

Asset Framing with Trabian Shorters



Trabian Shorters is the founder of BMe Community, a *New York Times* bestselling author, and an international authority on a powerful, important new way of thinking and communicating called *asset framing*. Asset framing is a hot topic among leaders and organizations looking to make positive change—because it can be a game changer. **Doug Hattaway** spoke with Trabian about this paradigm-shifting approach to communication on the ***Achieve Great Things*** podcast.

DOUG: Tell us the story of the BMe community. What is your mission and what are you all working to achieve?

TRABIAN: When I was vice president of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, we started experimenting with this question of how do you engage people in their communities in ways that recognize [their] contributions and their aspirations? Specifically, how do we engage Black males?

We got such surprising and positive early results that we ended up repeating the program a second year. And then, in the third year, we spun it out to make it its own thing. So BMe originally stood for Black male engagement.

In 2013, we recognized that it wasn't so much about how to get Black males engaged; it was more about how to recognize Black male engagement. Then build upon their strengths rather than always emphasizing their challenges.

From that simple understanding came the practice we call "asset framing." Asset framing is literally asking and answering for yourself, "What if we stop defining everybody by their greatest challenges; if we weren't orienting ourselves to focus on people's deficits, what else would we see?"

And it turns out that when you use asset framing you can engage a broader cross section of people. You can actually have a higher social impact. And you do all these things without stigmatizing people. When you stop understanding people by patterns of inferiority, you aren't adding to their types of oppression.

DOUG: Your workshop has been called one of the best workshops on equity. You really open people's eyes to this by posing some simple questions to them. What kind of questions do you ask them?

TRABIAN: I like to open the conversation by saying, "Let's talk about why you need to stop trying to solve everybody's problems," which of course makes people say, "Well, that's nice, but that's the whole reason we're here."

When you're focused on solving problems, you define people by their problems. There's actually a higher impact when focusing on fulfilling people's aspirations rather than focusing on solving their problems.

When you're focused on fulfilling aspirations, you have to acknowledge that people have them. And then you focus on fulfilling them, which means you're going to solve their problems along the way. So it's a win-win all the way around.

When you focus only on problems you tend to be crisis oriented, you tend to be reactive, and you tend to paint all the corners of your own mind with brokenness. And that's depressing. I've got news for you: that wears people out.

Conversely, when you recognize that there are plenty of aspiring people, when you tell that story, and then you talk about what is systematically obstructing these people from achieving their aspirations, the public is more willing to engage. They're more willing to help because you described an aspiring person who's trying to achieve a worthy goal despite unfair barriers.

DOUG: A lot of this is about how you talk about people. What are examples for those still wrapping their head around this?

TRABIAN: I stress to people that it's actually less about how you talk about people and more about how you think about them.

For instance, I was just talking with a venture capitalist who, in his words, wants to get more "old white guys like [him]" to invest in firms that are run by people of color. For the most part, investors are basically afraid that if they put in their money, they are going to get lower returns. But that presumption of inferiority is based on us all having these narratives of inferiority and few examples of counterbalancing narratives. I don't even blame people for having these biases. I just like to point out there is a totally different way to live.

That is also validated by data and facts. For instance, there's lots of ways to think about the so-called at-risk youth, but most at-risk youth still go to school. One of the many ways you can think about them is as students. What do students who are in communities that are systematically disinvested in, systematically overpoliced, systematically under-resourced—what do those students want to achieve? [They have] goals of graduating and growing up, and having a normal life. So we can talk about the at-risk youth, or we could talk about the student who has to try to achieve in communities that are under-resourced.

Now that is still an at-risk youth. But the difference between the two narratives is that in one narrative, you've only defined the kid by their challenge. That's all anybody knows about them, that they come with problems. If you define the cues, trying to overcome barriers that they didn't create, situations that they inherited, they still have ambitions. They still have a positive

aspiration. And that kid will, not surprisingly, elicit a more sympathetic response than the at-risk youth does, even though it's the same kid. So we just try to help people understand it's not about ignoring the problems at all.

If you weren't introducing them in a way that denigrates them, how else would you talk about them? And that's where asset framing comes in. They want the same things that anybody else wants, but they have to achieve those things against headwinds.

The way that we teach it actually primes people to believe. The term "at-risk youth" always felt like these problems come with their identity rather than people being willing to consider the external factors. They inherit injustices and inequities, and a person who has inherited these might deserve a little extra effort from the rest of us to overcome those unfair barriers. That's not favoritism. That's being fair.

DOUG: What do you mean by assets?

TRABIAN: Let me go a whole layer deeper than I have so far. Everything that we do is actually rooted in cognitive science.

They say your brain is constantly forming mental narratives. It's constantly drawing upon whichever patterns are easiest for it to recall. And then it makes rational judgments within that context.

In the trainings I like to remind people that according to the Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman, who received the Nobel Prize in behavioral economics, two processes are always in action in terms of how people actually think.

When we make our decisions, one process is literally tied to our nervous system. So the same way that your nervous system is always on and always firing, there's a part of the brain that's always pattern mapping. That part of your brain is autonomic.

It does all these things before conscious thought. Like literally the way we breathe and sense things, that same process happening on a mental level a thousand times a second.

Your brain forms mental narratives way faster than you can form conscious thought. Like it's not a race. They're not even close.

So our whole argument is that changing your frame, changing your narrative, changes the level of impact that you'll be able to have. The fathers of system science have argued that changing mental models is the highest form of systems change.

DOUG: That's a good way for folks who are new to all this to think about narratives as mental models, sort of programming that has been made by society.

TRABIAN: That's right. So if we don't round out our patterns, then of course we're going to have stigmatized responses to people. Of course we're going to totally underappreciate people who fit those descriptions. And of course, we're going to think that we're actually helping them when, . . . if someone is threat-primed in your mind, then you're not actually trying to help them.

What you're trying to do is reduce the threat they represent. And if you step back and analyze it, that is what we do. We try to reduce the threat that the poor and the at-risk youth represent. We're trying to minimize their costs on society.

Equity is about actually valuing people, right? Helping them realize their greatest potential, and fulfill their aspirations. Equity is about fulfilling aspirations. We don't typically even know or talk about their aspirations. We're trying to reduce the problem that they are for the rest of us. And we just got to wake up to that reality.

DOUG: Yeah. In your example that you are using with the at-risk youth, it's an example of an adjective used to define a person, which is actually just a code word for all these big negative ideas that have been in the culture for too long.

I love how you're putting it the way we see the people, the way we think about people. You've just, you have a whole different image in your mind. It's simple, but so powerful at the same time.

TRABIAN: I think there's a misperception that if we dramatize a crisis it will motivate people to be engaged. But when we dramatize crises we actually tap into people's fears, and those fears trigger our survival instincts.

So yes, when people are afraid they're motivated, they turn on, they activate. But the simple fact is we're not hardwired to sustain that and those adrenal responses are supposed to be temporary. It's not supposed to be a constant feed of that. If you're actually trying to motivate people and keep them engaged within a long term, you have to stimulate their aspiration.

You have to stimulate their imagination of what's possible. You have to stimulate their belief that they're doing something that serves a higher purpose. And the ironic thing is, with our space, philanthropic work, we all get into the work to serve a higher purpose.

So we all have this aspirational orientation, but we've inherited this 18th-century "help the poor" kind of attitude about it, and it's not serving us anymore.

DOUG: I've seen that happen many times with the work that you do, where a lightbulb goes off and someone realizes they've committed their life to making things better in the world, but they've been looking at the people through a negative lens. For those who want to make this paradigm shift right away, what are some tips you can share?

TRABIAN: There's a couple of things. Take the asset-framing training. But outside of that, I invite people to take the asset-framing challenge.

It's a very, very simple thing to do. Ask yourself, how are you introducing X, Y, Z. To be clear, we're not saying you can never mention negatives. You absolutely can. We're not even saying you can never define people by the negatives. What we're saying is if you practice introducing people by their aspiration or contribution before you get to the negative thing, what that does for your mind is it prompts you to recognize your aspiration, and recognize their full potential.

If you deficit frame compared to asset frame, you name their problem, you name their challenge. You don't mention their aspirations, so you [have] left out at least half of who's in front of you.

With asset framing you actually tell the whole story. You start with their aspiration, and then you talk about the challenges. So it is a full representation of the situation. We invite people to practice introducing folks by their aspirations and contributions first,

You will discover that introducing folks by aspirations makes it easier for people to see affinities with folks, and you're more likely to get people engaged.

Take the hundred-day asset-framing challenge. Just practice the skill for a while and you will see more opportunities. You'll be less depressed actually, because you're not painting all the corners of your brain with brokenness. You'll see that it's better than the other way in the end.

DOUG: Where do people who are interested need to go online to find out about [this].

TRABIAN: So a couple of places. I run a nonprofit called BMe Community. It is built entirely on asset framing. Go to BMEcommunity.org, and you will see that we are defining Black folks by their aspirations to live and vote and excel in this country and spread love.

We're working to build Black love in America. If you're serious about this idea, the second link is pledge@blacklovepledge.org. It's just saying that you're one of those hosts who's willing to see Black folks.

And then the third link is my name, Trabianshorters.com.

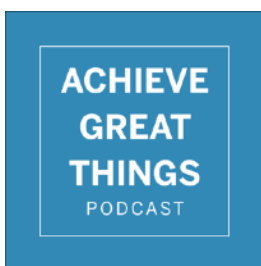
DOUG: To that young person who's hungry to learn and wants to make a contribution to the world and filter their negative lens, you can go to Hattaway.com and look under "Insights" and you can get a free guidebook on that.

The way I hear you talking about this problem, Trabian, is the way I counsel people too; on this idea of how we separate the people from the problem.

TRABIAN: Amen.

Doug: Thanks again, Trabian. We know you're very much in demand, doing one of the best workshops on equity out there.

TRABIAN: Thank you so much, Doug. Appreciate you.



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