

THE POWER OF PERSPECTIVE: “REFRAMING” YOUR FRAMING SKILLS FOR INNOVATIVE INSTRUCTION IN LEADERSHIP AND INFLUENCE

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ABSTRACT

This interactive session will offer a hands-on strategy for integrating reframing techniques into classroom experience. In a three-step activity, we will explore the power of reframing as a leadership and influence tool, and demonstrate ways that the concept can be brought into the classroom. Learn how to “liberate” yourself and your students from ingrained perspectives and ways of doing things, while maintaining the benefits of a shared, focused commitment to stated learning goals.

INTRODUCTION

Most practitioners, instructors, and students of business are partially familiar with the concept of “framing” and “reframing”. In fact, anyone who has ever made a persuasive argument (that includes just about everyone) has either knowingly or unknowingly used one of these techniques to enhance their argument. But by far the more effective use comes from persons who are aware of the concept and know how to use its power to shape positions and effectively influence others. Under the rubric of leadership and influence, instruction in the art of framing and reframing is a highly beneficial component of a course in management, leadership, and/or organizational behavior.

The objective of the session is to conduct an instructional workshop on the reframing concept designed primarily for instructors of management, organizational behavior, and other business courses. The purpose of the workshop session is threefold: (1) to familiarize participants with the precise meaning and nuances of the concept, (2) to engage participants in a case exercises in which they jointly share and clarify their interpretations of reframing an action scenario, and (3) to present ways in which this concept can be effectively integrated into management and leadership components of business courses.

The time required is 35 minutes. The targeted number of participants is ten - twenty.

Materials required: overhead projector.

BACKGROUND: THEORETICAL GROUNDING OF CONCEPTS

“Framing” and reframing” are terms that refer to the broad structure in which an argument, a point of view, or an issue is seen and presented. Much the way any building or product takes shape around a basic frame, so a point of view is largely based on and shaped by the frame in which it is conceived and presented. In determining the way people perceive the world around them, frames both define and limit a person’s thinking, enhancing a prevailing viewpoint and restricting other, competing points of view from making the same good sense. According to Bolman and Deal (1991), “Frames are both windows on the world and lenses that bring the world into focus”... “Frames help us order experience and decide what to do” (p.12).

An individual’s frame of reference to a particular event or process, while pre-configured by past experience, is also subject to modification by a person in a leader role, to a certain extent. For example, if a professor were to describe a required course as demanding but essential to learning in a particular field of study, and then reiterate that description during the first class in a non-nonsense, take-it or leave-it approach, students would be likely to view the course as a necessary “grind”. Most would likely comply with course requirements. On the other hand, if a professor framed a course as an adventure into exciting, novel concepts that would not only prove interesting to “discover” but also highly beneficial in terms of growth and career, students would be more likely to react to the course in that frame, seeing it more as an opportunity than a chore. Many students might adopt an enthusiastic commitment to the course, but others might not be willing to work hard, if their expectation of excitement and adventure is not met.

For most events in life, people have a preconceived way of perceiving the event that defines the frame of reference. A broad and enduring societal frame of reference is often referred to as a paradigm, while a more immediate perspective is characterized as a frame of reference. In a group or organizational setting, a frame of reference is generally a shared component of the group

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or organizational culture.

Reframing is generally referred to as reshaping or redefining a perspective so as to bring others to a new point of view and new incentive to support that point of view. Reframing is often used as an influence technique to help convince persons to see some proposal or idea in a different light. And as an influence technique, it remains a concept of much use to persons in business and management - practitioners, students, instructors, and researchers alike. According to Portnoy (1999), the key to reframing is to remove one lens and replace it with another. That is the influence skill of the leader.

The power of reframing as an influence technique is central in our culture. In classic stories and films, such as for example, "It's a Wonderful Life" and "A Christmas Carol", the central character is led to rethink his or her approach to life by seeing it through a different frame of reference - one in which the consequences of the current frame is brought to light for them. In "Dead Poet's Society" and "Stand and Deliver", the teachers reframe, in different ways, the process of learning to their student audiences.

In a business setting, a frame is what helps shape a company's business strategy, the manner in which it competes, and its methods for motivating members to support the strategy. Recently, an owner of a regional car wash company put it this way: "In re-evaluating our marketing strategy, we decided that we are essentially marketers who wash cars, and not car wash providers who do marketing". Strategically, this company had reframed its mission and strategic perspective. In this new frame, the CEO could then talk about related services they were considering providing in the immediate future and about a distant future of possible "waterless carwashes".

Generally, the frame in which the owners or leaders of a business conceptualize that business is instrumental in shaping the wording of that company's vision and mission statements. But more importantly, it is how a company's leaders collectively view the competitive environment in which they operate, their position in that environment, and the kinds of decisions they make in order to capitalize on opportunities in that environment. Major mistakes occur, and companies consequently often falter, when leaders misinterpret that environment and operate from a faulty or obsolete frame.

"Tunnel vision" and "being blind sided" are terms that stem from thinking within a given frame. In contrast, "thinking outside of the box" implies thinking beyond a current frame of reference in order to discern alternate solutions to a problem and possibly an alternate frame for future use. "Reframing" is undertaken when leaders (or "influencers") determine that a current frame is inadequate or that a newly recognized way of approaching a major issue is warranted.

Reframing versus: (a) paradigm change and (b) "spinning".

A paradigm is essentially a broad set of assumptions, concepts, values, and practices - a perspective - that constitutes a way of viewing reality with in a defined community, or social sphere that shares them. It amounts to an unwritten set of guidelines or rules that establish and define perceptual boundaries and tell one what are acceptable modes of behavior within those boundaries. At the other end of the perceptual spectrum, "spinning" - or playing up one side of an issue - refers to an influence technique that highlights certain aspects of

an event or situation generally after the fact and within a defined frame of reference. Spinning - portraying some event or program in a preferred light - is often done as a form of "damage control" in response to bad or discouraging news. Framing and reframing are processes that take place within a defined paradigm. Shading, highlighting, or "spin" occurs within the context of a defined frame of reference.

In organizational theory, a "four frames" model has been developed that describes four alternate frame through which an organization may be conceptualized and led (Bolman & Deal, 1991). These four frames are: a structural frame, a human resource frame, a political frame, and a symbolic frame. The model posits that it is within the discretion of leaders to select the frame that best suits their organization's function and goals and then inculcate that frame into the viewpoints of organizational members in such a way that all or most members share the frame. Elaborating on leader practices within a human resource frame, Pearce and Conger (2002) develop and describe methods and practices by which leaders can reframe their management style to one of shared-leadership. Gareth Morgan (1989) states, "By learning the art of reframing as a basic life skill, we can improve our ability to deal with the challenges of a changing world and open the way to a constant stream of insight and innovation".

WORKSHOP DESCRIPTION AND SCHEDULE

1. The workshop will begin with a brief introductory section followed by an interactive section. In the introduction, the concepts of framing and reframing will be explained, with an applied illustration of each concept. We will cover definitions as well as a brief synopsis of the common usage of these terms. Distinctions will be made between paradigm shift, reframing and spinning. In business disciplines and cases, there are numerous examples of reframing especially in strategy, marketing and management. Participants in the workshop will be given examples that they can use to help their students understand reframing and learn how to apply it. Participants will also improve their ability to use reframing practices in class to motivate the students' participation.

2. During the interactive component, we will use four mini case situations from business disciplines and education and invite the audience to try their hands at reframing. They will be asked to reframe these situation using a certain point of view. This segment should elicit numerous and hopefully creative ways of reframing a situation. Some of these cases may raise ethical issues, since reframing can create an impression contrary to a prevailing view about a given situation. These exercises will enlighten participants audience as to how reframing is done, so they may apply the technique effectively in teaching. It will allow them to point out the process of reframing to their students.

3. Finally, there will be a wrap up and conclusion in which the authors will summarize the session and the ways in which the participants could use the concepts of framing and reframing in their courses, both as learning components and as techniques for effective teaching.

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Workshop Schedule

1. Introduction to framing and reframing concepts. (10 minutes)
2. Interactive exercises (20 minutes)
3. Conclusion (5 minutes)

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