
2009 American Planning Association
Washington Conference

Framing and Reframing: The Keys to Changing
Landscapes

with

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November 12, 2009
Hilton Vancouver
Vancouver, Washington

Framing Your Story

What are frames?

(George Lakoff) Frames are the “mental structures that shape the way we see the world.”

Where do frames live?

Frames live in the synapses of a person’s brain.

Why are they important?

They affect how people understand problems and what solutions are seen to fit.

Like with a picture frame, the mind focuses only within set borders – not seeing what lies outside the frame.

People filter your arguments, supporting facts, and policy details through deeply held frames.

People’s minds rely on frames, not facts.

If frames are in the brain how do we know what our frames are?

The way we know what our frames are, or evoke new ones, comes out of language, what words we use.

What are some framing words?

They are the words that express our values.

Such as,

Fairness

Equality

Justice

Sustainability

Responsibility

Accountability

Truth

Loyalty

Family

Village

Personal rights

Community

Courage

Obedience

God, etc

The personal responsibility frame is one of the strongest in America.

What does all this have to do with my telling my story?

You need to be clear on the frame for any story you tell. Because if you don't frame it, the other person definitely will and it may not be with a frame you wanted.

So how do I begin to frame my story?

Just say to yourself: This is a story about _____.

Fill in the blank with the expression of a value.

If you said "this is a story about my sister Jacinta," you missed the point. Try again.

If you said "this is a story about how standing up for your beliefs (courage) makes you a winner," you got it.

Once you've got your frame it becomes clear what parts of your story must be shared and what parts can be left out.

Building Frames (George Lakoff)

Build frames based on three levels, prioritizing the values at Level 1 since those values are what motivate people to act.

- **Level 1 is the expression of values** like fairness, responsibility, equity, etc. – the core values that motivate us to change the world or not.
- **Level 2 is the general topic being addressed**, like AIDS, housing or the environment.
- **Level 3 is the nitty-gritty action, policy solution or strategy** for achieving change.

You have to start with shared values. Think about:

- What are the core values behind the change I want to see?
- How do these values help me define the problem?
- Why would these values lead people to support my solutions?

Here's an example taken from Meta Messaging: Framing Your Case and Reinforcing Your Allies. When many people focus on the problems alcohol causes in our society, they think solely of what alcoholics can do to stop drinking. Classic personal responsibility frame. That can be part of the solution, but advocates also wanted to improve the environment that encourages excessive drinking and leads to problems around liquor stores. They developed a frame based on:

- Values: Fairness and equity
 - Issue: Neighborhood development
 - Policy Goal: Local government should limit the number of alcohol outlets.
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Building Frames (cont.)

From this frame they developed a concrete, values based narrative:

- What's wrong? Too many liquor stores detract from the quality of life.
- Why does it matter? It is not fair that certain families are subjected to such degrading conditions. Every family should have the opportunity to raise their children in a healthy environment.
- What should be done? The city should make a rule to limit the number of liquor stores allowed within a certain radius.

By shifting the frame, advocates allowed people who didn't consider themselves affected by excessive alcohol sales to see the value of solving this problem for the greater community. The fight was now about fair access to a healthy neighborhood.

Advocates across issues can benefit by defining their frame with values that appeal to more than their advocacy base. This requires carefully analyzing what values are core to your mission, will resonate with your target audience(s), and can support your long term advocacy goals.

Strategy for activating your frame and its narrative:

- **What is the problem?** (Answer: Your perspective on what has gone wrong.)
 - **Why does it matter?** (Answer: Your core values)
 - **What is the solution?** (Answer: Who should take what policy action, by when)
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