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The Reality of Framing

THE WORDS *frame* or *framing* have many meanings these days. Most often, they refer to a form or structure, as in "the house has a sturdy frame," or they refer to the act of constructing such a form, as in "framing a house." However, a "frame" can also be a structured way of thinking such as the concept of customer service (designating anything that serves or supports the purchasers of a product or service). *Framing* then is the act of communicating that concept—even something as clichéd as saying, "The customer is always right." However, the English vernacular allows for a lot of wordplay using *frame* or *framing*; we can refer to "framing someone for murder" (sometimes referred to as a *frame-up*), or to "framing an argument," or to "framing the issues."

But could you also talk about "framing reality"? If you're familiar with the old baseball yarn of the three umpires who disagreed about the task of

calling balls and strikes, you might.[1] As the story goes, the first umpire 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 nothin' till I calls them."[2] The first two might argue that the swing and a miss can be objectively determined, especially in this age of instant replays and multiple camera angles. True enough, but the third understands that one needs a society's invented game of baseball for a strike to mean something in the first place. A strike is a strike by virtue of the agreed-upon rules of baseball and pronouncement by its authorities. Without the institution of baseball, a swing and a miss could just as easily be fly or mosquito swatting. So as long as the game is under way, the third umpire understands best of all that he frames reality by gesturing and calling, "Strrriiike three. You're out!"

If leadership is like umpiring baseball, what kind of umpire are you? This book will help you answer this question. Unfortunately, the overwhelming majority of leaders are like the first and second umpires. Only a small minority come close to the third, who understands the real power of human communication. Not just a simple transmission, it is the very stuff of reality-making itself.

The Rules of Reality Construction

What is the relationship between leadership and the task of constructing reality? Well, that's what this book is all about. For starters, let's begin with a few guiding rules.

Reality Construction Rule #1: Control the Context

Leaders often cannot control events, but they can control the context under which events are seen if they recognize a framing opportunity.

Some leaders disparage communication as something they just do automatically. They may also label communication "mere rhetoric," "window dressing," or "just words" because it cannot change the hard cold facts of a situation. True as that observation may be, however, it falls far short of being complete.

Consider the situation Robert E. Murray—chairman of the Murray Energy Corporation and co-owner of the Crandall Canyon mine in Utah— faced on August 6, 2007, when the mine caved in with six miners trapped

inside. It was perhaps the most important communications challenge of his career, and it serves to illustrate the effect of most of the rules in this chapter.

As soon as news of the collapse reached him, he could be sure that anxious families, the mining community, and the press would hang on his every word. But could any communication by him change the reality of a mine collapse with six entombed miners?

Of course, neither words nor symbols can alter the physical or material conditions of our world (although they may influence our perceptions of them). However, communications can play a huge role in many other issues surrounding a mine collapse—the comfort and rescue effort updates to the families and mining community; the moral and legal assignment of blame that could ultimately prove costly in a court of law; the efforts at image management for Murray Energy Corporation and its partner that could be key to future business and treatment by federal regulators; the treatment of the press as a means to an end in this regard, and many more.

Robert Murray was not in Utah at the time of the collapse, but upon hearing of it, he reportedly boarded a private jet and was at the Crandall Canyon site within hours, taking command of the rescue operation and giving frequent media updates.[3] Although not all situations so clearly mark their communication exigencies, Murray appeared to recognize an important communication opportunity with the mine collapse. This was his chance to frame reality, and he took it. But was he *competent* in his crisis communications?

Reality Construction Rule #2: Define the Situation

At its most basic level, framing reality means defining "the situation here and now" in ways that connect with others.

In the sense I use it here, *framing* involves the ability to shape the meaning of a subject—usually the situation at hand—to judge its character and significance through the meanings we include and exclude, as well as those we emphasize when communicating.[4] At his first formal news conference on August 7, 2007, how did Robert Murray define "the situation here and now"? He was adamant that an earthquake had caused the mine's collapse—not his company's practice of "retreat mining," which is exceedingly dangerous and tightly regulated. In this "situation here and now," Murray sought to portray

Murray Energy Corporation as without blame. (You can check out Murray's news conference on YouTube.[5])

But Murray went on from there, confidently proclaiming, "We know exactly where the miners are," promising, "I will not leave this mine until the men are rescued dead or alive," and then boldly predicting, "We're going to get them."[6] Curiously, at that same news conference, he spoke of subjects as wide-ranging as the essential nature of the U.S. coal industry for American consumers, new technologies, global warming, and his own rise from miner to founder, co-owner, and president of Murray Energy Corporation. On that hot August day, Robert Murray chose very specific meanings to define "the situation here and now" for those in attendance (and ruled out others that might suggest his company's culpability). That is the essence of framing.

One of the most frequently asked questions about framing is a matter of definition: Is it a structured way of thinking or an act of communicating? In reality, it is both, because a *frame* is that mental picture, and *framing* is the process of communicating that picture to others.[7] However, it can be a little confusing to talk about those "mental pictures" because they can be a single frame or snapshot of a situation, as in "I (Gail Fairhurst) am writing Chapter One right now." Or they can be rather persistent patterns of thought that I have formed, for example, about "book writing" or "first chapter book writing."

I prefer to call these more general structures *mental models* because they help organize our thoughts and serve as underlying expectations for what is likely to happen in new situations.[8] Think of them as a library of past cases from which specific frames emerge each time we communicate.[9] For example, from Robert Murray's mental models for crisis communications, his "deflect responsibility" framing emerged, coupled with the tendency to make some rather bold predictions.

What motivates us to choose one framing strategy over another? The simple and perhaps slightly cynical answer is "self-interest" or "personal goals," but the better answers are "culture" and "sensemaking." As Chapter Two discusses, *culture* supplies us with a tool bag of specific language and arguments to consider when we communicate with another. *Sensemaking* is the situational engagement of mental models (just as the mine collapse

triggered Murray's mental models for crisis communications).[10] In practical terms, to have made sense is to know how to go on in a situation, that is, to know what to say or do next.[11] Chapter Two discusses how mental models make this all possible.

Language becomes a key issue not just in our own sensemaking, but in how effectively we impact the sensemaking of others. In an increasingly complex world, language that is nuanced, precise, and eloquent enables leaders to draw distinctions that others may not see or be able to describe (Chapter Four). Quite often, options for surviving a complex world lie in those distinctions.[12] However, as Freudian slips also demonstrate, more than just conscious processes are at work when we use language. We need to know how to harness our unconscious as a result (Chapter Three).

Finally, and most important, a suitable definition of "the situation here and now" requires that we connect with others in some meaningful way. We have to be able to align others' interests with our own because we are rarely free agents. We are interdependent and often so inextricably so that we cannot accomplish objectives on our own. When we operate with a sense of that interdependence, we are motivated to look for the best ways to connect to others. Robert Murray clearly aimed for such a connection, but did he succeed?

Reality Construction Rule #3: Apply Ethics

"Reality" is often contested. Framing a subject is an act of persuasion by leaders, one imbued with ethical choices.

Robert Murray might have made himself the hero of one of those uniquely American success stories were it not for the challenges to his credibility in the hours and days following the mine collapse. U.S. government seismologists from the National Earthquake Information Center in Colorado indicated that it was likely the mine collapse itself that caused the ground to shake, not an earthquake.[13] It also became clear that Murray did not know where the miners were; bore holes were drilled in several unsuccessful attempts to supply oxygen and look for signs of life. Murray's promise not to leave the mine was also broken after three rescuers died and six were injured while trying to reach the miners. By August 23, Murray was telling *National Public Radio*, "It's a deadly mountain, and I'm not going near it."[14]

What might Murray have said to draw less fire? He could have allowed that the technique of retreat mining, even within the bounds of governmental regulation, might be among several factors that could contribute to a mine collapse. Instead, he consistently forced the media to parse his words on the subject. For example, at the August 7 news conference Murray said, "The damage in the mine was totally unrelated to any retreat mining. . . . The pillars were not being removed here at the time of the accident. There are eight solid pillars around where the men are right now."[15]

When reporting on the disaster on August 16, Frank Langfitt of *National Public Radio* said, "Technically what he's saying could be true because no one knows at that very moment what they were doing underground. In fact, only the men do and at the moment certainly we can't talk to them."[16] But Langfitt's report, which was based on the opinion of experts who believed that retreat mining *was* the likely cause of the collapse, appeared more credible.

Robert Murray's lesson here is twofold. First, when we frame, we assert that our interpretations of "the situation here and now" should be taken as real over other possible interpretations. Source credibility obviously becomes a key issue when interpretations of events differ. Second, leaders may win a momentary "pass" with strategically ambiguous language, but inconvenient truths have a way of surfacing.

What else could Robert Murray have said in those early communications? He could have expressed hope, not certainty, that the miners would be found. He gambled with the forces of nature and lost, as did heartbroken families and a waiting community whose hopes were dashed. The key to understanding framing as a persuasive act is not just to focus on that which may be uncertain, unknown, or contested and then take a position. It is to do so responsibly—with an eye toward the consequences of one's communications.

As Chapter Six argues, ethical codes are communication resources that assist leaders in morally positioning themselves and others as they communicate, whether in crises or everyday matters. When reflected upon, these codes help leaders actively resist the temptation to surrender to self-interest at the expense of other stakeholders whose interests may be every bit as legitimate. There is common ground to discover when we stop thinking, "my interests or yours."

Reality Construction Rule #4: Interpret Uncertainty

It is the uncertainty, confusion, and undecidability of "the situation here and now" that opens it up for interpretation and provides an opportunity for the more verbally skilled among us to emerge as leaders.

Robert Murray could have shown real leadership during the crisis at the Crandall Canyon mine, but arguably failed. Perhaps one of the best examples of a crisis leader in recent memory is Rudolph Giuliani, who was mayor of New York City on September 11, 2001, during the World Trade Center attacks. Giuliani rose to unexpected national and international prominence with a performance on 9/11 that many felt surpassed that of President George W. Bush and New York Governor George Pataki.[17]

In the moments following the attack, Giuliani took hold of the uncertainty, confusion, and undecidability of "the crisis here and now" and gave it meaning for a stunned city and nation. He immediately took command of the city's search and rescue for victims of the Twin Towers collapse and registered the shock of a nation as he was doing so. He was a ubiquitous presence, comforting first responders and their families at some two hundred funerals of the fallen. Moreover, he helped a city and nation understand a horrific act of international terrorism through repeated references to larger resonating Discourses of God and country.

While 9/11 and the Crandall Canyon mine disaster are extreme examples, the everyday moments of uncertainty and confusion are times when leaders can have their greatest impact. Indeed, conventional wisdom tends to distinguish leaders from managers, in part, based on this notion.[18] As Chapter Two describes, each group has a different set of *core framing tasks*. Leaders are the organization's change agents. They should be able to answer followers' "why, where, what, and who" questions: *why* we are here (mission), *where* the organization is headed (vision), *what* really counts in the organization (values), and *who* we are (collective identity). By contrast, managers often answer those all-important "how" questions, typically because they are implementers, trouble-shooters, and process oriented. Their core framing tasks are to set and solve problems, envision practical futures, and motivate efforts at solution.

However, there is one caveat to all of this. Things work differently if the organization is dealing with what Rittel and Webber call *wicked problems*.[19]

Problems are wicked when they are overwhelmingly complex and broad in scope, often with no one right answer. (As examples, consider the dire state of the American automobile industry; California's intertwined budgetary crisis and drought; nation-building in a tribal Afghanistan; or the efforts to overhaul the U.S. health care system.) By nature, wicked problems are intractable, constantly morphing into new ones. Leaders aren't expected to have the answers to these problems, but they do need to foster the right collaborations to get them. They must *frame* problems and collaborate to help their organizations engage the right knowledge networks, amass the right intelligence, and collectively decide possible futures. For this reason, wicked problems can render command-and-control leadership styles obsolete.[20]

Reality Construction Rule #5: Design the Response

Ultimately, leadership is a design problem.[21] *Leaders must figure out what leadership is in the context of what they do and, through their framing and actions, persuade themselves and other people that they are doing it.*

Leadership always emerges in some moment—or string of moments—in which someone's performance is deemed leader-like by a situation's stakeholders. Yet, one performance, even a skilled one, does not make a leader. (Otherwise, Rudolph Giuliani would have been elected president of the United States in 2008, not Barack Obama.) The true test of leadership is not just one believable performance but a sustained believability based on evidence of reliable performance as a leader.

Inevitably, this requires us to immerse ourselves in the work or tasks at hand and to balance it with whatever idealized notions we've developed about what it would mean to excel or lead at those tasks. For example, if you lead a manufacturing company or a division of one, your action is always tempered by your definition of success at this job—whether it be through market share, sales volume, patents filed, customer satisfaction, or some other criterion. If you lead a nonprofit or captain a team, the criteria change but your focus is still on the same questions: Where are you now and where do you want your organization to be? The real and ideal are constant companions, and your job is to figure out how best to marry the two. In this sense, leadership is a design

problem: *You have to figure out what leadership is in the context of what you do and persuade yourself and other people that you are doing it.*

However, it's useful to unpack this notion further by dividing it into its "design aspects" and its "persuasion aspects." Regarding the former, just how do you figure out what it means to lead at the job that you're in? This step requires critical thinking on your part, given the specifics of your job and all that your life and work life experiences have taught you about leadership. Answer the questions in Framing Tool 1.1, and take note of the picture that emerges.

FRAMING TOOL 1.1

Designing Leadership

Who are the stakeholders associated with your job? How would they define what leadership is in the context of what you do?

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Whose leadership styles do you admire or emulate and why?

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What have you learned, good or bad, about leadership styles from the socialization you've received into your organization's culture? (For example, does senior management "tell" middle managers to be participative with lower-level employees in your company?[22]) What cultural expectations exist regarding your leadership style?

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What books have you read or are reading about leadership? How have they shaped your views of leadership?

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What training, development, or coaching have you received that has helped you to match certain tasks with a particular style of leading?

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What work, school, or life experiences have impacted your comfort level and attitudes toward working with and leading others?

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(You can download this form from www.josseybass.com/go/gailfairhurst. Feel free to adapt it to suit your needs.)

Chapter Two presents questions to help you probe the mental models that you've developed for leadership, and Chapter Three addresses ways these models can continue to develop.

Regarding the "persuasion aspects" of leadership as a design problem, imagine the following scenario. Pretend that you can travel through time and

ask any of history's great monarchs, society's major industrial transformers, or even a despot or two, "Just what are you doing here?" They could well respond, "Why, I'm leading my people, of course, so that we may preserve this great nation / make a profit and keep the economy going / pursue my own agenda (which, by the way, is none of your business)." All might use the word *leadership* (or its equivalents) with very different behaviors in mind— including those that might be detrimental to society as a whole.[23]

Thus leadership is not to be found in specific concrete acts. The decision to remain a virgin queen, demand strong quarterly sales, or restrict the freedoms of the populace isn't inherently an act of leadership. All must be argued for as constituting leadership when interacting with other relevant players such as followers, customers, clients, Wall Street analysts, the press, historians, and so on. As Grint suggests, leadership performances have to be believed in the context in which they are being discussed.[24]

Richard N. Haass makes this point in a slightly different way. He is the author of *War of Necessity, War of Choice*, a chronicle of U.S. involvement in both recent wars in Iraq.[25] He writes, "All wars are fought three times. There is the political struggle over whether to go to war. There is the physical war itself. And then there is the struggle over differing interpretations of what was accomplished and the lessons of it all."

But are leaders outside politics aware of the role of persuasion as they lead? The best ones are, as demonstrated by Pamela Shockley-Zalabak, chancellor of the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs (UCCS). Her duties are to oversee a regional campus of some twelve thousand students, one of four in the sprawling University of Colorado system. Early in 2009, she received a startling telephone call. An attorney at the other end of the line said that due to her leadership, UCCS was going to receive an anonymous gift of $5.5 million dollars.[26] To her absolute astonishment, the next day the check arrived.

I had a chance to talk with Chancellor Shockley-Zalabak about why she might have won the award, and I was immediately struck by her sensitivity to the persuasion involved in the problems that she faced. For example, while the economic recession was forcing many universities to lay people off, she had declined to do this on her campus. Instead, she instituted a strategic plan that would emphasize transparency, collaboration, and a new language to help her constituents think and talk in more budgetary terms.[27]

For example, in her "2/3 of plan budget," she asked everyone to operate in the year ahead as if they had only two-thirds of their anticipated budget increases. If at the end of the year the saved money was not needed for budget cuts, the academic units would receive it back. Shockley-Zalabak's "2/3 of plan" signaled a very specific kind of budget tightening that actually calmed fears over whether needed allocations from previous years would be threatened. She also introduced the "cliff effect," which meant, from a budgetary perspective, what must units do before they cease to function effectively—before they "fall off a cliff"? Finally, the "joy of uncertainty" introduced language and arguments that prepared students afraid of the impact of the budget crisis and decision making ahead on their course of study.

Chancellor Shockley-Zalabak also thought that her outreach programs might have impressed the donor. She instituted a number of wide-ranging scholarship programs for bright but disadvantaged students from Denver public schools, area community colleges, and nontraditional women returning to school. To reach these students, the UCCS Web site links prospective students and their parents to a number of well-produced podcasts in which Chancellor Shockley-Zalabak speaks directly to its users.[28]

For example, the podcast titled "College Is Possible" is remarkable for its pithy take-away line, which also serves as a master frame organizing her persuasive arguments for those undecided about paying for a college education in today's economy. (Chapters Two and Four further explain master frames.) Along with a hard-hitting message, the strategic use of these podcasts guards against Shockley-Zalabak becoming a faceless bureaucrat in the Office of the Chancellor. On the contrary, she manages to have a real presence in these podcasts. Podcast users feel as if she is speaking to them.

It is quite likely that Chancellor Shockley-Zalabak reaped significant rewards as much through the selling aspects of her job as her design of leadership in a budgetary crisis. How about you? Later in the chapter, you will have an opportunity to evaluate yourself as a persuasive communicator.

Reality Construction Rule #6: Control Spontaneity

Effective framing requires that leaders be able to control their own spontaneous communications.

No doubt Robert Murray probably wishes he could take back some of his communication in the early hours of the Utah mine collapse. Indeed, his instinctive promise of a successful rescue of the miners proved wrong. In the end, he not only gave false hope to the miners' families, he damaged his own public image and his company's as well. However, this case raises a key question: can leaders control their spontaneous communications?

At first glance, this idea may seem both contradictory and downright impossible. Yet the truth of the matter lies with our unconscious mind and our ability to program it when we are consciously focused. Just as you might prime a pump for several seconds before water comes out, so too can you prime your unconscious mind during conscious periods to exert a measure of control over your spontaneous communications. However, it's necessary to know a little something about conscious and unconscious learning processes to do this, a topic addressed in Chapter Three.

Perhaps most important in this discussion of framing is the role that emotions and values play in our message behavior. Too often we believe that our organizational interactions are driven by logic and reason only. We either deny or fail to acknowledge the role of emotions in our framing when we ignore the way our bodies are registering pride, passion, joy, anger, and so on. Such emotions either accentuate our framing or provide a mixed message for those with whom we communicate (a point discussed in Chapter Five). The body is perhaps the most overlooked aspect of leadership behavior, but the subject of framing cannot be discussed without it.[29]

Consider also that even the most fleeting, in-the-moment responses are as value-laden as any conscious statement or affirmation of values on our part.[30] Moreover, they are especially credible to outsiders because such responses appear involuntary and thus representative of true feelings.

Despite this appearance of involuntary action, you can gain an element of control. You can go a long way toward programming your unconscious actions toward desired behavior by reflecting on what it is you would want to do. This is especially likely to be effective in close proximity to spontaneous moments of communicating. Therefore, it behooves us to explore how best to take advantage of these unconscious learning processes as we try to understand the impact of our communications on others.

To better understand the value of the six reality construction rules for leadership, select a critical incident involving your own leadership or management. The purpose of Framing Tool 1.2 is to take a first crack at analyzing this incident. As you continue to read on, you will find other analysis questions in following chapters.

FRAMING TOOL 1.2

Critical Incident Framing

Identify a key problem or critical incident involving your communications as a leader with your employees, customers, or other stakeholders. To maximize your gain from this exercise, select an incident in which you were unhappy with the outcome.

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How did you define "the situation here and now" for them? What specific language did you use?

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How effective was this framing? What told you that your use of language was either effective or ineffective? (For example, was there a challenge to your framing? Did your framing seem to confuse people?)

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If your framing was ineffective, what was your preferred outcome?

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(You can download this form from www.josseybass.com/go/gailfairhurst. Feel free to adapt it to suit your needs. This analysis will continue in Chapter Two.)

Test Your Framing Style

How difficult will the concept of framing be for you to understand and use? To answer this question fairly, it is important to assess the kind of communicator that you are. Since the 1996 publication of _The Art of Framing_, whenever I coach or train organizational leaders, I utilize the research of Barbara J. O'Keefe, dean of Northwestern's School of Communication.[31] In her research on what she calls "Message Design Logic," she argues that three kinds of communicator styles determine how we produce our own messages and interpret those of others, especially as the situations we face gain in complexity.[32] Complete the inventory below to determine the style that best fits your everyday communications and your sensitivity to framing.[33] Your total score should indicate whether you are an Expressive, a Conventional, or a Strategic.[34] As you will learn, each style has both strengths and weaknesses.

FRAMING TOOL 1.3

Communications Style Inventory

There are fifteen pairs of statements in this inventory. For each pair, read both statements and _quickly_ decide which statement best fits your communication style. Even if both statements are partially true, select the one that is true more often than not. Circle either "a" or "b," not both. There is no right or wrong answer in this survey.

Circle "a" or "b"

1a.   I pretty much say what I'm thinking most of the time.

1b.   I try to be honest, but within the bounds of politeness.

2a.   When communicating with another person, you have to respond to what the situation calls for.

2b.   I focus on the situation, but I look for room to maneuver within it.

3a.   I am sensitive to the context in which I communicate with others.

3b.   When communicating with others, I try to seize the moment.

4a.   I consider myself to be a straight-shooter. My communication is pretty transparent most of the time.

4b.   When communicating with others, you have to really consider their thoughts and feelings.

5a.   If my employees failed on an assignment that they are more than capable of handling, I would not be afraid to deliver a harsh message to them.

5b.   If my employees failed on an assignment that they are more than capable of handling, I would try to couch a harsh message in a polite way.

6a.   In difficult situations, I do what's right.

6b.   In difficult situations, I try to redefine the context in ways that are more suitable to a beneficial resolution to the conflict at hand.

7a.   People around me are shocked at times with things that I say.

7b.   I try to keep most of my conversations from veering into unnecessary conflict.

8a.   I am concerned about hurt feelings in a conflict.

8b.   I try to seek consensus in conflict situations.

9a.   I am careful in my use of language on the job.

9b.   In general, I understand the power of language and the possibilities it affords, especially at work.

10a.   My conflicts sometimes end with hurt feelings.

10b.   Hurt feelings can usually be avoided in a conflict.

11a.   I might be blunt at times, but people generally trust that I am telling them the truth.

11b.   There is always a "proper" way to communicate truthfully that I try to follow.

12a.   I try to persuade with the other person in mind.

12b.   I've been told that I am very verbal; I could sell cars to a used-car salesman.

13a. I have one goal when I communicate, and that is to express myself.

13b. I try to communicate with an awareness of others' feelings about a given subject.

14a. I don't usually play games when I communicate.

14b. I can be subtly manipulative at times, but not unethical.

15a. If someone is really angry and potentially hostile, I'll back off. Otherwise, I express myself pretty freely.

15b. I try to prevent conflict as much as possible.

How to score your results:

When your response matches the letter "b," score one point. All answers matching the letter "a" are to be scored zero.

The scale ranges from 0 to 15, with these approximate ranges:

0–8 = Expressive
9–12 = Conventional
13–15 = Strategic

Most leaders are Conventionals.

(You can download this form from www.josseybass.com/go/gailfairhurst.)

If you are an Expressive, you are likely to find it relatively difficult to develop sensitivity to the framing concept. Your primary communications goal is simply to express yourself unencumbered by most of the conventional norms of polite conversation. O'Keefe says that unless there are fairly dire negative consequences, you are a person who pretty much says what you think. Because finesse is not your strong suit, others may half-humorously suggest that you "lack an edit function." You are often blunt, surprising, or embarrassing. At times, you can also be very literal. Nevertheless, others may find you more trustworthy for these very same reasons. You are not a game-player.

Vice President Joe Biden is a classic Expressive. He is well known for his gaffes, including torpedoing his own 2008 bid for the presidency on its very first day with what many regarded as an unintentional racial slur directed toward Barack Obama, then a candidate.[35] Most recently, the swine flu epidemic in early 2009 found Biden telling the American public on the *Today Show* to

stay out of airplanes due to perceived poor air circulation. With this remark, he almost single-handedly brought down the airline and travel industries, which were already struggling to survive in a tough economy.

All of us pass through an Expressive phase as children, as the youngsters who reveal embarrassing family secrets remind us. However, some of us never leave this phase even as blunt talk gets us into trouble time and again. (Incidentally, several Expressive students over the years have suggested to me that they come from Expressive families where blunt talk is the family norm, which makes a great deal of sense.) If you are an Expressive, this book can help you adapt to the people and circumstances around you, locate opportunities for influence, and avoid offending others—while not losing any of your spontaneity.

O'Keefe's second communicator style is "Conventional," and it is the style of most leaders today. Conventionals have some sensitivity to the idea of framing because they generally follow the rules for communicating with others. Conventionals do what is appropriate to the situation and readily follow social norms. If you are a Conventional, then you likely see the communication process as a cooperative venture in which others also have needs.

To take a really simple example, when a person at your dinner table says, "Are those the rolls and butter?" a Conventional understands this remark as an indirect request to pass the rolls and butter. "Yes, would you like them?" is what a Conventional is likely to say based on proper etiquette for polite company—almost certainly avoiding the somewhat more literal response of the Expressive, who might say, "Yes, they are," thus further imposing on the other diner the need to phrase the request for rolls and butter in more specific terms: "Okay, would you *please* pass the rolls and butter."

Al Gore is a good example of a Conventional. Most know him either as the forty-fifth Vice President of the United States under Bill Clinton (1993–2001) or as an environmental activist who starred in the 2006 documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*. However, in 2000, Gore aspired to the presidency of the United States and surprised many when he lost to George W. Bush.[36] But Gore's 2000 presidential debate performances were telling. In his first debate, he was coached to be an alpha male and dominate the interaction, which

he tried to do through frequent interruptions of then candidate Bush and violations of his personal space. When Gore was reviewed poorly for this, he was coached to be more affable for the next debate. Gore subsequently emphasized areas of agreement with Bush, but also adopted what many saw as an overly friendly demeanor. When this showing produced poor reviews, Gore eventually assumed a middle position by the third debate, somewhere between the two extremes. Ironically, many pundits believe that Gore's best campaign performance was his concession speech, which is the only one he wrote himself. Gore gave himself over to his handlers, switching his style each time, because that's what modern-day presidential candidates (conventionally) do.

The downside of being a Conventional is that most situations tend to seem rather fixed. That is, you minimize the opportunity to let situations work for you instead of against you by fixing the elements in the context in one particular way. It is analogous to taking a Rorschach test (a personality test based on interpreting a series of ink blots), and insisting that an ink blot could be one and only one shape. If you are a Conventional, this book can help you to understand many more possibilities when you communicate. You can realize outcomes more to your liking because "the situation here and now" becomes somewhat more pliable.

Finally, you can have a Strategic style, in which you already have a heightened sensitivity to language, and you are rather precise when choosing it. You nearly always see alternative possibilities for "the situation here and now," and you are generally confident in pursuing them. Two great examples stand out here. The first occurs in, of all places, signage at my local grocery store notifying under-age purchasers that they will not be able to buy alcohol. It reads, "If you are lucky enough to look under 27, please be ready to show your identification." The compliment is a deft touch compared to the usual straightforward announcement, "No alcohol sold to minors."

Another interesting leadership example of a Strategic comes from the world of sports and a rather unlikely source. Ohio State University (OSU) basketball player Mark Titus is a bench-warming walk-on to the team coached under Thad Matta. By their own admission, the team's starters say that Titus is taking center stage with his Club Trillion blog, "Life Views from the End of the Bench" (at clubtrillion.blogspot.com).

To say that Titus is quick with a line is an understatement. Speaking to the *New York Times*, one of his team members recounted an incident in which Coach Matta assembled the team to address a circulating e-mail about an unsanctioned party featuring OSU's football and basketball players.[37] With numerous university administrators looking on and just as Matta was about to warn players about parties of this nature, a straight-faced Titus interjected: "Coach, can you forward a copy of that e-mail to me? I never got it."

You can imagine the room cracking up. But Titus's genius here is not just to be funny. He makes the coaches and administrators momentarily share his perspective and doubt their own if, ever so briefly, they flash back to what it was like to be a student in search of the next party.

One of the coaches also recounted a time when Titus was at the scorer's table during a blowout in which his team was dominating the game. However, he did not make it into the game when a time-out was called. Titus apparently screamed "Water! Water! I need water!" to the managers as he made his way back to his seat, mockingly calling attention to his aspirations and his bench-warming plight. One of Titus's high school coaches has an interesting insight into this Strategic: "He knows the line, he'll walk it and lean over it and then pull himself back." Indeed, that's what Strategics do. They make or find opportunities when the rest of us are usually rule or role bound.

Titus's verbal skills are clearly creating buzz and, quite likely, job opportunities in the near future. However, being a Strategic also has its downside, as others may suspect you of trying to manipulate them. My students often remark that more than a few lawyers would qualify as Strategics given their ability to argue. (This may be true, but one should not overlook academics either!)

We certainly saw this demonstrated during the depositions surrounding the Monica Lewinsky scandal, when President Bill Clinton answered a question with the memorable phrase, "Well, it depends on what the meaning of the word 'is' is." Perhaps only a trained lawyer and Rhodes Scholar could have uttered such a response, which was widely mocked by the press and political pundits. Nevertheless, this book can help Strategics focus on both ethics and strategic goal formation to avoid relinquishing personal credibility to charges of manipulation.

What do you think happens when individuals with different styles get into conflict with one another? O'Keefe suggests that individuals with similar

styles will likely conflict over issue-related matters, that is, specific arguments, assumptions, goals, and so on. However, individuals of different styles may conflict not only over the issues but also the other person's style—thus making resolution of the conflict all the more difficult.

For example, Strategics or Conventionals may find Expressives rude and overbearing, while Expressives or Conventionals might see Strategics as untrustworthy and manipulative. Similarly, both Expressives and Strategics may find Conventionals a bit too rule-oriented.

Consider former President George W. Bush as an example. In the early days of his presidency and after 9/11, he tended toward an Expressive style with what many Europeans saw as "Texas cowboy rhetoric" and frequent remarks like "I don't do nuance." When asked in September of 2001 if he wanted Osama bin Laden killed, he said, "I want justice. There's an old poster out West, as I recall, that said WANTED: DEAD OR ALIVE." When asked by a reporter in July 2003 about the rising attacks on U.S. troops in Iraq—two months after standing under a banner reading "Mission Accomplished" on the USS *Abraham Lincoln* flight deck—he said "My answer is, Bring them on."[38]

However, he came to regret many of those remarks when as early as January of 2005 he stated, "I watch what I say . . . . I said some things in the first term that were probably a little blunt."[39] Interestingly, Bush is the country's first MBA president and known for his aversion to lawyers, which, we can only surmise, might be a stylistic issue, as by his own admission he is not the most articulate of speakers.

One other key issue regarding Message Design Logic concerns a leader's ability to use all three styles. Interestingly, O'Keefe's work suggests that Expressives are usually Expressive most of the time.[40] Conventionals can be either Conventional or Expressive, while Strategics can be all three given their chameleon-like language skills. However, this raises a key point concerning the aim of this book, which is to move you toward a more Strategic style. It might be helpful here to recall Bill Clinton's early nickname of "Slick Willie" (from his days as governor of Arkansas) because one danger of becoming a Strategic is that others may perceive you as manipulative. It takes care with a Strategic style to realize its many benefits, and the discussion of the ethics of framing in Chapter Six is crucial to take to heart.

If you would like to further consider how the people on your team "mesh" with their different styles, especially in conflict situations, answer the questions in Framing Tool 1.4. In doing so, you may discover a conflict management strategy that you didn't know you had.

F R A M I N G   T O O L   1 . 4

Communications Style Meshing

Message Design Logic has implications for communicating with your staff, because individuals who have the same style (Expressive to Expressive, Conventional to Conventional, Strategic to Strategic) will likely conflict only over the issues when they disagree. However, individuals whose styles differ may conflict *both* over the issues and their objections to the other person's style.

If you can predict the communication styles of your staff members (or you want to give them the inventory to complete), you might gain some insight into how to better manage conflict among them.

My style is: _____

The Expressives on my staff oftentimes blurt out whatever they are thinking. It seems as though they lack an edit function most of the time. They are:

Name: _____
Name: _____
Name: _____

The Conventionals on my staff view communication as a cooperative venture. They are generally appropriate in their communications. However, they sometimes lack imagination in responding to the events of the moment.

Name: _____
Name: _____
Name: _____
Name: _____
Name: _____

The Strategics on my staff are very adept in their language use. They don't react to the context—they create it. Some, though, can be perceived as a little manipulative.

Name: _____

Name: _____

Name: _____

Conflict Dynamic #1: The Conventionals and Strategics on my staff find the Expressives rude and overbearing, regardless of the issues. Please explain.

_____

_____

_____

Conflict Dynamic #2: The Expressives and Conventionals on my staff find the Strategics to be untrustworthy or manipulative, regardless of the issues. Please explain.

_____

_____

_____

Conflict Dynamic #3: The Expressives and Strategics on my staff find the Conventionals to be overly rule-bound, regardless of the issues. Please explain.

_____

_____

_____

Key Conflict Management Strategy: Separate "communication style" from the "issues," and deal with each separately. The actual words I might use:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

(You can download this form from www.josseybass.com/go/gailfairhurst. Feel free to adapt it to suit your needs.)

Framing Through Pictures?

Up to this point, I have focused exclusively on framing through language, which raises the question of whether there are other ways to frame—using pictures, digital images, symbolism, or even just nonverbal behavior. Most assuredly, the answer is yes! For example, consider Carly Fiorina, whose tenure as CEO of Hewlett-Packard was abruptly cut short when she was fired by its board in 2005. As business schools, executives, and the media sized up her performance, there was a lot of talk about one seemingly nonperformance issue: the placement of her portrait alongside those of the company's revered founders, William Hewlett and David Packard, in the company lobby.

No words were uttered in this simple act, but what was the possible message here? In the postmortems after her firing, it appeared to some as a lack of respect for the past and power of the company's culture.[41] To others, it was an indication of Fiorina's aspirational "rock star" status given the celebrities and politicians with whom she associated.[42] Fiorina herself said she was following company precedent, as John Young and Lew Platt had hung their portraits in the same spot when each was CEO. She also defended it in this way, "Hewlett-Packard was clearly bigger than me, but it had also become bigger than [the founders] Bill and Dave. . . . Change can only begin if its force is greater than the weight of the history and the power of the status quo."[43]

But if Fiorina had succeeded at taking Hewlett-Packard to new levels of unprecedented growth, would portrait placement have mattered quite so much? Or was this a classic case of gender discrimination when she was merely following a precedent set by her male predecessors on the job? (Interestingly, the CEO who followed Fiorina at Hewlett-Packard, Mark Hurd, chose not to have his portrait hung in the lobby.[44])

Recalling Reality Construction Rule #2, reality is often contested—and this certainly was. The controversy over her firing at the time landed her an interview on *60 Minutes*, a prominent U.S. news show.[45] The interviewer asked about the symbolism of her portrait's placement in the lobby, acknowledging that it had become a matter of considerable debate.

Consider another woman leader, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in the Obama administration. As a U.S. senator, she ran against and lost to Senator Barack Obama for the Democratic nomination for the presidency of the

United States. One small moment in the campaign involved some interesting nonverbal behavior on her part that was deemed a framed message. It was January 31, 2006, the night of President George W. Bush's State of the Union address. Such speeches tend to draw a partisan response, although there are usually moments of bipartisanship. A smart president will try to strike a balance between partisan and bipartisan moments to avoid speaking to only half an audience of lawmakers and citizenry.

President Bush was discussing the problems associated with the U.S. Social Security system when he pointed out that the first baby boomers were turning sixty—including two of his father's favorite people (referring to President George H.W. Bush). While the audience waited to hear him name his father's two oldest sons, himself and his brother Jeb Bush, President Bush attempted a bit of humor by saying, "Me and President Bill Clinton." This was a reference to all the traveling that the elder Bush and Clinton had been doing associated with their December 2005 tsunami fundraising efforts.[46]

The cameras on the floor of the House of Representatives immediately panned to Hillary Clinton. This was to be expected, as she was the presumptive Democratic nominee at the time. Of the moment, syndicated columnist Kathleen Parker wrote, "If eyes could emasculate, Hillary's would send a man into the high octaves . . . her expression said, 'Bug off,' or sentiments to that effect. What we do know is that Bill Clinton would have loved it."[47]

Parker's take is certainly one way to interpret Hillary Clinton's putative stone face. However, it is also important to remember that Hillary Clinton had voted to go to war in Iraq, which angered many in her Democratic base. Her opponent, Barack Obama, who was not in the Senate at that time, was criticizing her heavily for doing what President George W. Bush had wanted. At every stop on the campaign trail, she was distancing herself from Bush. During the State of the Union address, it is likely that she was much more concerned with what a knowing smile or laugh might communicate to her base than with being polite at that moment. Any affiliation with the president was to be avoided if one follows this logic.

Yet, herein lies the conundrum when using nonverbal behavior, pictures, digital images, or symbolism to frame a message. They often create a visceral response, but they do not have the precision that language affords (assuming, of course,

that we are choosing not to be strategically ambiguous with our word choices). For example, was Carly Fiorina's true motivation to hang her picture in the HP lobby benign, merely strategic, or blatant self-aggrandizement? What exactly was Senator Clinton thinking during George W. Bush's attempt at humor?

The answer to these questions is that we do not know. We can only speculate. Nonverbal behavior, in particular, is all about positioning ourselves or acting in relation to another. Think of the effects of a scowl, raised eyebrow, or certain tone of voice in the midst of a conversation. They clearly add meaning to verbal messages, but alone they are difficult to interpret. It is something that we must adjust to as we learn about framing without words, a subject that Chapter Five takes up directly.

A Backward Glance at Chapter One

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Carly Fiorina, Chancellor Pamela Shockley-Zalabak, Rudolph Giuliani, and Robert Murray are leaders thrust onto a national or international stage. They are great fodder for any book because most are so widely known. However, their status should not be misinterpreted. Differences in what they do for a living notwithstanding, they shape meaning and help construct reality by influencing "the situation here and now" just as you and I must do. The rules that apply to them also apply to you and me when we lead:

- Reality Construction Rule #1: Control the context. Leaders often cannot control events, but they can control the context under which events are seen if they recognize a framing opportunity.

- Reality Construction Rule #2: Define the situation. At its most basic level, framing reality means defining "the situation here and now" in ways that connect with others.

- Reality Construction Rule #3: Apply ethics. "Reality" is often contested; framing a subject is an act of persuasion by leaders, one imbued with ethical choices.

- Reality Construction Rule #4: Interpret uncertainty. It is the uncertainty, confusion, and undecidability of "the situation here and now" that

opens it up for interpretation and provides an opportunity for the more verbally skilled among us to emerge as leaders.

- Reality Construction Rule #5: Design the response. Ultimately, leadership is a design problem. Leaders must figure out what leadership is in the context of what they do and, through their framing and actions, persuade themselves and other people that they are doing it.

- Reality Construction Rule #6: Control spontaneity. Framing reality requires that leaders be able to control their own spontaneous communication.

To help understand your own proclivities toward framing, I invoked Barbara J. O'Keefe's research on Message Design Logic as a diagnostic tool to help you categorize your communication style. The three possibilities reveal themselves in answers to the question, "Why did you say that?"

- The Expressive says, "Because that's what I was thinking!" Expressives say what they are thinking with very little editing.

- The Conventional says, "Because that is the appropriate thing to say for this situation." Conventionals follow social norms for communicating with others.

- The Strategic says, "Because that is the best course of action given my strategic goals." Strategics see situations as mutable, thus they understand that they play a major role in shaping the context.

A FINAL THOUGHT

Through framing, we create the realities to which we must then respond.