

REFRAMING



The approach relies on the fact that different people with different experience approach problems in different ways.

REFRAMING EXPLAINED

Reframing is about changing perception by understanding something in another way. Bandler and Grinder explained reframing in the following manner:

What reframing does is to say, this external thing occurs and it elicits this response in you, so you assume that you know what the meaning is. But if you thought about it this other way, then you would have a different response. Being able to think about things in a variety of ways builds a spectrum of understanding. None of these ways are 'really' true, though. They are simply statements about a person's understanding.

BASIC TYPES OF REFRAMING

There are two basic kinds of reframes: context reframing and content reframing. Both can alter our internal representations of events or situations, which permits us to experience the events in other, hopefully, more resourceful ways.

Context reframing is taking an experience that seems to be negative, not useful, and distressing and showing how the same behavior or experience can be useful in another context. Children's stories are full of reframes designed to show children how what might seem a liability can be useful in another context. For example, the other reindeer made fun of Rudolph's bright, red nose; but that funny nose made Rudolph the hero on a dark night.

Context reframing can be used as a "perceptual filter," taught and practiced until it becomes an integral and habitual way of organizational thinking. It is a very useful tool in business as it is the way of thinking that gives one the ability to make lemonade from those unexpected (and unwanted) lemons. Creativity, new visions, innovations are commonplace for those who know to reframe and re-contextualize problems and obstacles into opportunities and resources.

The second type of reframing is content reframing. *Content reframing* is simply changing the meaning of a situation - that is, the situation or behavior stays the same, but the meaning is changed. For instance, a famous army general reframed a distressful situation for his troops by telling them that "We're not retreating, we're just advancing in another direction." Another example is the reframing of death. Death is a life event that has different meaning in different cultures, and even many individuals deal with this event in vastly different ways. Some are forever grieving the loss, whereas others are joyous at the now eternal presence of the person's spirit. In other words, different people attach very different meaning and interpretations to the concept of death.

REFRAMING AS A COMMUNICATION SKILL

Learning to reframe is essential in learning to effectively communicate with others and even with ourselves. In every field of endeavor, it is the person who sets the frame who defines the playing field, and, therefore the scope of the "game" to be played. The framer defines the focus of attention and sets the frames that define the presuppositions of the activity or conversation.

Learning to Communicate

Reframing starts by recognizing how each of us processes our experiences. Reframing is not just a pattern to apply to the world "out there" but needs to be a resident

program in our mental operating system. We tend to accept our perceptions at face value and use reasons like "that's just the way I am" as rationale for continuing to proceed with the same thought patterns.

To overcome our reluctance to challenge our perceptions, the personal challenge is to learn to communicate with ourselves with all the purpose, direction, and persuasiveness that we offer in a business presentation. How we think, or the structure of our thinking, affects the content in the same way that how we drive affects the safety and security of our passengers. In practice, reframing is widely used in the therapeutic context. When a counselor asks a client to "see it another way" or "think about it differently," he or she is attempting to reframe events to get him or her to see the problem in another light.

THEORY AND PRACTICE FOR INDIVIDUAL REFRAMING

Reframing is a key to the puzzle of self-fulfilling prophecies - the concept that your beliefs tend to unconsciously manifest themselves in your actions and decisions.

Self-fulfilling prophecies have been called the Pygmalion effect from a play that later became *My Fair Lady*. In the play, Professor Henry Higgins won a wager that nurture was more powerful than nature. He trained a commoner, Eliza Doolittle, to have the manner and speech of a woman of the upper class. The story demonstrates that our self-perceptions, or who it is we learn to think we are, is a primary determinant in how we will fare in life. There is story after story about class room experiments in which teachers were told that a group of randomly chosen students were gifted and that another random group were slow; sure enough, at the end of the experiment, students tested just that way.

Perceptions define our experience. Meaning is created in our brains from our experiences. Behavior is given meaning based on what we learned the behavior meant in the past. We have a past frame into which we fit current behavior in order to identify and understand it. The understanding comes not from the behavior itself but from the particular frame through which we chose to view it. Each of us perceives the world as it is filtered into our awareness through our frames of perceptions. Thus, each of us experiences and finds different and unique meaning in our world.

Reframing, then, is expanding our own or others' perceptions by providing a new frame through which to view a life situation. What is a disastrous problem for someone is a challenging growth opportunity for another. Victor Frankl (1963) who survived Nazi Concentration camp, recounted that although most of his fellow inmates lost hope and subsequently died, Frankl kept hope and planned for the lectures he would give after his release. In his own mind, he turned a potentially hopeless situation into a source of rich experiences that he could use to help others overcome hopeless situations. Fortunately, we do not have to be in such dire circumstances for reframing to be useful. Every moment of every day, there is opportunity to see things in another way. To see them through another frame of perception can give us hope and a better perspective of ourselves and others.

A major implication of this concept is that there are no correct or right frames of perceptions. There are only useful frames and not so useful frames depending on the particular context. A useful reframe is to understand that all perceptions are useful in

some context. Given that, you can always ask yourself or someone else, "where would this perception be useful, or where would it make sense?"

Reframing in Practice

Medical hypnotherapist, Milton H. Erickson, M.D., mastered reframing in a therapeutic setting. (Rosen, 1982). When an individual would come to him with a problem such as procrastination, Erickson would immediately congratulate him and declare the client an expert on procrastination. He would then enlist the person to teach him how to become a master Procrastinator. By reframing what was perceived as a lifelong liability into a skill, Erickson helped each individual see this former liability as a positive attribute and an ability to be valued and used in the appropriate contexts. The person then could view his or her behavior not as something to avoid or get rid of but as a resource that has value when used appropriately. Two possible contexts in which procrastination could be useful are postponing dessert when dieting or delaying the expression of rage when angry. This ownership and mastery of, in this example, procrastination, gives the individual options to choose to use this skill in an appropriate context.

The ability to reframe virtually any issue into a positive attribute establishes an atmosphere of acceptance and cooperation rather than one of "expert and subject." Genuinely accepting every person's ideas, attitudes, and behaviors as positive and useful is to open ones own perceptions to the potential rather than the limitations of any situation.

Reframing is more than a technique to resolve a difficulty. Reframing is an operating system. Once it becomes a habit, the whole world and everyone in it are seen in terms of "what is right" rather than "what is wrong." This is a fundamental shift in our cultural paradigm in that we are encouraged and rewarded to be problem-solvers from an early age. American culture gives great accolades and much money to those who can solve the big problems. We learn to measure our self-worth in terms of our ability to solve problems. Seeing oneself through the filters of being a problem solver sets one's perceptual filters to "scan for problems." Life is then seen primarily as a source of problems being served up so that we can maintain our status as master problem solver. Problem solving is a dominant theme in schools, psychotherapy, management, and counseling. We continue our fascination with problems although we know that success is what creates success. Success stimulates success in persons and in organizations. Yet, we spend much of our personal and organizational time looking through the frame of "problem elimination or solution." How many of us as children learned that we got more attention from adults when we brought them a problem to solve? How many of us carry this unconscious pattern into everything we do today? Management consultants, managers, and employees often see their roles as problem solvers. This orientation can hide from us the small successes that if noticed and nurtured, can lead to a creative spirit of continuous improvement and success. An individual attitude of reframing problems into potential and opportunity is more than just "sleight of mind." It is literally a way to change the perceptions of ourselves, those we serve, and the organizations we lead.

THE QUALITY REVOLUTION AS A REFRAME IN BUSINESS

The total quality management movement in business was a major, across-the-board reframe. It affected the ways that businesses thought about every important

relationship, from relationships with customers, to relationships with suppliers and employees. One of the primary changes brought about by the quality revolution was in the relationships between companies and their employees.

An example of a new covenant between employer and employee comes from Jack Stack of Springfield Remanufacturing. Stack (1992) explained that he shares all of Springfield's production and profit numbers with every person in the plant and in the office. He even offers classes to his employees to teach them what every number means and how the financial reporting process works. This is a massive reframe in a business world that still tends to operate on a "need to know" basis. Since Stack started opening his books to his employees, Springfield's sales have soared, as have profits. Employee turnover is extremely low, whereas employees hold themselves and each other to the highest of standards.

Stack wrote that: "We have a company filled with people who not only are owners, but who think and act like owners rather than employees. ... Owners, real owners, do not have to be told what to do - they can figure it out for themselves. They have all the knowledge, understanding, and information they need to make a decision, and they have the motivation and the will to act fast."

All employees want to find meaning in their work. If managers act as if this "frame" were true and if they hold it as part of their covenant with employees, then how will they think differently about what information they share with associates and team members? How will managers help employees to organize their work? What demands will managers make of their teams and of themselves to uphold the values that they have chosen to be the nonnegotiable elements in the organizations. How will managers go about choosing team members - our partners in service?

One of the most important reframes in the quality revolution is the definition of quality itself. The new definition is simple: *Quality* is what the customer says it is. Looking through this lens has been a big change for many enterprises. Moreover, the new ways of thinking continue to take on new frames as companies reckon with the challenges presented by the quality movement. Roles have shifted. Companies, in the demand for defect-free products, increasingly have started demanding the same of their suppliers. An organization committed to delivering the highest quality service or product needs to align itself with supplier companies and individuals who share this dedication to high-quality standards. This has led to more long-term relationships between customers and suppliers. Demming noted that, "in long-term relationships both supplier and customer have a chance to learn from each other" (in Iatzo & Saunders, 1995, p. 58). In this context, an organization's relationship with its suppliers is similar to the organization's relationship with its end-use customers. In other words, a firm that establishes a long-term, mutually beneficial relationship with suppliers is more likely to maintain consistently high quality.

And, if all of this information about quality and the changes it has wrought in business make us start to wonder about the cost of this reframe, Philip Crosby (1979) suggested that we think about that in another way, too. He reframes the entire nature of the cost of quality in the title of his seminal book, *Quality is Free*.

CONCLUSIONS: MAKING SENSE OF ANOTHER'S FRAMES

Understanding where others are "coming from" requires the ability to step outside one's own mental structures to perceive the situation through another person's frames. To find the sense in the situation that someone else sees, you have to look at it through his or her frame. Once you do that, you will have some ground for redirecting his or her attention to looking at it another way or through another frame.

Reframing is a tool, which when skillfully applied, can bring greater understanding of those who think and act differently than oneself. Knowing that there are different possible frames and paradigms will give us a way to engage those different models of the world in a deeper, more accepting way. We can then realize that those who disagree with us are speaking and acting from within a different frame, perhaps a different theory of disabilities, or a different theory of management.

By using reframing skills, we can explore the other person's views in order to find the frame of reference out of which they are thinking and operating. Only then can we reframe the situation and move on to creating a frame that will allow the deeper intention of both people to guide our plans and actions to mutually beneficial outcomes.

Simple Examples of reframing:

- **Original:** I made a mistake, therefore I'm stupid.
Reframe: I tried something that didn't work, so next time I'll try something else.
- **Original:** Bob is so lazy, I wish he would do something productive.
Reframe: Maybe Bob does get things done, just in a different way than I do.

Constructing a reframe:

There are literally hundreds of ways to reframe things. You can reframe them according to time, place, situation, intent of behavior vs. behavior itself, etc. Reframing works by virtue of the fact that the map is not the territory. Hopefully doing the following exercise will convince you of the power of reframing.

- **Step One:** Identify the behavior/belief/etc. that you want to reframe.
- **Step Two:** Ask yourself: "What is a more useful / important / beneficial way to look at / understand / think about this?"
- **Step Three:** Deliver the reframe, and notice the response you get.
- **Step Four:** It's usually best to use several reframes in order to solidify the new way of thinking.
- Repeat as necessary.