

What Can We Responsibly Say?

A practical way to match a public claim to the evidence actually available

FOR

nonprofit leaders, program teams, board members, funders, communications staff, and anyone responsible for a statement about results

USE WHEN

a report, presentation, grant application, or public message needs to say whether a program worked

INCLUDES

a claim ladder, a worked example, a language check, an action ladder, and a 15-minute team exercise

A report is almost finished. The team agrees that the results look encouraging. Then someone writes, “The program improved participants’ lives,” while someone else proposes, “The program caused a significant improvement.” Both sentences may sound like ordinary ways to describe the same result. They are not.

One sentence describes what was observed. The other explains why it happened. A third sentence, such as “This model will work in other communities,” makes a prediction about a setting that has not yet been observed. Each asks the evidence to carry a different weight.

The short answer

Start with the strongest sentence the current information can support, not the strongest sentence the organization hopes to publish. Name the people, result, period, and source actually observed. Then separate three questions: did people change, did the program itself make the difference, and should the result be expected somewhere else?

A useful claim is not the boldest available sentence. It is the clearest sentence that remains true after its important limits are named.

Why this is harder than it looks

Organizations are rarely trying to mislead. More often, several legitimate pressures collapse into one phrase such as “show impact.” A board wants confidence. A funder wants accountability. Staff want recognition for difficult work. Communications staff need a sentence short enough to use. Participants may want their experience represented accurately.

The problem begins when one sentence is asked to satisfy all of those needs at once. A positive outcome becomes evidence that the program caused the outcome. A causal estimate becomes evidence that expansion will work. A story becomes evidence that everyone had the same experience.

Precision can feel cautious, but it is not timid. It tells the reader exactly what is known and protects the organization from having to defend a claim its own records cannot carry.

The claim ladder

Think of claims as four different rungs. Moving upward requires additional support.

1. Activity

“The program served 240 people and delivered 1,100 hours of support.”

This says what the organization did. It may be important for operations and accountability. It does not say whether participants’ circumstances changed.

2. Observed result

“Among the 148 participants with a six-month follow-up record, 61 percent were employed.”

This says what was observed, for whom, and when. It does not say what happened to participants without follow-up or what would have happened without the program.

3. Program contribution or effect

“Participants offered the program were more likely to be employed after six months than a credible comparison group.”

This begins to address what might have happened otherwise. Its strength depends on how the groups were formed, whether outcomes were measured consistently, and who disappeared from either group.

4. Transfer or expansion

“The model is likely to produce similar results when delivered in three additional counties.”

This asks whether the conditions behind the original result will travel. Staff experience, referral partners, participant needs, local services, and implementation support may all change.

There is no shame in staying on a lower rung. A well-specified descriptive result is more useful than an unsupported causal claim.

A worked example

Suppose a mentoring program reports that 78 percent of participating students improved their attendance. Before using that number, ask five questions:

1. Which students are included in the 78 percent?
2. What counted as improvement, and over what period?
3. Was attendance available for every student who started?
4. Was there a comparison with similar students who did not participate?
5. Did anything else change during the same period?

If the number includes only students who completed the program and had school records available, a responsible sentence might be:

Among program completers with available school records, 78 percent attended more school days in the semester after enrollment than in the semester before enrollment.

That sentence is narrower than “mentoring improved attendance for 78 percent of students.” It is also much easier to defend. It identifies the observed group, the measure, and the comparison over time without assigning cause.

A language check before publication

Put the proposed sentence at the top of a page. Under it, write four short answers:

- **People:** Who is actually represented?
- **Result:** What exactly was measured?
- **Time:** When was it measured?
- **Comparison:** Compared with what?

Then circle the verbs in the claim. Words such as “served,” “reported,” “increased,” “contributed,” “caused,” “proved,” and “will” do different work. Ask whether the supporting record earns each verb.

If a limit would materially change how a reasonable reader understands the sentence, place that limit beside the claim rather than hiding it in a technical appendix.

What you can say

- “Participants with follow-up data reported greater confidence after the program.”
- “Employment was higher at follow-up than at enrollment among the people observed at both points.”
- “The result is consistent with the program’s intended pathway, although other explanations remain possible.”
- “The pilot produced an encouraging result under the staffing and referral conditions described here.”

What you cannot say yet

- “The program caused the change,” when there is no credible account of what would otherwise have happened.
- “Participants improved,” when the result includes only respondents or completers and missing outcomes may differ.
- “The model is proven,” when one study answered a narrower question in one setting.

- “The program had no effect,” when the study was too small or imprecise to distinguish a meaningful effect from little effect.

What to do next

Minimum useful step: Rewrite the claim so it names the observed population, measure, and period. Remove causal or predictive language that the current record does not support.

Stronger step: Reconstruct the denominator, comparison, missing outcomes, and source of each important number. Keep a short claim record showing which source supports which phrase.

When the claim carries higher stakes: Have someone who was not responsible for producing the result review the exact sentence against the underlying material. The reviewer should be free to recommend weaker wording or no claim at all.

A 15-minute team exercise

Choose one sentence from a current board paper, grant report, website page, or presentation.

1. Read the sentence aloud without explaining it.
2. Ask each person to classify it as activity, observed result, program contribution, or transfer.
3. Write down the population, outcome, period, comparison, and source it implies.
4. Mark any element the team cannot locate in the underlying record.
5. Rewrite the sentence at the strongest level everyone can support.
6. Add one limit a reasonable reader would need in order to interpret it fairly.

End by asking: if the revised sentence feels less impressive, is that because the work is weaker, or because the original language was carrying more certainty than the evidence?

A note on stories

Participant stories can show experience, meaning, sequence, and mechanisms that a count may miss. They should not be treated as inferior evidence. They also should not be made to stand in for everyone served.

Say how the story was selected and what job it is doing. A story can illustrate an experience, challenge an assumption, or show how a program operates. It cannot by itself establish how common that experience was or what caused it.

When to bring in help

Outside review is worth considering when the claim will influence a material funding decision, affect public trust, be used across settings, or expose the organization to a serious challenge. It is also useful when the people who produced the analysis are being asked to approve the public language about it.

The purpose of review is not to make every sentence technical. It is to find the simplest true sentence and make clear where the evidence stops.

Questions to carry forward

- What exact words would become unsafe if the supporting source were weaker than expected?
- Who is missing from the result behind the sentence?
- Does the proposed claim describe change, explain change, or predict change elsewhere?
- What would strengthen the claim enough to justify moving one rung higher?