



UNDERSTANDING FRAMES AND REFRAMING

Jerry was at it again; yet another contentious season fighting over irrigation water. The ditch manager was well-meaning and had already tried several times to explain how other users' water rights gave them not only the chance to ask for water first, but also to receive water even if Jerry would run out. Jerry just didn't understand. His father had always criticized the system and had often roared that it was unfair. Jerry had taken on that frame of reference and just couldn't accept that he did not legally have the same rights to water from the ditch as other users further down the line.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a frame of reference as “a set of ideas, conditions, or assumptions that determine how something will be approached, perceived, or understood.”

Frames (short for “frames of reference”) are mental shortcuts people use to help make sense of complex information. Frames help us understand and interpret the world around us and to represent that world to others. They help us organize complex ideas and events into coherent, understandable categories.

Frames and differences in perspective contribute much to how individuals and groups see things differently, especially where there are differing and incompatible interpretations of events. Because frames are built upon the underlying structures of beliefs, values, and experience, individuals on alternative sides of an issue often construct frames that differ in significant

ways. Even further, as strategic tools, frames can help rationalize self-interest, persuade broader audiences, build coalitions, or promote preferred outcomes.

Alternative Frames of Reference

Clearly conflicts can contain many different frames. The most common forms or source of frames of reference include the following:

- **Identity frames:** Answer the question “who am I?” For example: environmentalist; farmer; resident of the United States. Those identities can shift; parties may view themselves as having certain identities in one situation but a completely different identity in an alternative setting. When a conflict surfaces, the more central the challenge to one’s sense of self, the more opposed a person is likely to be. Typical responses to identity threats include ignoring information and perspectives that jeopardize the core self, affiliation with like-minded individuals and groups, and negatively characterizing outsiders.
- **Characterization frames:** Answer the question “Who are you?” Individuals view others in the conflict as possessing specific characteristics. Similar to a stereotype, characterization frames can be either positive or negative. Parties in conflict often construct characterization frames for others that significantly differ from how the other parties view themselves. Such characterizations often undermine the other sides’ legitimacy, cast doubt on their motivations, or exploit their sensitivity. Characterization frames are also often linked to identity frames, serving to strengthen a person’s own identity, while justifying actions toward the other parties.
- **Power frames:** A person’s conception of power and social control can play a significant role in conflict dynamics, because conflicts are often about struggles to alter existing institutions or decision-making procedures.



Power frames help the parties determine not only which forms of power are legitimate (e.g., governmental, legal, civil disobedience), but also the forms of power that are likely to advance one’s own position.

- **Conflict management or process frames:** Conflict over how best to manage or resolve differences is central to many disputes. Conflict frames may cause those involved to seek very different remedies in response to common problems. These remedies may range from acts of violence, civil disobedience, litigation, and negotiation. One side may be willing to sit down with a mediator and negotiate, while the other, thinking that it has the upper hand, may refuse negotiation, preferring litigation or violent action.
- **Risk and information frames:** Conflicts often involve expectations about future events, where the events and consequences are unknown and their likelihood is uncertain. As a result, the parties often construct risk and information frames with very different understandings about the level and extent of a particular risk. In addition, these frames often indicate to the individuals involved which sources of information are reliable and which are not.
- **Loss versus gain frames:** It is common for most parties in a conflict to focus on the threat of potential loss, rather than on the opportunities for gain. People tend to react differently to a proposed action when the expected consequences are framed in terms of losses as opposed to gains. This is true where preventing a perceived loss is often more important and more highly valued than capturing a gain.

Reframing: A Way Forward

Resolving conflict requires that the persons involved understand how frames influence contentious situations. We create frames to help us:

- **Define issues:** Does a problem exist? Describe what the problem is and the issues involved.
- **Shape actions:** Define how a problem should be resolved.
- **Provide protection:** Describe who is in the right; who is in the wrong.
- **Justify actions:** Tell us what action is appropriate or needed and why.
- **Mobilize others:** Provide a rallying cry or invoke a common mission.

Evaluating a conflict from the perspective of frame analysis and the resulting understanding of frames can help the stakeholders involved to better recognize the dynamics involved, including the factors that can lead to changes within a frame or changes to the frames themselves.



Reframing Approaches

There are many ways to accomplish reframing, including:

- Rephrasing,
- Focusing,
- Proposing an option,
- Moving from abstract to specific,
- Going behind positions,
- Stimulating new ideas,
- Looking to the future,
- Dealing with emotional outbursts,
- Preempting, creating a metaphor, offering choices,
- Involving the quiet participant,
- Assigning homework,
- Being direct,
- Using a ludicrous intervention,
- Discussing what will happen in a court scenario,
- Caucusing,
- Emphasizing closure,
- Referring to other disciplines,
- Termination, and
- Considering a return to court, among others.

One way to address conflict is through reframing. Reframing is an attempt to change the conceptual and/or emotional setting or viewpoint about a particular situation and to place it into another frame. The new frame should fit the facts of the situation equally well, or even better, and thereby changes its entire meaning. Reframing allows an idea or object to be thought of in a new and different way, allowing it to fit into a completely other frame. Reframing is essentially urging the parties toward a perspective that makes a mutually agreed upon solution possible.

Victor Frankl in his book, *From Death Camp to Existentialism*, in which he writes of being in a concentration camp. For three years, he lived through starvation and torture in four camps. He lost his beloved wife and all of his family, and observed most of his fellow inmates die. Frankl kept his mind active, planning the lectures he would give after his release, using the material from the death camps to illustrate points he wanted to teach. As a devoted teacher, his careful, deliberate planning of his future lectures kept his spirit and body alive in hideous deadening conditions. He survived the death camps and did go on to realize his vision of using his experiences as a great healer. His process was a giant reframe of a hideous situation being transformed in Frankl's mind to be used for a worthy purpose. He was determinedly preparing to use his suffering to help others find hope in their particular horrible physical or mental situations.

Research suggests that reframing is often challenging for individuals or groups. It requires taking on new perspectives, and often requires some degree of risk-taking on the part of the parties linked to the dispute. As a result, reframing works best when changes in the context of the dispute can be made in a way that increases the incentives for new perspectives or places a strong focus on improving communication and building trust. Reframing can also be used negatively to frustrate and impede settlements and the resolution of conflicts, but that is not our focus here.

In general, all reframing strategies use dialogue to reframe positions, issues, and the conflict as a whole. These can be lumped into four broad categories:

- **Reduce tension and hostility:** by using techniques that focus on listening, further study, and approaches for reducing tension and promoting more effective communication. The focus is on improving the capacity to communicate and reduce the escalation often associated with mutually-incompatible frames.
- **Perspective taking:** by helping the parties understand the conflict and its dynamics from the perspective of others. The hope is that individuals will each see themselves more objectively, as well as seeing the other party in a more positive light. This approach seeks to validate and bolster the credibility of the perspectives held by the other party, as well as examine the interplay between one's own frames and those of other disputants.
- **Establish common ground:** by using techniques such as visioning and common ground inquiry to allow reframing around a smaller set of issues. Common ground inquiry explores areas of agreement and possible joint action between parties who normally focus on their differences, in order to open up communication. Parties are also encouraged to identify their desired futures in order to shift the focus from short-term to long-term.
- **Enhancing options and alternatives:** Several approaches can be used to enhance the desirability of alternatives. Individuals must be able to understand the other parties' frames and to view options from other perspectives in order to evaluate options. Third-party facilitators can be helpful with this. In addition, reframing perceptions of losses as gains can enhance the openness and creativity of parties involved in a dispute. Stated in another way, when making choices involving gains, we tend to be risk averse. But, when we make choices involving losses, we are more likely to be risk taking. How

an issue is framed affects how we value different options and use those values to make a selection.

A key element to making any negotiation more successful or to resolving conflict is the ability to reframe. Each of these techniques have a common structure at their most basic level. That structure involves taking the framework that each participant in a conflict holds from one of negativity to one that focuses on the positive opportunities for resolution.

It is just possible that Jerry might benefit from reframing his perspective on irrigation water rights. However, that will likely be difficult, unless he is able to see the newly-gained understanding as a gain, an opportunity to better-manage the water he has access to, rather than as a loss compared to other users. Jerry is unlikely to take this upon himself, as the reasons for reframing often are driven by forces and factors outside traditional systems.

RESOURCES:

Blanciak, P. "Reframing: The Essence of Mediation." <https://www.mediate.com/articles/blanciak.cfm>. Accessed June, 2020.

Bloom, C & L. "Reframing: The transformative power of suffering." *Psychology Today*. December 2017. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/stronger-the-broken-places/201712/reframing>. Accessed June, 2020.

Kaufman, S., M. Elliott and D. Shmueli. "Frames, Framing and Reframing." *Beyond Intractability*. Eds. Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess. Conflict Information Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder. Posted: September 2003. <https://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/framing>. Accessed June, 2020.

Livingood, J.M. "Reframing and its Uses." *Dispute Resolution Journal* - V57:4. October, 2002. <https://arbitrationlaw.com/library/reframing-and-its-uses-dispute-resolution-journal-vol-57-no-4>. Accessed June, 2020.

Merriam-Webster dictionary. <https://www.merriam-webster.com>. Accessed June, 2020.

Negotiation in Agriculture | Western Extension Committee. [Negotiation.FarmManagement.org](https://www.negotiation.farmmanagement.org).

Shmueli, D., M. Elliott, and S. Kaufman. "Frame Changes and the Management of Intractable Conflicts." *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*. 2006. <http://image.lifeservant.com/siteupload-files/VSYM/7AF4374C-961E-4F5F-A526A9CoA749Co54/DC11BC53-C29A-8FCE-4477923AFDFoE7DF.pdf>. Accessed June, 2020.

Smutko, S. *Negotiation Skills in Natural Resources Management*. Collaboration Program in Natural Resources. The Ruckelshaus Institute | University of Wyoming, 2016.

Negotiation in Agriculture offers a series of guides and other educational materials to assist those involved in agricultural operations find solutions where perspectives differ. Settings may include a diverse range of situations: working out the terms of a lease, establishing an agreement for a crop-share, or resolving a point of contention. Negotiation in Agriculture is a joint effort of the Western Extension Committee, an association of Extension professionals in the 13 western states.

For more information see: [Negotiation.FarmManagement.org](https://www.negotiation.farmmanagement.org).



The Western Extension Committee seeks to make its programs and activities available to all individuals regardless of race, color, national origin, age, disability, or where applicable, sex, marital status, familial status, parental status, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, political beliefs, reprisal, or because all or part of an individual's income is derived from any public assistance program.

To learn more, see:
<https://WEC.FarmManagement.org>



The Western Extension Committee is an organization of Extension specialists from the 13 western states, Guam and U.S. affiliated Pacific Islands, supported by Extension Directors in the western region. WEC also receives support from the Western Extension Risk Management Education Center (Western Center).