

Reframing Leadership¹

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Introduction

Effective leadership is essential in the businesses where we work, the institutions where we learn, and in the communities where we live. Our own leadership is a product of how we see the world. Called many different names, our mental models, mind-sets, or frames are a set of ideas and assumptions that help us understand and negotiate different challenges (Bolman & Deal, 2013). A good frame, like a well-drawn map, allows us to better understand our current situation and decide how to move forward within that landscape.

The challenge in leadership is that we tend to only use one map to guide our understanding of the environment and to make decisions. We become comfortable with one frame and continue to use that frame to see the world, no matter what is happening in the environment. It is like using a Pennsylvania map successfully in Philadelphia, but then believing the map will have the same level of success in Gainesville, Florida. The environments in which leadership occurs are complex. A frame that works in one situation might not work as well in another.

In Bolman and Deal's book, *Reframing Organizations* (2013), the authors provide a toolkit for developing different frames to address leadership issues. By allowing for multiple frames, a leader is able to reframe the way they perceive a situation and adjust the way they respond. The four frames that can be used as tools to guide our

perception of effective leadership are the structural frame, the human resource frame, the political frame, and the symbolic frame.

The Structural Frame

In general, the structural frame emphasizes goals, specialized roles, and formalized relationships (Bolman & Deal, 2013). More specifically, this frame focuses on the division of labor, rules, policies, procedures, and hierarchies that are currently established in the environment.

Problems are often found when the current structure established in the group or organization does not fit within the current environment (Bolman & Deal, 2013). For example, if an organization is looking to be flexible and creative, they might be better served with a horizontal or flat organizational structure. On the other hand, if decisions need to be vetted prior to being implemented, a traditional hierarchy structure may be more appropriate.

When the leader is able to observe an issue through the structural frame, he or she is able to

1. Carefully study the existing structure to understand how the structure works (or does not work) and redesign if necessary. This includes having a more accurate picture of roles, responsibilities, and the relationships between individuals.
2. Redefine new goals and strategies for moving forward.

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3. Proactively change the current structure in response to changing goals, technology, and external demands.
4. Address the structural dissemination of facts and information to increase communication effectiveness.

Tip for using the structural frame:

- Consider regularly revisiting a visual model, such as an organizational chart or map, to determine where structural issues occur the most and why this might be.
- At least once a year, go back and review with the employee his or her job descriptions, roles, and responsibilities in order to make sure the description matches what he or she is actually doing in their job.
- Ask employees how the structure of your organization or department is impeding on progress or success.

The Human Resource Frame

The human resource frame, like the name suggests, emphasizes the role individuals play in getting work done while also feeling good about themselves, the organization, and their work (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Specifically, this frame focuses on individual needs, feelings, prejudices, skills, and limitations.

Problems can arise when an individual or a group of individuals are unsatisfied and actively disengaged with their work. For example, employees who are recognized by their supervisor or manager tend to have higher active engagement in the organization.

When the leader is able to observe an issue through the human resource frame, he or she is able to

1. Identify and address those areas that are not a good fit between the individual and the organization.
2. Recognize and keep talented individuals who work well in the organizational culture.
3. Promote and reward individuals to encourage motivation.
4. Empower others by providing an environment of job enrichment, teaming, and diversity.

Tip for using the human resource frame:

- Consider exploring the use of personal assessments (such as Strengths Quest, MBTI, DISC, etc.) in your organization to better address the talents and needs of individuals.

- Think about working with an outside support individual (possibly another individual at the same level in Extension or a faculty member) to collect satisfaction data on your area of the organization. Think about including areas like satisfaction with the job, communication, being recognized, work-life balance, etc.

The Political Frame

The political frame views “organizations as coalitions composed of individuals and groups with enduring differences who live in a world of scarce resources” (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 209). Furthermore, leadership in these coalitions looks to use power and influence to address this landscape. Effective leaders are able to use conflict, negotiation, and bargaining to achieve the group’s goals.

Issues can arise when power is used unjustly or ineffectively (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Additionally, issues may also emerge if the leader has little political awareness. For example, if the supervisor or manager is unable to accurately read key power relationships, detect crucial social networks, or understand the forces that shape the views of key stakeholders, then their employees are at risk of missing out on valuable resources (Goleman, 1998).

When the leader is able to observe an issue through the political frame, he or she is able to

1. Carefully study the existing structure (utilizing the structural frame) and redraw (for him or herself) the organizational chart to better understand the power structures in the organization. This includes having a more accurate picture of who utilizes power, who has informal power, where coalitions exist, and how decisions are made.
2. Identify how information gets communicated and how that communication brings together different coalitions within the organization.
3. Continuously build networks and relationships with different internal and external stakeholders.

Tips for using the political frame:

- Consider creating spaces, such as a regularly-held meeting or forum, where employees across your organization can freely and equally speak to issues in your organization.
- Set the agenda for your team but be realistic about expectations when defining goals. Consider identifying the individuals or groups in your organization who hold

the five bases of power (French & Raven, 1959): reward power, coercive power, legitimate power, referent power, and expert power. How are these power bases permitting or hindering the allocation of resources in your organization?

The Symbolic Frame

Finally, the symbolic frame recognizes that culture is the glue that holds a business together, unites people, and ultimately helps the leader accomplish the business's goals (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Stories, myths, rituals, ceremonies, and symbols, like vision, mission, and values, are the driving forces behind culture.

- Problems that occur in the symbolic frame are often associated with leaders not adequately representing those symbols that are communicated as important (Bolman & Deal, 2013). For example, if the leader preaches integrity and collaboration as core values for the organization, then it is critical that the leader does not engage in unethical behavior or elitism.

When the leader is able to observe an issue through the symbolic frame, he or she is able to

1. Create and establish a mission, vision, and values for your group. These should be more than “talking points” but should help guide the group and make decisions.
2. Respect and use the rich history of the business or group, i.e. what has happened in the past; that, if communicated effectively, can help communicate positive growth and change.
3. Develop and tell stories that easily communicate the symbols that are important to the organization. Make sure the stories are easily retold by others.
4. Lead by example and practice what is preached.

Tips for using the symbolic frame:

- Consider exploring creative ways to visually depict your organization's cultural pillars, such as mission statements, core values, and shared history.
- Consider providing space for individuals in your organization to help identify the various symbols in the organization. Ask yourself if what was identified is what you expected or believe to be true.

Applying the Frames

As you work on reframing your leadership and the organizational issues you face, it is helpful to know which of the frames are most valuable in different situations. Although all four frames provide valuable insight into a problem, Bolman and Deal (2013) also provide a valuable chart that helps guide leaders to a particular frame(s) when addressing leadership issues. In the chart below, five different questions are posed, and, based on the answer, a corresponding frame is recommended.

Question	If yes:	If no:
Are individual commitment and motivation essential?	Human resource, symbolic	Structural, political
Is technical quality of decision important?	Structural	Human resource, political, symbolic
Is there a high level of ambiguity or uncertainty?	Political, symbolic	Structural, human resource
Are conflict and scarce resource significant factors?	Political, symbolic	Structural, human resource
Are you working from the bottom up?	Political, symbolic	Structural, human resource

As you advance an issue through these questions, particular frames will surface and continue to be referenced more than other frames. By focusing on these dominate frames, the leader is provided with a basic map to navigate the leadership landscape on any particular issue.

Conclusion

Leadership is a complex process with many different variables that lead to success. Often, those practicing leadership fail to appreciate the many different facets of the leadership process. The four frames provided in this article are one step to providing those leading with a more comprehensive map to navigate the complex leadership terrain.

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