Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech largely shaped the civil rights movement. His words created an imagery of what a country would be like where racial prejudice no longer existed; that is, King framed the civil rights movement in a way so others would see it the way he saw it.

Framing is a way to use language to manage meaning. It's a way for leaders to influence how events are seen and understood. It involves the selection and highlighting of one or more aspects of a subject while excluding others.

Framing is analogous to what a photographer does. The visual world that exists is essentially ambiguous. When a photographer aims her camera and focuses on a specific shot, she frames her photo. Others then see what she wanted them to see. They see her point of view. That is precisely what leaders do when they frame an issue. They choose which aspects or portion of the subject they want others to focus on and which portions they want to be excluded.

Political leaders live or die on their ability to frame problems and their opponent's image. In an age of language wars, political
victory often goes to those who win the battle over terminology. George W. Bush, for instance, talks about "opportunity scholarships" rather than the unpopular concept of school vouchers, and sought repeal of the "death tax" rather than the "estate tax." And when Bush proposed a $1.6 trillion tax cut, he called it a "refund" for overcharged Americans. That sounds a lot fairer than a "tax cut that overwhelmingly benefits the rich."

In the complex and chaotic environment in which most leaders work, there is typically considerable maneuverability with respect to "the facts." What is real is often what the leader says is real. What's important is what he or she chooses to say is important. Leaders can use language to influence followers' perceptions of the world, the meaning of events, beliefs about causes and consequences, and visions of the future. So a leader's effectiveness is strongly influenced by his or her ability to frame issues.

Framing influences leadership effectiveness in numerous ways. It largely shapes the decision process in that frames determine the problems that need attention, the causes attributed to the problems, and the eventual choices for solving the problems. Framing also increases a leaders' success in implementing goals and getting people's agreement, because once the right frames are in place, the right behavior follows. In addition, framing is critical to effective leadership in a global context because leaders must frame problems in common ways to prevent cultural misunderstandings. Finally, of course, framing is a vital element in visionary leadership. Shared visions are achieved through common framing.
There are five language forms that can help you frame issues—metaphors, jargon, contrast, spin, and stories.

Metaphors help us understand one thing in terms of another. They work well when the standard of comparison is well understood and links logically to something else. When a manufacturing executive describes his goal of having "our production process running like a fine Swiss watch," he is using a metaphor to help his employees envision his ideal.

Organizational leaders are fond of using jargon. This is language that is peculiar to a particular profession, organization, or specific program. It conveys accurate meaning only to those who know the vernacular. Bell Atlantic (now part of Verizon) used exercises such as "breaking the squares" and "finding the blue chips" in employee training sessions and they became symbols within the company for finding new ways of thinking and identifying priority assignments, respectively. When a manager says that "this project is a blue chip assignment," people know that it's important and should get priority.

When leaders use the contrast technique, they illuminate a subject in terms of its opposite. Why? Because sometimes it's easier to say what a subject is not more easily than what it is. When an executive at a small software company was frustrated by his employees' lack of concern with keeping costs
down, he constantly chided them with the phrase, “we’re not Microsoft.” The message he wanted to convey was that his company didn’t have the financial resources of the software giant and they needed to reduce costs.

Presidential politics has created a new term—spin. Those who practice the art are called spin doctors. The objective of this technique is to cast your subject in a positive or negative light. Leaders who are good at “spinning” get others to interpret their interests in positive terms and opposing interests in negative terms. They emphasize their strengths and their opponent’s weaknesses. When executives at British Airways and American Airlines announced plans to cooperate on U.S.–U.K. routes, they gave it a positive spin by promoting the advantages to consumers. Richard Branson, head of Virgin Airlines and a direct competitor on these routes, responded with a negative spin—emphasizing the monopolistic implications and the downside effects on consumers.

Finally, leaders use stories to frame issues with examples that are larger than metaphors or jargon. When leaders at 3M continually retell the story of how Post-it Notes were discovered, they remind people of the importance the company places on creativity and serendipity in the innovation process.