for change always is, "What are the shared values and assumptions of the people who will stand to benefit?"

Understanding this allows communicators to recognize and build from existing assumptions, in each and in every communication. This kind of listening, to frame the story before trying to tell it, applies at every stage of communication. Advocates must incorporate the broader perspective into the way they think about and understand their issue – and attract new allies who see themselves as part of the story