Leadership

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Reframing *The Art of Framing*: Problems and Prospects for Leadership

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Abstract *This article offers three explanations for why some leaders embrace the skill of framing and others struggle with it. The first explanation draws from philosophical arguments in social constructionism over relativism, essentialism, and agency to draw boundaries around that which is open to framing and that which is not. The second explanation draws from O'Keefe's (1988; 1997) theory of 'Message Design Logics', which argues that the logics that managers employ to produce and receive messages likely impacts framing ability. The third explanation grapples with questions of whether framing is a teachable skill and the contingencies associated with effective learning. Finally, the article concludes with an argument for the interrelationship among the three explanations.*

Keywords *communication; framing; leadership; management of meaning*

In January of 1996, Jossey-Bass published *The Art of Framing*, a book written by an academic (yours truly) and an internal organizational consultant (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). The book was based on nearly 10 years of research at my coauthor's American multinational firm, which involved tape recording over 200 actual work interactions at several of its US based manufacturing sites. In the midst of publishing for a number of academic outlets (Courtright et al., 1989; Fairhurst, 1993a; 1993b; Fairhurst & Chandler, 1989; Fairhurst et al., 1987; Fairhurst et al., 1995), my company liaison and coauthor, Bob Sarr, asked me when I was going to stop publishing for the few hundred people who read academic journals and start writing something that could actually help the people that I was studying. It was one of those questions for which there were no good answers.

While I was fighting my tendency to view this as further evidence of the academic–industry gulf, I remember being very struck at the time by the disconnection between industry's view of communication, roughly that of information transmission, and the critical need to understand the management of meaning. Communication as information transmission is best reflected in the Sender–Message–Receiver model (Shannon & Weaver, 1949). An old chestnut that accurately enough depicts the conduit like character of the communication process, it neglects the role of meaning, one of the most essential aspects of human communication (Axley, 1984). My feelings about this disconnection were strong

because in those taped conversations I saw Total Quality Management (TQM) come to life and die on the shop floor. Some very smart people mistakenly viewed strategic change initiatives as 'lay ons', their jargon for a mandated, whole-cloth transfer of ideas, rather than products of multiple and evolving conversations in which the meaning of TQM was continually negotiated. The conduit view of communication fell far short.

Hence *The Art of Framing* was born in an attempt to see if managers could begin to understand their role as managers of meaning and co-constructors of reality: individuals who were frequently powerless to control the turbulence of their environments, but who could control the context under which turbulence was seen. I should hasten to add, this was hardly an original idea. Aside from a too often unacknowledged rich history in the study of rhetoric dating back to Vico in the 18th century, Nietzsche in the late 19th century, and Richards, Burke, Perelman, Goffman, and Foucault, to name a few, in the 20th century, 'management of meaning' or 'symbolic' views of communication were all the rage in neo-charismatic models of leadership (Bass, 1985; 1988; Conger, 1989; Conger & Kanungo, 1987; House, 1977; Shamir et al., 1993). Still thriving, this genre produces articles and books on leader-manager distinctions,[1] charisma, inspirational leadership, organizational visions, controlling corporate culture, and transformational change in an age of corporate downsizing and globalization, all of which converge on the idea that leadership's greatest impact is perhaps not on the bottom line as much as it is human sentiment and understanding: meaning, affect, belief, and commitment (Bryman, 1992; 1996; Conger, 1991; Fairhurst, 2001; Kotter, 1990; Pondy, 1978; Smircich & Morgan, 1982; Zaleznik, 1977). However, some 10 years ago the skills associated with the management of meaning were scarce in most leadership development programs, not to mention the business schools. Even those programs with a communication emphasis were emphasizing active listening, dialogue, giving and receiving feedback, problem solving discussion, conflict resolution, and public speaking. Framing was foundational to all, but missing in action.

Ironically, the concept of framing has a long and rich history in the social sciences. Bateson (1972), an anthropologist, showed us how frames work meta-communicatively to shape the interpretation of both speech content and the relationship between communicators. In sociology, Goffman's (1974) frames are definitions of situations that produce meanings and organize experience; they are as multidimensional and multilayered as past experiences allow.[2] Viewing framing as generalized schemata, Tannen's (1979) linguistic focus emphasized its role in language production. In the organizational sciences, Weick's (1979; 1981) enactment and selection phases in his model of organizing as well as his notion of 'gloss' are evocative of framing's bracketing and interpretive functions. Bartunek (1988) likewise focused on the role of reframing in organizational change. Kahneman and Tversky (1979; Tversky & Kahneman, 1981) demonstrated the impact of problem framing on decision making, which was picked up by negotiation scholars who study both the schematic and communicative aspects of framing in bargaining strategies, conflict escalation, and negotiated outcomes (Bazerman, 1984; Neale et al., 1987; Putnam & Holmer, 1992). Entman's (1993) view of framing as the promotion of a 'particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral

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evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation' (p. 5) is a frequently cited definition for political actors in media framing research, a genre which seeks to link news texts to production and reception processes (Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Price & Tewksbury, 1997). While a literature review that meaningfully characterizes the differences in framing research across disciplines and genres of research is beyond the scope of this essay, one commonality is the casting of framing as both a cognitive device and a communicative activity defined by selection, emphasis, interpretation, and exclusion.[3]

If ever there was an academic warrant for a leadership skill quite new to practicing managers, managing meaning or 'framing' was it. I was as sure of it then as I am today. However, something unexpected happened on the way to becoming the next management gurus. Still an active title for Jossey-Bass, the book and skill of framing consistently engenders two quite distinct reactions: either practicing managers really embrace the concept, or they seem to struggle with it. Managers from in and outside of the US have said to me: 'this really gets to the heart of what I do as a communicator', or quite the opposite, 'This is really tough stuff. I'm going to have to go back to school on this one. I'm not sure I understand'.[4]

At first I thought that these diverging responses might have something to do with hierarchical level. In early seminars on the subject, first line supervisors were among the first to invoke the law of two feet (that is, walk out). However, this was quickly disconfirmed when regardless of level managers from highly technical fields (for example, those with engineering backgrounds) and a few CEOs struggled with the concept. Some managers complained of the abstractness of framing relative to more concrete skills like listening or giving feedback. Some managers wanted a faster read. Some women leaders viewed as lacking gravitas struggled with framing because they were too inclined to defer to male colleagues. Some old guard (read white, male and older) managers disregarded framing because in the immortal words of one: 'I let my authority do the talking'.

By contrast, those who readily embraced the concept seem to place a premium on communication especially regarding its role in organizational change. These managers were not the ones I saw in executive coaching or in training seminars. They bought my book and many others on the subjects of leadership and communication, and they took the time to engage me in dialogue about the subject, usually via email. They had questions and lots of them. Intuitively, they understood the need for their own 'presence' as communicators and the transformative possibilities of communication, what Hoskin (2004) calls *kairos* or a 'significant moment of crystallization, turning point, or things coming together' (p. 744).

Perhaps it is human nature, the academic mindset, or a personality flaw to focus on the negative, but this unexpected dichotomized response continues as a source of fascination for me. I have since come to believe that the reasons for the failure to understand leadership as the management of meaning through framing are many and varied. As we approach the 10-year anniversary of this book, it seems a fitting time to reflect on these reasons because they speak quite directly to the theory/practice divide in the organizational sciences, translatable skills from social constructionism and neo-charismatic models of leadership, and dismissive attitudes toward communication in the business world. Before doing so, framing in *The Art of Framing* must first be described.

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Framing defined

In *The Art of Framing* (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996), we draw from Pondy (1978), Entman (1993), and Weick (1979) to define 'framing' as:

> the ability to shape the meaning of a subject, to judge its character and significance. To hold the frame of a subject is to choose one particular meaning (or set of meanings) over another. When we share our frames with others (the process of framing), we manage meaning because we assert that our interpretations should be taken as real over other possible interpretations. (p. 3)

We do not suggest that every subject is suitable for framing. However, to the extent that uncertainty or ambiguity mark a given subject, what is real and important is often what we say is real and important. Because this definition of framing rests squarely on the socially constructed nature of reality (Berger & Luckman, 1966), it offers an opportunity to view leadership more specifically in terms of power relations. For example, leaders' mastery of the skill can certainly contribute to the imbalance in power relations through their greater access to symbolic resources. However, when direct reports (managers or non-managers) master this skill, it can just as easily demonstrate resistance and/or the distributed nature of leadership based upon who can advance the task (Fairhurst, in press; Gronn, 2002). Thus, our definition of framing within the leadership relationship is quite consistent with a perspective on power that is never independent of its implementation (Foucault, 1982; Knights & Wilmott, 1992).

The skill of framing is based on three key components: language, thought and forethought. *Language* is the easiest to understand because it helps us to: a) focus, especially on aspects of situations that are abstract and only vaguely sensed at first; b) classify and put things in categories; c) remember and retrieve information; and d) in the case of metaphoric language, understand one thing in terms of another's properties (Alexander, 1969). *The Art of Framing* highlights five key language tools: metaphor, jargon/catchphrases, contrast, spin, and stories, yet also emphasizes the ways in which truth and reality, objectivity, and legitimacy claims manifest themselves linguistically and may contribute to mixed messages.

The *thought* component examines the role of mental models in deciding what and how we choose to frame because, 'leaders who understand their world can explain their world' (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996: 23). Mental models are images of how the world works (Senge, 1990). How developed they are plays an instrumental role in the specific communication goals that we formulate given the constraints and opportunities of the context. Particular attention is paid to the kinds of mental models that leaders need to have surrounding an organizational mission, vision, and set of values – and how they surface in daily conversations on the shop floor.

Finally, the *forethought* component is all about how to exert a measure of control over our spontaneous communication. We argue that the overwhelming majority of our work communication occurs without much preparation and without much awareness of how we select and arrange the words that we use. Yet, we can be strategic and goal oriented and at the same time spontaneous and automatic:

> Becoming conscious of a goal purposely but unconsciously predisposes us to manage meaning in one direction or another to communicate our frames . . . We

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may be conscious of a goal . . . but unconscious of how we will select, structure, and exchange words with another person to achieve that goal. Our unconscious mind makes certain communication options available to us for the framing that we ultimately do. These options are not always ones we would have consciously chosen, as we are painfully aware when we blunder and succumb to 'foot-in-mouth' disease. But . . . we can 'program' our unconscious toward the selection of certain options over others via priming. (pp. 144–5)

A number of studies of cognition and memory suggest that priming occurs when the conscious recall of some information leaves an unconscious imprint that is stored away for future use (Bargh, 1989). We argue that when we use the process of priming, we can call to mind our mental models, anticipated opportunities, and/or desired language sometime prior to communicating. Such priming remains accessible by the unconscious mind to filter information taken in later, and this occurs for some time after that thought process is no longer in our conscious awareness. We liken it to wearing sunglasses on a sunny day: one has the initial experience of less glare, but quickly forgets seeing through a colored lens. Our conscious experience has dissolved but primed our unconscious with a lens that influences our view, though we may be unaware of its presence. Because events and those with whom we communicate are often unpredictable, it is impossible to predict just how our priming will end up in actual conversation. Yet the priming should be recognizable in some form. Priming places us in a state of mental readiness for communicating and suggests that the time to control our spontaneous communication is not when we are about to communicate, but when we are storing our memories.

The Art of Framing makes a number of additional points, all designed to tie the language, thought, and forethought components of framing together into a coherent whole. As the next section reveals, there may be a number of reasons as to why some leaders really understand framing and others do not, however, the book's writing style and skill representation must first be addressed.

Possible reasons for failure to understand 'framing'

Among the reasons why the skill of framing and the book provoke such a dichotomized response, I believe that neither the writing nor the adequacy with which we represent the skill is chief among them. As to the writing, my background was writing for academic journals and my coauthor's firm was famous for its one-page memos. We anticipated that we might have some difficulty writing for practicing managers who want sound argument, powerful anecdote, and crystal clear relevance delivered in rather short order, an airplane ride preferably. As a result, Jossey-Bass hired a production editor to assist with the writing, and readers will ultimately have to judge for themselves whether or not we were successful.

As to capturing the skill, the book was widely reviewed and criticisms were leveled, but neither leadership nor communication scholar-reviewers took issue with the way in which the framing process was represented (Buzzanell, 1996; Honig-Haftel, 1996; Johnson, 1997; Shamir, 1998).[5] Indeed one of the acknowledged strengths of the book is its thorough grounding in the communicative aspects of framing. However, one caveat must be the American-centric viewpoint from which

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the book, the book reviews, and this essay were written. Cultural differences along such dimensions as uncertainty avoidance/tolerance for ambiguity, direct/indirect, abstract/concrete, or high context/low context as well as national differences in approaches to organizing may mitigate claims about leaders' communicative sensibilities (Stohl, 2001).[6] Cross cultural questions are beyond the scope of this essay, but remain an important concern. This caveat notwithstanding, what other reasons might prompt leaders' variable response to framing?

Insecurity about an 'as if' world

As managers begin to appreciate the skill of framing, the world in which they live looks increasingly like one that they craft rather than discover. While it is easy to recognize that there are at least two 'made-up' sides to every issue, a full appreciation of the skill of framing opens up the range of what is socially constructed in our world. It is both considerable and potentially unnerving, even as we laugh at stories such as told by Herb Simons (1976):

> (T)hree (baseball) umpires disagreed about the task of calling balls and strikes. The first one said, 'I calls them as they is.' The second one said, 'I calls them as I sees them.' The third and cleverest umpire said, 'They ain't nothing' till I calls them'. (p. 28)

As Weick (1979) observed in his use of this story: 'Organizations, despite their apparent preoccupation with facts, numbers, objectivity, concreteness, and accountability, are in fact saturated with subjectivity, abstraction, guesses, making do, invention, and arbitrariness . . .' (p. 5). From Weick's perspective, managers' awareness of the realities that they have helped create is often a casualty of the supposed 'accidents' or 'circumstances' in which they find themselves. Why? As the baseball story so aptly demonstrates, the label 'strike' reifies an action, objectifies a reality, and prompts us to act *as if* these objectivities are real. Communication is predicated on the assumption that actors communally inhabit a shared world of real meanings, yet a stable-meaning-world is not that of empirical discovery but one of presupposition (Ellis, 1995). As individuals come to realize that the *as if* solution to living in a constructed world is a product of intersubjectively created meanings, it may be threatening to those who hold assumptions about objectivity, order, and permanence dear (Gioia, 2003). Yet, it should also be empowering to realize that a world that has been conceived and framed is a world that can be reconceived and reframed (Cooperrider et al., 1995).

However, the argument goes much deeper than this as the debates over social constructionism have taught us (Astley, 1985; Berger & Luckman, 1966; Chia, 2000; Gioia, 2003; Hacking, 1999; Parker, 1998; Potter, 1996; Reed, 2000; Shotter, 1993; Tsoukas, 2000). For example, just what is open to framing and what is not? The swing and a miss in baseball that constitutes a 'strike' is what Searle (1995) would call ontologically subjective but epistemologically objective. In other words, the swing and a miss is all too objective (especially in an age of instant replays and multiple camera angles), but necessitates the human practice of baseball for it to mean something. A strike is a strike by virtue of the arbitrary standards of baseball authorities (Simons, 1976). Without the institution of baseball, a swing and a miss could just as easily be fly or mosquito swatting.

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Yet, if whole institutions like the game of baseball are a human invention, where does it all end? For some managers, the great fear of relativism may rear its ugly head if one takes a social constructionist argument to its extreme. That is, if we live in a constructed world, then everything must be constructed because the art and practice of framing knows no boundaries. However, this is an argument that even the most ardent social constructionists reject because of materiality of the social world and the constraints it imposes (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Hacking, 1999). To wit, can imprisoned Enron executives socially construct themselves out of prison? Can the finality of the collapse of the World Trade Center on September 11 2001 ever be rewritten? Clearly there are contestable issues here such as what led to the collapse of Enron, the root causes of Islamic terrorism, or the deeper meanings behind either set of events, but the materiality of a prison or the finality of the skyscraper's collapse cannot be undone. The point is to suggest that managers may fall on the slippery slope of relativism by assuming that everything that is material in the social world reduces to the discursive, a patently false assumption.

However, the real difficulty lies in capturing the complex ways in which the material and discursive interact. For example, the meaning of the Twin Towers' collapse in a post-9/11 world (as framed by the US government and New York City officials) influences the material environment in the massive fencing surrounding the site, countless police and military security details, signage commemorating the events of 9/11, and the steady stream of busses filled with tourists. Conversely, for many US visitors the sheer materiality of the giant, gaping hole in the ground where the towers stood transforms a visit to a construction site into a visit to hallowed ground. The material and the discursive are so inextricably intertwined that Latour (1994) argued for *hybrid agency* between human and non-human actors because of their transformative abilities; one is made different because of the other.

Yet another problem is that managers consistently underestimate their framing opportunities due in part to essentialist thinking. Essentialism is a philosophical position dating back to Aristotle and the phenomenology of Husserl (1962), which views social objects as given objects of the world, innately possessing a true nature whose meanings must be grasped or discovered. Modern day versions of essentialism presume that one's subject matter is either inevitable or taken for granted; indeed, essentialist thinking is but the strongest form of inevitability (Hacking, 1999). While a conception of the self as unitary, coherent and autonomous is the prototype for essentialist thinking (Collinson, 2003; Hacking, 1999), the debates over leadership offer a more relevant example here.

For example, trait, situational, and contingency leadership theories suggest that there is an 'essence' to either the leader or context or both (Grint, 1997; 2000).[7] As Grint (2000) observed: 'what counts as a "situation" and what counts as the "appropriate" way of leading in that situation are interpretive and contestable issues, not issues that can be decided by objective criteria' (p. 3). Thus, what some would regard as a disquieting picture of leadership as an attribution (Calder, 1977), a romanticization (Meindl, 1993; Meindl et al., 1985), a myth (Gemmil & Oakley, 1992), or an ontologically variable phenomenon (taking form in individual traits, behaviors, influence, interaction patterns, role relationships, outcomes, or the occupation of an administrative position) (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Gronn, 2002; Kerr & Jermier, 1978; Rost, 1991; Shamir, 1999) is really not so disquieting at all. It is quite

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consistent with a view of leadership that is 'framed' by leadership scholars for their purposes in some setting at some historical moment. Their essentialist thinking runs counter to the notion that leadership is socially constructed by them, ultimately bound by context and always contestable. Likewise managers' essentialist thinking in presupposing a subject's inevitability or taking it for granted may similarly hide the machinery behind their own fact production.

With the social constructionist debates over relativism and essentialism also comes the debate over agency and how much control actors can really exert in their framing. The view of power here is disciplinary as the conception of the self as unitary, coherent, and autonomous gives way to the produced subject (Foucault, 1972; 1980). Subjects are no longer the originators of meaning because they are produced by the multiple and often conflicting discourses in which they position themselves across interactions (Deetz, 1992; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Thus, the individual is really a fragmented conflictual subject caught in the antagonistic tensions of masculinities/ femininities, work/family, public/private, class/inequality, ethnicity, organizational culture and many others. Because 'power can be shown in the production of linguistic distinction, in separating the activities or possessions of one from others, and in creating one of the two created objects as desirable', one's framing is always wittingly and unwittingly (constructed as) interest-based, as one asymmetrically values one set of distinctions within competing discourses while masking or suppressing others (Deetz, 1992: 252).

With a disciplinary view of power, individuals' capacity to resist means that they are not the passive entities of systems of domination, but neither are they ever free of structural forces. Dialectical approaches pay particular attention to the intrinsic tensions and contradictions between agency and structure, between the opportunities to construct meaning *in situ* and institutional attempts to restrict meaning (Benson, 1977; Giddens, 1979; 1984). As Mumby and Ashcraft (2004) observe, critical and feminist organizational studies increasingly reveal the complex struggles over meaning that simultaneously embody both domination and resistance (Clair, 1994; 1998; Collinson, 1988; 1992; Holmer Nadesan, 1996; Mumby, 1997). These studies and others within the post-modern tradition direct us to see human beings simultaneously as subjects and objects of their relationships, organizations, and societies.

If subject-object tensions are complex and sometimes contradictory simultaneities, as Collinson (2003) suggests, then any attempt at management requires immersion in the micro-politics of power. In other words, understanding and managing active or passive agent tensions will not be done outside of setting and socio-historical context, problems to be managed vis-à-vis one's tasks, identities, and/or relationships, asymmetrical power relations between social collectivities that are both material and discursive, and co-orienting actors whose languaging and sensemaking in communication becomes the basis for collective action. There is work to be done by managers in order to grasp the ever changing parameters of their role as reality framers *with other actors* whose presence signifies contestable realities and broader systems of control, the depths of which actors may never fully appreciate. If managers do relinquish their assumptions about an objective, orderly world and their role as its chief symbolizing agents, insecurity about an *as if* world may come along for the ride. As the following section reveals, some managers will

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be more comfortable in this undertaking than others by virtue of the message design logics they employ. With this new lens, the view of power shifts from disciplinary to strategic.

Message Design Logics

Barbara O'Keefe's (1988; 1991; 1992; 1997; O'Keefe & Lambert, 1995) theory of Message Design Logics offers a second explanation for managers' differential inability to grasp framing. Her model rests on research that links cognitive complexity, or differentiation in one's construct system, to individuals' ability to design more target adapted persuasive appeals, ones that address multiple goals and goal integration (O'Keefe & Shepherd, 1987). O'Keefe (1988) posits three design logics, each of which reflects a means of reasoning from one's communication goals to messages. Each is associated with 'a constellation of related beliefs: a communication-constituting concept, a conception of the functional possibilities of communication, units formation procedures, and principles of coherence' (p. 84). As such, appreciation for the skill of framing is likely to vary by design logic.

Individuals who employ an *Expressive Design Logic* believe that communication is little more than a process to express what they feel. Verbal messages have few goals in mind other than the act of expression – as individuals who seem to lack an 'edit' function often demonstrate in inappropriate, overly blunt, or shockingly personal remarks. As O'Keefe argued, expressive message producers often fail to comprehend that expression can serve other goals and that messages can be interpreted as something beyond independent units, that is, woven into a fabric that can better adapt to the complexities or subtleties of context. Thus, when asked: 'why did you say that?' the expressive logic user answers: 'because that's what I was thinking'.

In a *Conventional Design Logic* communication is a cooperative game to be played premised upon socially conventional rules and procedures. This design logic subsumes the expressive logic, but language is viewed as a means of expressing oneself based on the social effects one wants to achieve rather than the thoughts one has. Conventional message producers cooperate in playing the game by doing that which is appropriate and obligatory while avoiding the sanctionable. Hence, communication competence is based on acting appropriate to the context, and individuals employing this logic are quite responsive to its demands in this regard. When asked: 'why did you say that?' the conventional logic user says: 'because that is what is appropriate and normal under these circumstances'.

In a *Rhetorical Design Logic* communication is the construction and negotiation of social selves and situations. Instead of altering their communicative actions to fit the situation as a conventional message producer might do, rhetorical logic users alter the situation to the fit the action they want to perform (O'Keefe, 1991). Thus, individuals employing the conventional logic react to context, but rhetorical logic users understand that they help create the context to which they then respond. They are self and context shaping because meaning is treated 'as a matter of dramaturgical enactment and social negotiation' (O'Keefe, 1988: 87). In other words, those employing a rhetorical logic possess a heightened sensitivity to language and the ways in which communicative choices may shape one definition of the situation over another. When asked: 'why did you say that?' the rhetorical logic user answers:

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'because that is the goal I had in mind'. Those employing this logic would seem to have the greatest appreciation for the art and practice of framing.

However, there is a natural developmental ordering of design logics (O'Keefe, 1988; 1991; 1997). People start with an expressive logic (as children), but to the extent that they come to appreciate that there are social norms for how to use language to accomplish desired means, then they also acquire the conventional logic. Likewise, to the extent that they come to appreciate that definitions of selves and situations are negotiable, then they also come to acquire a rhetorical logic. Acquiring the rhetorical logic does not mean that people lose their ability to think and act conventionally or expressively. However, if individuals never progress beyond an expressive logic, then they would be expected to communicate much more consistently across situations than rhetorical or conventional logic users, who can flexibly adopt more than one logic.

Communication effectiveness has been found to vary with this developmental ordering in situations involving multiple goals (O'Keefe et al., 1993). Most leadership encounters involve multiple goals given the need to complete a task, maintain work relationships, manage identities, and reconcile any opposing views in order to coordinate behavior. Expressive logic users tend neither to appreciate nor adopt the strategies needed to simultaneously manage these goals as they are more self-focused although perceived as honest (Willihnganz et al., 2002). The conventional logic user responds to the needs of the context to be sure, but perhaps not with the deftness with which a rhetorical logic user can improvise to integrate these goals into a single strategy. Yet, rhetorical message producers must guard against being seen as manipulative as Bill Clinton's 'it depends on what the meaning of the word 'is' is', remark during the Monica Lewinsky scandal so clearly demonstrated. They may consistently underestimate the force of convention and overestimate their own abilities given how facile they are with language (O'Keefe, 1988).

Importantly, O'Keefe (1988) argues that social environments can differ systematically in their representation of particular design logics, which would impact individual development:

> Indeed, persons who are surrounded by those who use a Rhetorical communication system will find it difficult to avoid developing a Rhetorical logic of communication, since the messages they hear will have negotiation and reality constitution as obvious and salient features. By contrast, persons who live in a world where power and resource control are used to fix meaning and social arrangements . . . will find it difficult to develop a belief in the social constitution of reality and the power of language to reorder social life. (p. 89)

Consider the worlds of politics and sales, which actively cultivate rhetorical skill development, while the bureaucratic and/or technical competency emphases in many corporations would seem to foster conventional cultures. This clearly parallels my experience with Message Design Logics when working with practicing managers. As part of my executive coaching and development programs over the past several years, I use a measure that O'Keefe has developed to assess design logics (O'Keefe & Lambert, 1989; Waldron & Cegala, 1992). The overwhelming majority of managers do not score beyond a conventional logic, which suggests large numbers of practicing managers may miss the framing opportunities that a rhetorical design logic affords.

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Is framing a teachable skill?

Knowing that one is a rhetorical logic user begs the question as to whether this logic and, by implication, the art and practice of framing can be taught. This issue is as old as Aristotle, but it has come to the forefront again in the debates over the training of charismatic leadership. Framing is a part of the neo-charismatic skill set because it plays a key role in vision articulation and problem setting, interpersonal sensitivity, impression management, and empowerment (Fairhurst, 2001; 1993a; Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). In a review of various pro and con positions on the training of charisma, Conger and Kanungo (1988) argued that while it is naïve to assume that everyone can be taught to be charismatic leaders, enhancements can be made when the skill set is broken down and expectations are adjusted to individuals' dispositions and contextual opportunities. In other words, *some* of the leaders *some* of the time can be taught charisma.

Like Conger and Kanungo, Bob Sarr and I argue that the skill of framing should be broken down into skill sets, each of which can individually enhance one's framing abilities. Communicative goal setting, developing mental models, figurative language use, context sensitivity, priming for spontaneity and so on are all teachable skills. Likewise, framing will be easier for some than others. Natural intelligence and recognized high impact opportunities certainly make framing easier, but they still do not guarantee success for four reasons: arrogance, conduit thinking, authenticity concerns, and the absence of a moral framework.

Arrogance is a baffling malady that prevents large numbers of practicing leaders from developing themselves and their framing skills to their fullest potential (Kets de Vries, 1990; 1991; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1985). Consider some of the symptoms:

> Terrance, a high level insurance executive, is disturbed by his 360 degree feedback results. His employees consistently say that he is authoritarian, but he does not understand why they think this way. However, his favorite phrase is, 'You have my permission to . . .'. He was also criticized for not being a very good listener, which he claims is a result of being misunderstood. He says that he is just very task-oriented, able to think much faster than others can talk, and should not have to overtly mark his listening behavior with paraphrases, backchannel acknowledgements ('uh huh,' 'mm-hmm'), or affirmations ('I hear you').

> Ted, a senior vice president for a large accounting firm, does not see the need to focus on his own communication. 'I never think about it because it is so automatic. Why should I? Communication skills are a small part, probably less than 10 percent, of what I do.' Ted is exceedingly bright and widely perceived as arrogant.

> Katherine lost her husband recently to cancer. Many colleagues at work acknowledged her loss, and weeks later some still inquired about how she was handling her grief. However, one manager said nothing at all and talked shop as if nothing had happened, while another manager with whom she interacted frequently held his comments until a scheduled meeting at which time a perfunctory acknowledgement became an 'agenda item'.

The common denominator among these leaders is a dismissive attitude toward the communication process; *they mistakenly equate talking with communicating.*

Leaders like the above are often generally articulate, but specifically ignorant of the context and the self shaping features of their language drawn, in these instances, from masculinity discourses that suggest a high need for control and an instrumental view of social relationships (Kerfoot & Knights, 1996). They rarely end up in executive coaching because they never think they need it, but they are the same ones whose direct reports and coworkers would love to turn a video-tape on. They are also the same ones who insulted their public-speaking instructors in college for giving them 'C' grades because: 'how tough can a communication course be when I am taking finance, accounting, or computer engineering?' It is the arrogance born of the naturally bright and gifted, but who fail to appreciate that ignorance and IQ are not mutually exclusive. Thus, they are not interested in the subject of framing because, feeling an unrestricted sense of agency, they are not interested in the consequences of their own communication.

Unfortunately, the automatic nature of our communication is one of enablers here as is managers' penchant for simplistically viewing communication as information/ meaning transfer. Regarding the latter, Axley (1984) has written about the per- vasiveness of conduit metaphors in definitions of organizational communication in both management textbooks and everyday vernacular. Expressions like 'getting one's thoughts across', 'putting thoughts into words', 'conveys meaning', 'exchanging information', and 'imparting ideas', whether in everyday speech or formal defi- nitions, only reify the process of communication. According to Axley:

> They graphically suggest that communication involves the physical transfer of meanings, thoughts, emotions, and so forth from person to person. . . Once the communicator finds the right words to accomplish the transfer, then the fidelity between intended meaning and received meaning becomes almost guaranteed, even routine. (p. 433)

When communication reduces to the transfer of meanings rather than its negotiation, its complexity is vastly underestimated. It leads to the unwarranted assuredness of many leaders regarding the self-perceived clarity and understandability of their own communication (Axley, 1984). Moreover, the complacency and/or overconfidence that accompany a conduit view of communication ('what words will transfer this thought?'), belie the effort and other orientation needed for a more meaning-centered view ('how is my meaning being perceived?' or 'how do we differ in our meanings?'). There is much more interactional work to be done when communication is seen as open to multiple interpretations and the perceiver is no longer viewed as the passive recipient of sense data (Cooperrider et al., 1995). Unfortunately, this is not well under- stood by those with dismissive attitudes toward communication. Arrogance and conduit thinking are a lethal combination in this regard.

If arrogance and conduit thinking thwart an interest in framing, so might concerns about losing authenticity. Like the unfamiliarity of a new car or pair of shoes, begin- ning to appreciate how we co-create realities through framing comes with a period of awkwardness or uncertainty. There may also be a heightened sense of responsi- bility and obligation, risk and vulnerability, and/or precipitous feelings of 'now what?' once the contingencies of context and situation come into play. It is natural and normal to feel that one risks losing authenticity when trying on new behaviors, although assuaging feelings of 'this is just not me' or 'this just doesn't feel right', is

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probably done less by books and more by conversation with other managers, mentors, executive coaches, consultants, or significant others. Executive coaches can be especially helpful to more plain spoken managers who are often the ones to raise authenticity concerns. However, as Kets de Vries (1990) has shown, they can be just as vital to those leaders fighting the forces of hubris and greatly in need of some reality testing. If the right kinds of resources are not available to practicing managers who need them to attend to situational specifics or individual proclivities, then there is a theory/practice divide that *The Art of Framing* cannot span.

Finally, the subjects of our conversations with other regarding what and how we frame are always ultimately less meaningful in the absence of a moral framework, which provide the criteria by which our decisions and strategies (large and small) are shaped and implemented. What are the standards of right and wrong to which a leader subscribes? What are the values in the company mission statement that she seeks to embody? What personal and organizational sins does he wish to avoid? *The Art of Framing* makes the reader aware that these moral logics exist, but in no way guarantees that they enter conversations with others when discussing framing choices and strategies. Thus, perhaps the book is best viewed only as a beginning because the subject of framing should be introduced within a wider philosophical, moral, and instructional context.

The work of John Shotter (1993; Shotter & Cunliffe, 2003) provides one such philosophical and moral context in which managers are cast as *practical authors.* Devoting a book to this theme, Holman and Thorpe (2003) succinctly summarize Shotter's practical authorship as the ability to:

- Articulate a clear formulation of what for others might be chaotic and vague, and to give them a shared or sharable significance;
- Create a landscape of enabling constraints relevant for a range of next possible actions;
- Set out a network of moral positions or commitments (understood as the rights and duties of players in that landscape);
- Argue persuasively and authoritatively for this landscape among those who must work in it;
- Do the above in joint action with others.

Shotter and Cunliffe (2003) argue that managerial practice is a *relationally responsive activity*, in which managers need to consider the role that they and others play in practical authoring *in situ*. It is a view of reflexive practice that challenges the manager-as-expert, the solution-finder who reads situations as externalized and stable texts, to spotlight reflexivity in relational interplay. In other words, in the midst of dialogue one senses the reality structuring possibilities in the discursive moves of self and other, moves that enable and constrain individuals as they negotiate identities and manage relationships (Barge, 2004; Cunliffe, 2001; 2002). This kind of reflexivity is morally bound; relationally responsive dialogue considers the rights and duties of the actors in that landscape. Thus, it challenges any right and final reading of the context because it may be read and authored by as many actors as exist. For this reason, reflexive practice opens a space for previously marginalized voices to be heard (Barge, 2004).

Thus, the skill of framing is really set within a wider view of management as reflexive practice. Framing in *The Art of Framing* may be read as a skill that leaders develop as they stand outside of the work process and determine how best to manage it, but framing from the perspective of reflexive practice is really an invitation to joint sensemaking. Through dialogue actors discover not only that there are contestable versions of events, but that each offers its own moral logics (and thus advantages and disadvantages) in reconciling the 'facts' of the situation. The application of multiple contexts and multivocality produces various 'frames' that may be used as linguistic tools to create new awareness precisely because of the ways in which framing configures and reconfigures the opportunities and constraints in a landscape of next actions (Barge, 2004). Thus, framing either as an intellectual exercise and/or individualized practice shifts to morally bound, dialogic practice.

One instructional context for Shotter's relationally responsive approach may be found at the Kensington Consultation Centre (KCC), a London-based training center that emphasizes reflexive approaches to practice. Kevin Barge (2001; 2004; Barge & Little, 2002; Barge & Oliver, 2003) describes the kinds of practical theory developed at the KCC drawing from systemic and social constructionist thought shaped by philosophical treatments of language and meaning (Bateson, 1972; Dewey, 1938; Harré, 1994; 1986; Rorty, 1989; Wittgenstein, 1953) and contemporary communication theory (Pearce & Cronen, 1980; Shotter, 1993). Managers, consultants, and family therapists explore the linguistic aspects of human systems of which framing and ethics are a part. Barge's work (2004) suggests that framing is a teachable skill as long as it is set within a broader context that stresses dialogic activity, an ethical framework, and awareness of the consequentiality of communication. This is done with an eye towards broadening the variety of discourses from which actors may choose and demonstrating the choices available in how to participate in them. The goal is empowerment, so that managers experience both a heightened sense of agency and lowered anxiety as a result of acting reflexively.

Conclusion

This article offers three explanations for why some leaders readily embrace the skill of framing and others do not. The first explanation recognizes a certain ontological insecurity associated with acting *as if* we live in a stable meaning world. This discussion draws from philosophical arguments in social constructionism over relativism, essentialism, and agency to draw some boundaries around that which is open to framing and that which is not. Power is best viewed as disciplinary with these arguments, unlike the more strategic view of power in Message Design Logic.

The second explanation draws from O'Keefe's (1988; 1997) theory of Message Design Logics, which argues that the logics that managers employ to produce and receive messages likely impacts framing ability. Expressive design logic users speak what they think and are likely less sensitive to framing skills. Conventional logic users see communication as a cooperative game to be played, thus framing is used to demonstrate context sensitivity. Rhetorical design logic users are likely the most skilled framers because they see communication as the construction and negotiation of social selves and situations. This discussion also highlighted the ways in which

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social environments can represent particular design logics and so foster cultures of conventional or rhetorical design logic users.

The third explanation grapples with the question of whether framing is a teachable skill. The literatures on charismatic leadership and reflexive managerial practice both give a qualified 'yes' as their answer. Charismatic leadership training allows for considerable individuality and context variability (Conger & Kanungo, 1988), while the work in reflexive managerial practice sets framing within a broader philosophical, moral, and instructional context (Barge, 2004; Shotter & Cunliffe, 2003). However, this discussion also raises questions about the motivation to learn about communication and move beyond a conduit view of communication. If leaders possess a dismissive attitude toward the communication process, it will be difficult to spark an interest in framing.

Finally, these three explanations may work separately, although logic suggests they build upon one another. Insecurity about an *as if* world often comes with the recognition that the world is fluid and emerging, yet leaders may be unsure of how to frame/position themselves within an evolving set of constructions. For example, to borrow Giddens's (1979; 1984) term, managers' discursive penetration of a discourse may be low either because it is too new, ill defined, or restricted to certain groups who are in possession of some technical knowledge such as senior management. They may also be caught between conflicting discourses such as when male or female managers must couch a more feminine and intuitive mode of decision making in the language of rational argument, a more masculine and organizationally sanctioned approach. Finally, managers may be unsure of how to manage contradictory discourses such as that of private appropriation versus socialized production (Giddens, 1979). For example, in an organizational downsizing the drive for profit can directly contradict employee needs for employment, generous separation packages, outplacement services and so on. Managers are faced with the difficult choice either to align with one pole over the other or seek transcendence strategies that require the imaginative use of multiple discourses to reframe the contradiction (Fairhurst et al., 2002). Rhetorical design logic users presumably would choose the latter. The idea of a constructed world is likely less frightening to them as their knowledge and framing abilities help them to cope with novel circumstances. Moreover, their facility with language suggests that they may be able to discursively penetrate multiple discourses and know how to position themselves and others within such discourses. Finally, acquiring rhetorical message logics through training is certainly possible, although effectiveness seems contingent upon a host of variables, including the presence of a moral framework, a valuing of communication, and a commitment to learning about the consequentiality of one's communication vis-à-vis the reality-constituting nature of discursive activity. For leaders who are not particularly skilled communicators, the road is not always easy. However, the possibilities of worlds yet to be imagined await those who try.

Notes

1. However, in this article I use 'leader' and 'manager' interchangeably.
2. In sociology, framing also became a central issue in the labeling debates of the 1960s when deviance was viewed not in terms of the type of act that a person commits, but rather a consequence of the label given by others (Becker, 1963; Cicourel, 1972; Gove, 1980; Hargreaves et al., 1975). The labeling perspective focused on the way in which a person's identity, role, and/or behavior were transformed by the label given to him by society.
3. Carragee and Roefs (2004) made this point about media framing research. I believe the point is generalizable across social scientific work on framing.
4. Likewise in the classroom with junior and senior undergraduate students, I have gone from spending two weeks on the book to a minimum of five. Some students immediately comprehend the significance of the skill; others cannot quite grasp all that it involves.
5. The book was reviewed in several business and academic periodicals. Among the academic reviews, some sought a more extensive set of footnotes for classroom use (Buzzanell, 1996; Johnson, 1997), while others like Shamir (1998) found the examples from the taped conversations lacked a certain dramatic appeal (allowing, however, that is the nature of everyday conversation). It should also be mentioned that the book was published in German, although no reviews were available.
6. However, the automatic nature of our communication and simplistically viewing communication as information/ meaning transfer argue for the commonality of this phenomenon across cultures.
7. From Grint's (2000) perspective, trait theories of leadership essentialize the person, situational theories essentialize the context, and contingency theories essentialize person-context combinations (e.g. when a strong leader and crisis coincide).

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