

# A Word Palette to Replace Jargon

Is your social change vocabulary worn out like an old favorite t-shirt? You aren't alone. Generic and jargony narratives routinely **hold nonprofits back** from plainly and energetically communicating what they do. While jargon does have its place, serving as a sort of shorthand for communicating industry concepts, we know from experience that organizations that aspire to be successful must not only be good at achieving impact but at creatively and effectively communicating that impact. When we routinely rely on buzzwords to do the heavy lifting, they lose their meaning, making our messaging impersonal and disengaging. That's why we've created this word palette to offer up some colorful alternatives to overused, stale favorites.



Instead of "strategize"

try: **map out, blueprint, build**

"Strategize" can feel like a stiff suit in a room full of creative minds—it's too formal, too rigid. Why not swap it out for something that's a bit more relatable? "Blueprint" and "map out" paint a clearer picture, like charting a course for real impact, turning your planning into an adventure rather than a chore.



Instead of "leverage"

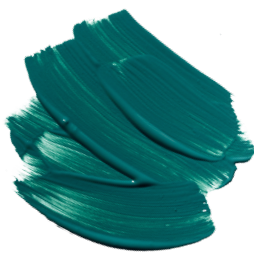
try: **tap into, amplify**

"Leverage" has been tossed around so much it's turned into a buzzword with no buzz. Instead of relying on it, we can use more engaging phrases like "tapping into" or "amplifying," which spotlight people's natural strengths and keep your readers from dozing off.

Instead of "sustainable"

try: **enduring, long-lasting, resilient**

Words like "sustainable" and "sustainability" can feel vague and open ended, unless referring to specific concepts like the UN's definition of sustainable development. But outside of that, it helps to be a bit more descriptive. We recommend language like "enduring" and "long-lasting" or even "resilient," a term that expresses the concept of building something that not only survives but thrives over time.



Instead of "catalyze"

try: **spark, ignite**

"Catalyze" can sound cold and mechanical, like a chemistry experiment – a stark contrast to the beautiful and messy humanity of social change. We should be mindful of this when using the word and when possible, try to opt for terms that crackle with energy like "spark" and "ignite." These speak more to the emotion and inspiration that exists in the social impact sector.

try: **embolden, uplift, awaken**

Instead of "empower"

"Empower" is one of those words that, while well-intentioned, carries a subtle and problematic message. It can imply that people are starting from a place of powerlessness, waiting for someone else to "give" them power, a framing that overlooks people's inherent strength. While many organizations, including power-conscious groups, continue using the term for its familiarity, it's worth challenging this usage. Alternatives like "embolden," "uplift," or even "awaken" honor the power that already exists and highlight an organization's role in amplifying what's already there.



Instead of "transformational"

try: **metamorphic, revolutionary**

Since becoming a buzzword, the meaning of "transformational" has become diluted. Words like "metamorphic" and "revolutionary" feel less worn out and are more colorful alternatives that bring the concept of change to life in a way that feels fresh.

Instead of "equitable"

try: **balanced, fair**

Buzzwords like "equity" and "equitable" were once game-changers in conveying a commitment to fairness and justice, but over time, overuse has dulled their meaning. Not to mention, they are still abstract concepts, which might not resonate with those not routinely enmeshed in social impact work. Opting for words like "balanced" and "fair" can restore clarity and immediacy to our conversations about justice while also drawing in more audiences with verbiage that is universally understandable.



The truth is, even the most well-chosen words will lose their flair if overused, eventually becoming another set of buzzwords devoid of meaning. The key is to use language thoughtfully and strategically, keeping it fresh and relevant. We hope this short list demonstrates that there's a vibrant palette of alternatives to common jargon terms that communicate our messages clearly and resonate with all kinds of audiences.



PS – If you catch us in the act of jargon-speak –something you can verify by browsing our website and sending us an email with a screenshot – then we'll reward you with complementary enlivening editing of up to 300 words of your writing.