



# THE POWER OF VOICE

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Metropolitan Group crafts strategic and creative services to amplify the power of voice of change agents in building a just and sustainable world.

## Meeting the Moment

Advancing Your Mission in the Face of Rising Authoritarianism

### Introduction

We live in challenging times, unprecedented in many people's lifetimes or lived experience. And yet what we are living through now has happened before (Jim Crow Segregation, the Red Scare, Japanese American internment, and others) and is happening today in countries around the world where the assault on freedom and democracy is in full force.

Our work to promote democracy globally and to support organizations promoting freedom, equity, and justice in countries whose leaders do not share those values, has shown us that authoritarian leaders and movements follow a similar, well-orchestrated playbook. They "do everything, everywhere, all at once" to confuse, divide, frighten, and exhaust those who would otherwise stand against them.

Autocratic actions and a fertile environment for authoritarian narratives are bolstered in the United States where decades of declining trust in institutions—including the justice system, a free press, colleges and universities, science and the public health system, to name just a few—have created fertile ground for mis/dis/mal-information and weakened the ability of democratic institutions to respond.

Yet, we also know that standing for democratic principles and fighting the anti-democratic assault on our freedoms and our democratic institutions and norms is not only necessary, but also has proven to be highly effective. We can learn—from social movements in the U.S. and from movements, coalitions, advocates, activists, and leaders we have worked with in nearly 30 countries on 5 continents—how to effectively meet this moment. We can both counter threats and attacks while also advancing a vision people can embrace and stand for. We have distilled these lessons into 10 Grounding and Guiding Principles.

### Grounding and Guiding Principles:

How to hold on to your values, stay true to your mission, AND be effective during challenging times

1. **Stay rooted in your values.** Ground all actions in your values. You might change the language you use to talk about them, but the values themselves—and the way you live them—should not change. Staying authentic to who you are builds and retains trust.
2. **Make intentional choices regarding safety and impact.** Prioritize physical, psychological, emotional, and relational safety in everything you do. Decide collaboratively on new ways of communicating, whether and how to share ideas and updates, what to document in written form, and what to communicate only verbally and/or in person. Where risks are worth taking, make conscious choices, develop

strategies to mitigate risks, and ensure that those at greatest risk are the ones making the decision.

3. **Be clear and inclusive in your communication.** Use clear and plain language. Make every word count. Communicate clearly, using language that connects with broader audiences. Avoid jargon or language that may leave people feeling left out or judged. Frame your messages in ways that *both* engage your base and invite others in.
4. **Keep your focus and let some things go.** Prioritize and respond selectively, versus trying to react to the overwhelming number of issues surfacing every day. Think carefully about what you absolutely need to respond to and what you need to let pass.
5. **Rest and recharge.** We are in challenging times. Resilience comes from caring for each other and ourselves. Find ways for individuals and teams to rest, check in, and reconnect to each other and to your shared purpose.
6. **Beware of false either/or dichotomies.** Push back on false binaries. You can (and must) be inclusive and thoughtful, but you must also be able to move quickly. You need to respond strategically to attacks that come your way, but you must also go on offense to create a more fertile enabling environment for the work you do. This will help to reassure your base, but also expand your network of champions and allies.
7. **Don't willingly surrender the power you still hold.** Be aware of self-censorship, fear-based silence, or making changes based on what you think *MIGHT* happen. Base your decisions on facts, hold onto the power and rights you still have, and recognize that there are risks worth taking.
8. **Say what you are FOR.** Create and advance the narrative/message you want: the future you are creating and the difference it will make in people's lives and communities. At the same time, challenge false narratives and harmful actions that seek to undermine or even prohibit those efforts.
9. **Action beats inertia.** Be willing to decide, do, evaluate, and adapt. To balance the urgency to act with the importance of inclusive voices, involve partners and allies in the design of strategies, actions, and engagement. Co-create, then iterate.
10. **Stand with and for each other.** Often the groups, movements, and issues under attack are the least able to defend themselves (and may also be perceived as the least credible when defending themselves). Voices from different sectors and issues are needed to effectively respond to attacks on others and to advance upstream narratives and norms.

## About MG

[Metropolitan Group](#) (MG) is a global small business and a Certified B Corp that specializes in narrative change and strategic communication to create lasting and sustainable impact for people and communities. We design and implement social and behavior change (SBC) initiatives, work to shift narratives, build capacity of local partners, and conduct and disseminate actionable research. We bring deep experience addressing mis/dis/mal-information, threats, and attacks on civil society, philanthropy, journalists, human rights and environmental defenders, and vulnerable communities/populations. Our work in nearly 30 countries on five continents with diverse governance, freedoms, and rights contexts has helped us develop effective approaches and to translate learnings from the field to address changing contexts.