

Making the Case for Digital Equity

An Introduction to Strategic Casemaking

February 3, 2026

Net Inclusion: Chicago, IL

Building Public Will for Digital Equity

Technical solutions alone won't address digital equity.

Digital equity is an **adaptive challenge**. It demands strategic advocacy that builds public and political will.



Communications vs. Strategic Casemaking

Communications Campaigns: Informing

- Build awareness
- Inform audiences
- Share data and stories
- Educate about problems
- "Here's what's wrong"

Strategic Casemaking: Mobilizing

- Build will to act
- Mobilize decision-makers
- Organize principles that trigger action
- Move people to specific decisions
- "Here's why you should care and what we can do together"

Three Advocacy Traps



Backfires

When problem-focused data triggers defensiveness rather than action.



Backpacks

The tendency to favor small-scale fixes over systemic change.



Bedtime Stories

Outdated beliefs that stall meaningful action.

The Persuasive Arc: Your Framework for Today

We'll organize seven of Dr. T's ten principles into three practice rounds



ACT 1: THE VISION

- Connect to Aspirations
- Tell the "Story of Us"

→ Practice Moment #1: Craft your opening

ACT 2: THE OBSTACLES

- Navigate Dominant Narratives
- Make Systems the Villain
- Trigger Loss Aversion

→ Practice Moment #2: Show what's blocking us and what's at stake

ACT 3: THE BREAKTHROUGH

- Anchor Solutions
- Reimagine Your Value Proposition

→ Practice Moment #3: Present the path forward

ⓘ Think about someone specific you're trying to motivate and what you're asking them to do. You'll need this later!



Ten Strategic Casemaking Principles (We'll Cover Seven)

Connect to Aspirations

Tell the Story of Us

Navigate Dominant Narratives

Make Systems the Villain

Tell People What They Lose

Anchor Solutions, Not Problems

Reimagine Your Value Proposition

Name the Power of the Moment

Foster Collective Ownership

Share Roadmap & Metrics

Connect to Aspirations

Tool: Lead with WE & WHY

Problem-First Approach

- We have a digital divide
- 20% of households lack internet
- This is a crisis we must solve

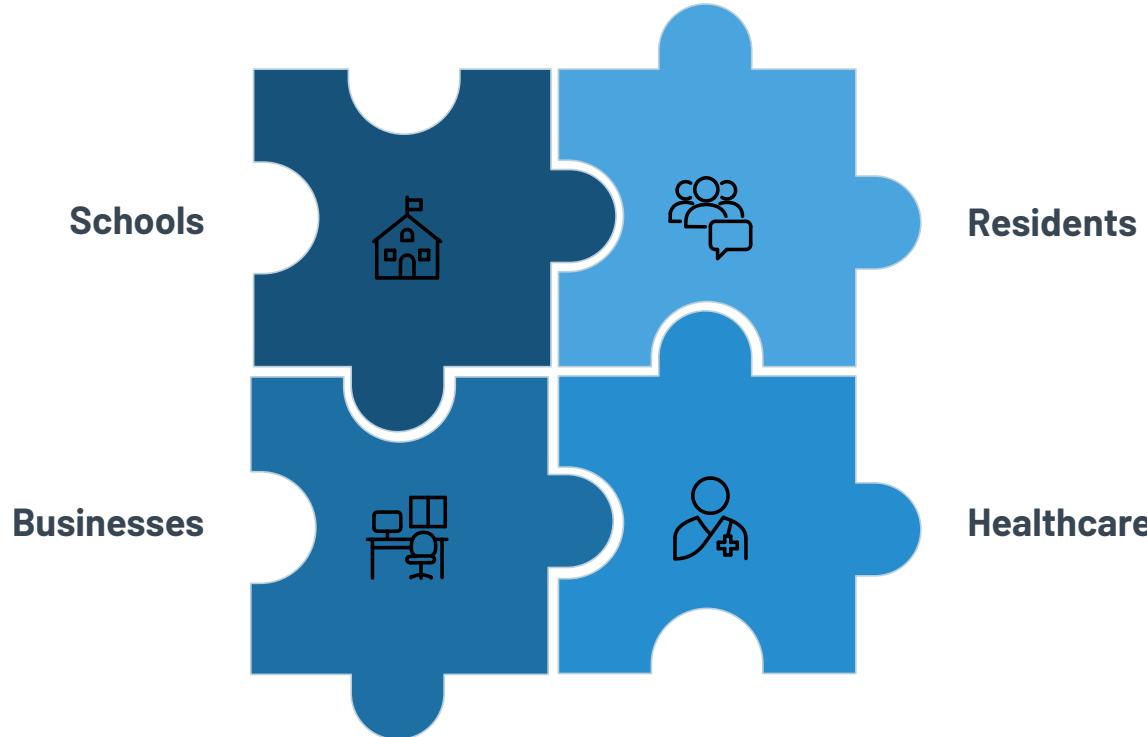
Values-First Approach

- We are a community that believes everyone deserves an opportunity to thrive
- We value connection and shared prosperity
- Digital equity enables us to reach our shared aspirations

 People listen when they believe we share values.

Tell the Story of Us

Tool: Show How Everyone's Futures Are Connected



- Move from 'helping them' to 'we're all in this together!'
This expands your coalition - everyone sees their stake, not just direct beneficiaries.

Practice Moment #1: Craft THE VISION

Establish Shared Values and Interconnection

✓ Connect to Aspirations

✓ Tell the "Story of Us"

1

INDIVIDUAL (4 min)

- Write one core value that drives YOUR digital equity work that also speaks to your stakeholder
- Write one aspirational outcome for your community based on your identified core value

2

PAIRS (~4 min; ~2 min each)

- Share your value and aspiration
- Partner mirrors: "What I hear is your value..."
- Partner probes
- Speaker responds and refines

3

SMALL GROUPS (9 min)

- Groups of 3-4: Craft your opening (45 seconds when spoken):
 - → WE & WHY statement (15 sec)
 - → Story of Us connection (15 sec)
 - → How digital equity gets us to the aspirational outcome (15 sec)

YOUR OUTPUT: A 45-second opening that invites people in through shared values.

Navigate Dominant Narratives

Tool: Name the Myth, Then Reframe with Facts



✗ The Myth

Everyone has internet access now

Internet access is a luxury, not a necessity

The free market will solve this

✓ The Reality

22% of households lack broadband, and 'smartphone-only' access can't support remote work or online learning

During the pandemic, we saw clearly: no internet = no job applications, no telehealth, no education, no civic participation

ISPs won't build in low-density rural areas or low-income urban neighborhoods without policy intervention - the business case doesn't work

Don't ignore dominant narratives - address them directly with data and lived experience.

Naming and countering myths prevents them from derailing your case.



The Strategic Pivot

Turn Objections Into Opportunities

OBJECTION: "We can't afford expensive broadband subsidies right now"



Step 1: Acknowledge the Underlying Concern

"I hear your concern about fiscal responsibility"



Step 2: DON'T Repeat Their Frame

✗ Never say: "But broadband subsidies aren't that expensive..."
✓ Instead, pivot immediately



Step 3: Redirect to Your Strategic Case

"That's exactly why this approach makes financial sense: When families have connectivity, emergency room visits drop, workforce participation increases, school performance improves, and our tax base grows. This isn't an expense—it's an investment that pays returns."

Like aikido: Use their energy, redirect to your strength. Acknowledge the concern, but never repeat their framing.

Make Systems the Villain

Tool: Reframe from People to Systems

It's not about the people in the houses — it's about whether the systems serve them.



✗ Problem-Framing:

"Low-income families can't afford internet service"
"Seniors don't know how to use technology"

✓ Systems-Framing:

"Our subsidy systems are fragmented and inaccessible, and ISPs don't build infrastructure in lower-income neighborhoods"
"Our digital literacy systems aren't designed for multiple generations with different learning needs"

- Target broken systems, not people or organizations—this centers equity and justice.

Trigger Loss Aversion

Tool: Paint Two Distinct Futures

If We Act:

- Families have stability
- Schools retain students
- Employers keep skilled workers
- Economic opportunity expands
- Community thrives together

If We Don't Act:

- Digital divide widens
- Economic opportunity shrinks
- Schools destabilize
- Workforce gaps grow
- Systems spiral into crisis

 Humans respond 2-3x more strongly to loss than to gain.

Practice Moment #2: Clarify THE OBSTACLES

Show What's Blocking Us and What's at Stake

- ✓ Navigate Dominant Narratives
- ✓ Make Systems the Villain
- ✓ Trigger Loss Aversion

1

INDIVIDUAL (5 min)

- Identify a **MYTH** your stakeholder likely believes. How do you dispel it?
- Reframe your challenge: What **SYSTEM** is broken?
- What do we **LOSE** if we don't fix this? (name 3 concrete losses)

2

PAIRS (~5 min; 2.5 min each)

- **Find a new partner from another table (someone you don't know!)**
- Share your obstacles with your partner
- Partner probes
- Refine together: Make your reframes sharper

3

SMALL GROUPS (12 min)

- Reconvene groups of 3-4
- Draft your "Obstacles" section (~60 seconds when spoken):
 - → Counter one myth (~15 sec)
 - → Name system that needs changing (~15 sec)
 - → Paint two futures - loss and gain (~30 sec)
- Build on your opening from Practice Moment #1

 **YOUR OUTPUT:** A 60-second obstacles section added to your 45-second opening.

Anchor Solutions

Tool: Credential the Solutions with Evidence



Social Math

Compares large, abstract numbers to something relatable and understandable to the audience.

Example: **"For the price of one family pizza night a month, we can get them connected to reliable high-speed broadband."**



Proof Points

Demonstrates that solutions are feasible and effective by showing where they've already worked.

Example: **"Syracuse Surge Link connected 2,000 households at \$10/month"**



Anchoring Language

Frames the issue with a sense of agency and possibility, reinforcing that solutions are within reach. Examples:

- **We built the internet, we can make it accessible**
- **We've connected every school; we can connect every home**
- **Digital navigators are already in our libraries and community centers**

Lead with solutions, not problems. Proven approaches build confidence!



Reimagine Your Value Proposition

Tool: Position Yourself as Partner, Not Just Advocate

Identify the strengths and resources you offer to achieving digital equity.

- Our coalition connects ISPs, schools, libraries, and 30 community organizations.
- We've already piloted affordable connectivity with 500 households.
- We have digital navigators embedded in trusted community spaces.
- Our team includes policy expertise, community trust, and technical knowledge.
- We're ready to implement – we have the relationships and infrastructure.

✗ Without a Clear Value Proposition:

"Someone should fix the digital divide."

✓ With a Clear Value Proposition:

Our coalition is positioned to implement proven solutions with our community partners, starting next month.

- You're rolling up your sleeves, not just pointing at problems.
You're bringing specific assets to make change happen.

Practice Moment #3: Present THE BREAKTHROUGH

Complete Your Case with Solutions and Partnership

✓ Anchor Solutions

✓ Reimagine Your Value Proposition

1

INDIVIDUAL (3 min)

- What's a **PROOF POINT** can you use? Can you use **SOCIAL MATH** to make this concrete?
- What do **YOU/WE** bring to solving this? (skills, relationships, resources, credibility)

2

PAIRS (3 min)

Each person gets 1.5 min:

- Share your proof point and what you bring (30 sec)
- Partner probes
- Speaker refines (15 sec)
- Then switch roles

3

1-ON-1 SPEED PITCHES (16 min)

- **Find a NEW partner from a different table**
- Each person takes turns:
 - Deliver your complete case (~2 min)
 - Partner gives focused feedback (2 min):
 - What landed strongest?
 - Where could framing be sharper?
- Switch roles (8 min per pair)
- Find another partner and repeat as often as you can!

Three More Principles (For Another Time...)

- **Name the Power of the Moment**

Why is this the pivotal time to be engaging in this work?

- **Foster Collective Ownership**

Everyone has a role in making this change, and you have more power than you think!

- **Sharing Roadmap & Metrics**

Creating clear pathways with measurable milestones that demonstrate progress.

Action Steps

Individual Commitment

Take a moment to write down one concrete, specific next step you'll take to apply what you've built today.

Example: "Next Tuesday, I'll deliver my digital equity case statement to Councilmember Johnson when we meet about our municipal broadband proposal."

Be specific about **when**, **where**, and **with whom** you'll deliver your case.



- ⓘ Consider enlisting another attendee as an accountability partner to check in on each other's progress one month from today.

A complex, abstract fractal pattern in shades of blue and white, resembling a microscopic view of a crystal or a network of neurons. It features several large, rounded, bulbous structures that are interconnected by a dense web of smaller, branching filaments.

Digital equity is an adaptive challenge.

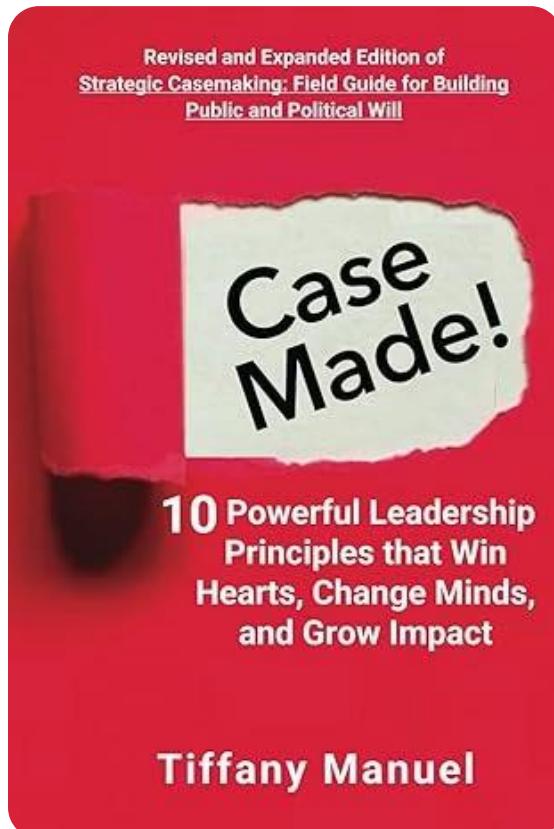
Having the right technical solutions isn't enough.

We need to change hearts, shift narratives, build unlikely coalitions, and challenge systems that were designed to exclude.

We already have everything we need to succeed.

We are the ones we've been waiting for.

Learn More About Strategic Casemaking



Dive deeper into the principles of strategic casemaking with Dr. Tiffany Manuel's **Case Made!** book, available on Amazon.com.

Visit The Case Made Online

Explore additional resources, case studies, and tools for effective advocacy at www.thecasemade.com.

