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Framing in Organizations: Overview, Assessment, and Implications

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Abstract

Individuals frame their perceptions in many ways. This phenomenon is common in organizations and can greatly influence the quality of managerial decisions. Seemingly trivial changes in the framing of information can substantially influence decision makers and subsequent action. Leaders should not only know how to utilize the technique in a positive manner, but also how to prevent others from using the approach to distort the decision-making process. This paper discusses the organizational ramifications of framing, along with its implications for managers and leaders.

> The couple was asked by their therapist how
> often they made love. "Hard Iy ever," said
> the man, "no more than three times a week."
> The woman, on the other hand, ind icated
> "Constantly, at least three times a week."

-**Woody** Allen's film, *Annie Hall*

Any gesture, remark, or act between or among people can have multiple interpretations. Indeed, the same experience may be labeled spontaneous or impulsive; frank or rude; thrifty or stingy; consistent or rigid; intense or overemotional; serious or grim; trusting or gullible; and so on (Langer, 1989). Individuals performing the same work may define and interpret objective task characteristics as their job, calling, or passion. There can be as many interpretations as there are observers at any time (Boje, Oswick, & Ford, 2004).

A frequently seen occurrence in the political world is the term "spin" that has come to refer to the twist candidates put on a fact, detail, statement, or story which gives it a different look or perspective (Lewis, n.d.). Political spins give the content a particular perspective or ideology. In its most basic sense, spinning is simply the process by which individuals "frame" the debate and argue a certain point of view.

Framing is also a key concern in the organization and business world (Bolman & Deal, 1991; Hodgkinson, Maule, Bown, Pearman, & Glaister, 2002). This paper examines framing and emphasizes its ramifications in organizational settings. Implications for leaders and prospects for future research are also outlined.

Framing Defined

The nature of framing can be illustrated by the well-known anecdote of two stonecutters working on a cathedral in the middle ages (Conger, 1991). When asked what they were doing one said, "Cutting stone, of course." The other replied, "Building the world's

most beautiful temple to the glory of God." Each was doing the same job but framed their activities differently. Contemporary examples of framing might involve Internet service providers changing their view of their work from "making sales" to "connecting those who would otherwise be left behind in the information revolution" (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001, p. 181) and public defenders claiming that they are "protecting the constitutional rights of all citizens to a fair trial-not helping criminals avoid condemnation" (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, p. 421). The meaning of work in these scenarios, that is, individuals' understandings of the purpose of their jobs, or what they believe is achieved (Brief & Nord, 1990), is reflected in the framing of their work. In turn, "...such meanings shape work motivation and performance" (Roberson, 1990, p. 107).

Framing in its various formats is done by everyone, knowingly or not, when individuals wish to influence others and themselves. Our view of framing draws heavily upon the writings of Goffman and other sociologists. For example, in Goffman's (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,* he advanced the view that individuals engage in performances in various settings for particular audiences in order to shape their definitions of the situation. In a later book Goffman (1974) portrayed everyday interactions as strategic encounters in which one attempts to "sell" or frame a particular interpretation. Hence, a frame is defined as "a quality of communication that causes others to accept one meaning over another" (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996, p. xi). Similarly, Entman (1993) identified framing as a process communicators use to make salient certain aspects of perceived social reality in a way to "promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (p. 52). Lippa (1994) described framing as entailing attempts to influence social judgments, decisions, and behavior by the way relevant information is presented or questions posed.

These framing definitions highlight a process involving selection and highlighting certain aspects of a topic while excluding or downplaying others. When individuals share their frames with others, they manage meaning because they assert that their interpretations are "reality" and should be taken over other possible interpretations. This is consistent with the view of Gamson (1992) who construed a frame as an organizing mechanism that enables communicators to provide meaning (see also Gamson & Modigliani, 1989).

Because much organizational behavior occurs in complex, chaotic, and uncertain environments, there is considerable maneuverability with respect to shaping "the facts." Cues from the environment are often ambiguous and one establishes meaning as he or she experiences the surrounding world, creating the reality to which they respond (Weick, 1979). Hence, language and discourse do not merely "name" or passively describe reality, but they create and shape it (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). In doing so, that framing promotes particular attitudes and behaviors and discourages others. Describing someone involved in an armed struggle as either a "freedom fighter" or a "terrorist" is an enduring reminder of how competing discourse can prescribe (rather than describe) and refract (rather than reflect) social reality. As Fairclough observed: "Discourses do not just reflect or represent social entities and relations, they construct and constitute them" (1992, p. 3). Hence, reality is problematic and not a given, for "the world is not already there, waiting for us to reflect it" (Cooper & Burrell, 1988, p. 100).

Framing in Practice

Historically, framing has been cast as a perceptual or decision-making error that distorts an objective, rational view of the world (Bateman & Snell, 2002; Champoux, 2003). However, framing may be viewed as an opportunity for individuals to exert influence by selectively emphasizing preferred alternatives. Because language and actions are closely related, language defines certain actions as "legitimate, necessary, and may be even...the only 'realistic' option for a given situation" (Dunford & Palmer, 1996, p. 97). The speech act

produces a changed reality and does not simply report on or represent something that was already there (Austin, 1961; Ford & Ford, 1995). Indeed, people "do not use language primarily to make accurate representations of perceived objects, but, rather to accomplish things" (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000, p. 137) and to "...mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists" (Snow & Benford, 1988, p. 198).

A number of contemporary examples of framing can be cited. One such illustration is found on Boston's Freedom Trail-a part of the historic city that highlights key events of the colonial period. At one stop on the Trail the famous Boston Massacre is highlighted, a site where five Americans were killed. Although any loss of life is regrettable, the term "massacre" is likely overstated. Rather, Samuel Adams had effectively framed the incident to impel action leading to the Declaration of Independence and the subsequent Revolutionary War.

Another example of effective framing involves the issue of abortion. Those individuals who view abortion as tantamount to murder have framed their position as "pro-life" and their opponents' as "pro-abortion." Those persons who view abortion as involving a woman's right to choice over whether she has the right to terminate a pregnancy have framed their position as "pro-choice" and their opponents' as "anti-abortion." Pro-life and pro-choice are two very effective frames that leaders and strategists on the political right and left, respectively, have skillfully used to create the context for their public education and that contribute to the on-going abortion controversy (Esacove, 2004). As Gloria Feldt, president of the Planned Parenthood Action Fund, Inc., put it, "Whoever frames an issue [effectively] wins the debate" (Vennochi, 2003).

A third example of successful framing involved the 1995 trial of O. J. Simpson, a famous African American football player who was acquitted for the murder of his wife, Nicole Brown Simpson, and Ronald Goldman. In the beginning, jurors were instructed to determine whether or not O. J. Simpson had murdered his wife. The initial question was framed as O. J. Simpson not guilty vs. O. 1. Simpson guilty. However, both defense and prosecution attorneys immediately attempted to reframe the argument in terms of *victimhood.* The prosecution framed the trial as wife-beater male *vs. female victim,* while the defense attempted to adopt the frame of *ethnic minority victim* vs. racist police force. The outcome of the trial depended on which frame was most persuasive when the jury reviewed the evidence. One of the two frames dominated and Mr. Simpson was found not guilty (Rhodes, 1997).

Finally, a number of studies have called attention to the ways in which social movements (e.g., animal rights, victims rights, gay/lesbian rights) identify victims of a given injustice and amplify their victimization to inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of the movement (e.g., Weed, 1997; White, 1999). Indeed, Beneford and Snow (2000) in reviewing framing processes and social movements call attention to the effectiveness of such *injustice* frames. The prevalence of framing can also be seen in organizational settings.

Framing in Organizations

Within an organizational context, framing is a key tool leaders use-knowingly or unknowingly-to persuade and influence others, though they may be unaware of doing so. Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill, and Lawrence (2001) portray an organization as a "pluralistic marketplace of ideas in which issues are 'sold' via persuasive efforts of managers and 'bought' by top managers who set the firm's strategic direction" (p. 716). Issue selling is the process by which individuals affect others' attention to and understanding of events, developments, and trends that have implications for organizational performance (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). Because no issue is inherently important or strategic, claims about what matters most determine, in part, which topics are acted upon (Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Floyd & Wooldridge, 1996). Issue selling guides organizational investments of time and attention

and thereby helps shape actions and changes that ensue. Issue sellers are "players" (Ocasio, 1997) who use a repertoire of actions to sell preferred ideas and direct decision makers' limited attention. A key technique such players use is carefully framing their positions and ideas so that key decision makers selectively focus on certain characteristics of the organization and its environment, and ignore others.

Fairhurst and SarI' (1996) argue that framing is an art and communication skill whereby individuals manage meaning and socially construct reality for themselves and others. Wrzesniewski and her colleagues (Dutton, Debebe, & Wrzesniewski, 2000 as cited in Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) studied 28 hospital cleaners and custodial personnel. Those employees who framed their work as a calling (as opposed to a job) believed strongly that they were helping pailents get better, and they approached their work accordingly. They timed themselves for efficiency. They prided themselves on anticipating the doctors' and nurses' needs. They also took interest in brightening the patients' days by rearranging furniture and decorating the walls, and engaged in many tasks that helped patients and visitors and made others' jobs in the unit (e.g., nurses, clerks) go more smoothly.

In addition to creating realities for themselves, individuals can also frame reality for others. Photographers provide their view of the world through their pictures as they capture a viewpoint for others to appreciate. Sales persons translate product or service features into benefits that address customer needs. Politicians cast their messages so as to connect with their electorate. Reporters construct stories in ways that privilege one viewpoint over another (Shah, Kwak, Schmierbach, & Zubric, 2004). Parents transmit "facts" to their children, religion conveys "truths," and effective leaders communicate to employees their reality of the world.

Individuals become leaders through their ability to decipher and communicate meaning. Effective leaders are excellent at communication, the resource they use to get others to act in accordance with their mental models (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). Leaders socially construct reality for their followers through framing techniques that present purposes and missions in ways that energize followers. Gardner and Alvolio (1998) indicate that in framing their visions, charismatic leaders choose words that amplify audience values, stress importance and efficacy, and if necessary, denigrate their opponents (e.g., competitors). Their communications lead supporters to see opportunities where others perceive only constraints and roadblocks.

Affirmative action has been framed as "remedial action" for the continuing effects of discrimination, or as "reverse discrimination" against whites and/or males (Nelson & Kinder, 1996). Similarly, Bandura (1993) reported an unpublished study by Jourden that examined feedback to different individuals that was factually equivalent but varied in whether progress or shortfalls were underscored. If an individual performed at a 75 percent level of a standard, the positive feedback emphasized the 75 percent progress attained. The negative feedback was framed as a 25 percent goal shortfall. Accenting the gains achieved enhanced perceived self-efficacy, aspirations, efficient analytic thinking, self-satisfaction, and performance accomplishment in subsequent tasks. Highlighting deficiencies in terms of the shortfall undermined self-regulative influences with resulting deterioration of performance on subsequent activities.

In another setting, managers indicated a desire to invest more money in a course of action that was reported to have a 70 percent chance of profit than in one said to have a 30 percent chance of loss (Bateman & Zeithaml, 1989). Even electric shock can have significantly different and less stressful effects when individuals were asked to think of the shocks as interesting new physiological sensations, as opposed to painful stimuli (Holmes & Houston, 1974). Virtually all behavior can be cast in a negative or a tolerable or justifiable light (Langer, 1989) and framing is a key process used to do so.

Types of Frames

Levin, Schneider, and Gaeth (1998) identified several kinds of frames that cast the same information in either a positive or a negative light: attribute framing, goal framing, and risky choice framing. Each of these categories involves distinct, independent processes. Additionally, while not precisely considered an example of framing, question formatting is also presented because of its similarity to framing.

Attribute framing

Attribute framing represents the simplest and most widely understood case of framing. Some recent examples of attribute framing involve consumer judgment or other forms of item evaluation. One such study by Levin and Gaeth (1988) showed that perceptions of the quality of ground beef depended on whether the beef was labeled as 75 percent lean or 25 percent fat. They found that a sample of ground beef was rated as better tasting and less greasy when it was labeled in the positive light (percent lean) rather than in the negative light.

Another common application of attribute framing involves describing situations in terms of success versus failure rates. In all cases, the same alternative was rated more favorably when described positively than when described negatively. An example is observed in studies where a surgery or other medical treatment is described in terms of survival rates versus mortality rates. In one study participants were informed that a new cancer treatment had either a 50 percent success rate or a 50 percent failure rate. Though equivalent, these different frames led to quite different evaluations. Those in the 50 percent success group judged the treatment to be significantly more effective and stated that they would be more likely to advise a close family member with cancer to seek the treatment (Levin, Schnittjer, & Thee, 1988). The literature abounds with similar results in varying contexts (see: Bandura, 1993; Bateman & Zeithaml, 1989; Levin, 1987).

Goalframing

In goal framing an issue is structured to focus attention on its potential to provide benefits or gains (positive frame) or on its potential to prevent or avoid loss (negative frame). Gain-framed messages highlight the *advantages* of either engaging or not engaging in a course of action, whereas loss-frame messages highlight the *disadvantages.* A distinguishing feature of goal framing manipulations is that both framing conditions promote the same act. The question of interest in goal framing is which frame, positive or negative, will have the greater persuasive impact.

Many studies of goal framing are in the health area (e.g., AIDS, see Levin & Chapman, 1983; coronary heart disease, see Maheswaran & Meyers-Levy, 1990; skin cancer, see Block & Keller, 1995; and mammography, see Banks, Salovey, Greener, Rothman, Moyer, Beauvais, & Epel, 1995). The literature indicates that intentions to engage in preventative health are generally higher when the behavior is framed in terms of its related costs (loss frames) than its related benefits (gain frames), even when the two frames describe objectively equivalent situations (Rothman & Salovey, 1997). A well-known example of such goal framing is illustrated by Meyerowitz and Chaiken (1987) who showed that women were *less* apt to engage in breast self-examination (BSE) when presented with information stressing the positive medical consequences of engaging in BSE than when presented with information stressing the negative consequences of not engaging in BSE. Considerable research also supports the views that messages emphasizing losses associated with inaction are generally more persuasive than messages emphasizing gains associated with action (Ganzach & Karsahi, 1995; Maheswaran & Meyers-Levy, 1990; Newberry, Reekers, & Wyndelts, 1993).

Risky choice frames

Risky-choice framing is the form most closely associated with the term "framing" in the decision-making literature. With this type of framing outcomes of a potential choice

involving options differing in level of risk are described in varying ways. For example, Tversky and Kahneman (1981) examined choices between two strategies for dealing with an emergency situation in which a number of lives would be lost unless one of the strategies would be adopted. Choices differed depending on whether the strategies were described in terms of how likely a given number of lives would be saved with each strategy or how likely a given number of lives would be lost with each strategy, even though the objective information was the same in each case. Thus the only difference between the options was the wording. Prospect theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979) was used to explain these results. This theory suggests two major outcomes about the effect of framing a decision problem in either gain or loss terms. First, it holds that people are risk-averse when a decision problem is formulated in terms of gain and risk-prone when the problem is fonnulated in tenns of loss. Second, people exhibit loss aversion, Le. that losses loom larger than gains (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). As with other kinds of framing, additional studies support these results (e.g. Dressler, 1998; Neale & Bazerman, 1985).

Question formatting

Although not formally an example of attribute framing, current research on question formatting seems to follow the notion that positive framing supports more favorable evaluations and that negative framing supports less favorable ones. For example, Harris (1973) demonstrated that height estimates are influenced by whether participants considered how "short" versus how "tall" a person is, and Loftus (1975) found that subjects reported more headaches if asked whether they have "frequent headaches" rather than being asked if they have "occasional headaches." Smith (1987) made a similar point in his discussion of differences generated when "welfare" and "poor" are used in survey questions. Specifically, support for more assistance for the poor was 39 percentage points higher than for welfare recipients. The welfare/poor distinction illustrates the major impact that different but similar words can have on response patterns.

Framing as impression management

Framing in its various formats is done by everyone, knowingly or not, when individuals wish to influence others and themselves. As such, framing is a key tool in impression management. Framing can be an impression management technique that involves the goal-directed activity of controlling or regulating information in order to influence the impressions formed by an audience (Schlenker, 2002). Through impression management, people try to shape an audience's impressions of a person (e.g., self, friends, enemies), object (e.g., a business organization, a gift, a consumer product), event (e.g., a transgression, a task performance), or idea (e.g., capitalism versus socialism; pro-life versus pro-choice policies,).

A number of the best selling self-help books in psychology and business address how to exert social influence by making a favorable impression on others (e.g., Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1990); David Lewis' *The Secret Language of Success: Using Body Language to Get What You Want* (1995); Michael Korda's *Power!: How to Get It, How to Use It* (1995). Such books convey how to look and dress; what to say and how to say it; how to move, sit, and gesture; when to smile or raise an eyebrow; and all manner of suggestions that seem vital if we are to do well in the game of life, winning and keeping lovers, money, power, friends, etc. The common thread is the idea that to survive and prosper we must get people to form the "right" impressions about us and the issues about which we care deeply.

At another level impression management involves more than gamesmanship. It has been argued that impression management is not simply a type of behavior that occurs only under limited circumstances, such as during a job interview or on a date, or that is evidenced only by certain types of people, such as those high in self-monitoring or Machiavellianism (Schlenker, 1980). Instead, impression management is a fundamental feature or characteristic

of interpersonal experience. To help us accomplish our objectives in life, we "package" information to help audiences draw the "right" conclusion. This packaging is a pervasive feature of interpersonal behavior and may be done via framing.

Implications for Managers

We believe that framing represents a valid means of presenting one's perspective. There is nothing inherently right or wrong about framing. However, framing-knowingly or unknowingly-can ultimately distort the facts and perceptions surrounding a situation, resulting in poor decisions. Within this context, the notion of framing provides a number of managerial implications.

First, *utilize framing techniques to your advantage.* If one desires a favorable judgment, decision, or behavior related to a topic, one would focus on desirable characteristics (e.g., "winning," "percent lean beef," or "percent of goal attained"). If, however, one desires a negative evaluation then one should focus on undesirable features (e.g., "losing," "percent of fat," or "percent of goal shortfall"). Framing, thUS, is an effective but subtle influence technique.

The development of influence skills has been said to be "...absolutely critical to job and career success in organizations today" (Ferris, Perrewe, Anthony, & Gilmore, 2000, p. 29). If this is correct, it may behoove women and minorities to pay particular attention to issue framing as an approach to enhance their influence. In one study, for example, white men had a greater understanding of organizational influence approaches, including framing, than did racial and ethnic minorities and white women (Ferris, Frink, Bhawak, Zhou, & Gilmore, 1996). Such a deficiency may be partly responsible for the failure of women and ethnic/racial minorities to make progress in organizations (e.g., salary progression, promotions, and career advancement), thus posing an alternative explanation for employment discrimination. The researchers endorsed the practice of using mentors to help women and minorities develop their influence skills and learning the informal organizational rules. Added to this recommendation would be for the less adept at organizational influence to consider enhancing their language skills through more effective framing. Table 1 summarizes some key principles and implications for leadership behavior derived from the framing literature.

Second, *watch/or and neutralize others' attempts to frame a situation.* For example, managers should take notice of any communication that appears to emphasize one portion of a whole while deemphasizing another portion. For example, if a supplier boasts a 90 percent customer satisfaction rate, one might ask why the other 10 percent were not satisfied. If a

Table 1. General principles and implications for leadership behavior derived from the framing literature.

General PrinciDles	ImDlications
1. People are not completely rational decision makers and respond differentially to factually equivalent messages depending on how these messages are presented or framed	1. Framing works and indicating that the glass is half full or half empty can have a significant impact on attitudes, intentions, behavior, and message persuasiveness
2. People are risk-averse (more conservative) when a decision problem is formulated in terms of gain and risk-prone when the issue is presented as a loss	2. Frame problems as positive gains to promote conservative decisions; to encourage more risky decisions frame problems as potential losses
3. Positive framing supports more favorable evaluations and negative framing supports less favorable evaluations	3. Frame your preference in favorable terms (e.g. investment) and your opponent's preference in less favorable terms (e.g., cost)
4. How questions are asked makes a	4. Pay attention to your choice of words

difference; a rose by any other name does *not* always smell as sweet	and use language that presents your desired position in a positive light.
5. People exhibit loss aversion, i.e., losses loom larger than gains. A given positive occurrence (e.g., receiving $5) is *less* psychologically rewarding than a negative occurrence of equal magnitude (e.g., losing $5) is punishing	5. Framing a decision in terms of possible loss should motivate a person more than framing the same decision in terms of a possible gain.
6. Messages emphasizing losses associated with inaction are generally more persuasive than messages emphasizing gains associated with action	6. Casting a competitor's proposal as a vote for inaction, missed opportunities, and the "status quo," is more effective than stressing gains associated with your suggested action

subordinate emphasizes the disadvantages of one course of action and the advantages of a second course, ask for a presentation of the advantages of the first course and the disadvantages of the second. Such responses will force a more balanced treatment of facts before decisions are made.

Third, *anticipate opportunities/or framing and take steps to avoid it.* When prospective solutions to an organizational problem are to be discussed, ponder the likely perspectives of the participants and consider assigning counterpositions in advance. For example, if a sales manager and a production manager are called to a meeting to discuss lagging sales of a new product, one could ask the sales manager to open the meeting with a discussion of ways in which the product could be presented more effectively to prospective customers. The production manager could then lead a discussion of how potential changes in the product or improvements in its quality might make it easier to sell. This approach forces each individual to adopt another's perspective at the outset instead of rushing to frame the problem as someone else's failure. Indeed, advocates of such multiple perspective approaches claim, such activities provide a number of advantages: "The ability to shift from one conceptual lens to another provides a way to redefine situations so that they become manageable" (Bolman & Deal, 1991, p. 37; "Less effective managers and problem solvers seem to interpret everything from a fixed standpoint" (Morgan, 1986, p. 12).

Fourth, *resist the temptation to overly frame a situation.* Framing is a useful technique for presenting a perspective on a particular issue. Overuse of the approach, however, can raise "red flags" among those to whom one is communicating. This can lead to reduced credibility of the framer, and ultimately a loss of power and influence.

Finally, *educate others in the organization on the merits and concerns associated with framing*. Organizational members who question the frames presented by their colleagues ultimately develop a more balanced perspective of the salient issues, enabling them to make more effective decisions. Promoting "framing awareness" reduces the likelihood of poor decisions because some members of the organization are unable to see beyond a frame.

Conclusion

Framing is a language tool generally considerd secondary in importance to action. Language, discourse, and talk are often depicted within organizations as "stepchildren" to action (Oswick, Keenoy, & Grant, 1997). This inferiority is signaled by commonplace sayings such as "Talk is cheap" or "Easier said than done"-and epitomized in the maxim: "Actions speak louder than words." Doing appears to be more highly valued than talking. In contrast, we suggest that the role of discourse, particularly framing, in management and the leadership process has been consistently understated and undervalued (Oswick et aI., 1997).

We believe that talk is not cheap and that what is said matters. Seemingly trivial changes in the framing of information can substantially influence decision making and decision makers.

It should be acknowledged, however, that some question the appropriateness of teaching framing skills. Indeed, the notion of organizational influence can have a negative connotation, giving rise to forms of deception, lying, and intimidation (Champoux, 2003). Machiavellian personalities are especially well adapted to abusing such techniques. Indeed, their resistance to social influence, lack of ethical concerns, and use of deception and manipulative tactics have been noted (Wilson, Near, & Miller, 1996).

These concerns notwithstanding, framing is a key component of language and expression within organizational contexts. Managers should master framing as a means of presenting their perspectives to others inside and outside of the organization, while seeking to reduce the gratuitous and deceptive use of the technique by others in the organization. In summary, when framing is properly used in an organization, it can create clear visual images and strong support for a course of action. When it is improperly utilized, however, it can result in an inaccurate presentation of the facts surrounding a situation, and ultimately a poor decision. Astute leaders learn to distinguish between the two extremes.

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