

# Introduction

## The Power of Reframing

Donald Trump's presidency was distinctive for his outsized personality, raucous rallies, fearsome Twitterstorms, and stunning iconoclasm. It was also unorthodox from a management perspective, a feature that generated less media attention but affected everything the Trump administration tried to do. From his experience of running a family business, Trump brought a deeply ingrained preference for patriarchy rather than bureaucracy, for entrepreneurial flexibility rather than structural constraint, and for lieutenants whose loyalty mattered more than their experience or expertise (Blair, 2018). He created a structure much like that of a boisterous family, with Trump as a dominant father figure whose attention and favor everyone else fought to get.

Traditionally, presidents have relied on their chiefs of staff to bring a modicum of order and discipline to operations that are chronically hectic and complex. Trump's first chief of staff, Reince Priebus, lasted only six months, during which he struggled to control both his boss and his staff. He was "widely viewed as weak and ineffective," but "hardly got the chance to operate as an effective chief of staff" (Prokop, 2017), because he was hobbled by more powerful informal players like Trump *consigliere* Steve Bannon and Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner.

Trump tried to rein in the chaos and infighting of the Priebus era by appointing a retired marine general, John Kelly, as his next chief of staff, but the buttoned-down general and the mercurial president were not a match made in heaven. Kelly set out to bring coherence and

a semblance of military discipline to the cacophony of voices that vied for the president's attention. He announced a hierarchical system requiring all staff to go through him before seeing the president, but that was alien to the president's free-wheeling style. As a former official in the Bush administration noted, "The notion of a chain of command is gone" (Baker, 2017).

Kelly lasted 18 months in the job, longer than many skeptics expected, before leaving in the wake of media reports that he and the president were no longer on speaking terms. After his departure, Trump's subsequent chiefs (Mick Mulvaney and Mark Meadows) were loyalists with limited inclination or ability to contain the president's impulses.

White House turmoil reached a new high after Joe Biden was declared the winner of the 2020 presidential election. Some of Trump's most committed supporters found that he was eager to listen to any conspiracy theory that reinforced his preferred narrative that he had "won by a landslide" (Barry and Frenkel, 2021). Trump ignored advisors who encouraged him to acknowledge Biden's victory. Instead, he devoted almost all his attention to a quixotic battle to overturn the election results. A tragic climax came on January 6, 2021, when Trump's "Rally for America" triggered a mob to march down Pennsylvania Avenue and to invade the halls of Congress, producing terror, vandalism, and five deaths.

A few weeks before the rally, Trump had tweeted to his supporters, "Big protest in D.C. on January 6th. Be there, will be wild!" At the event, he gave an hour-long, barn-burner of a speech that extolled his achievements, insisted that the election had been stolen, and told his audience they needed to be strong to "stop the steal." Near the end of the address, he exhorted the crowd, "And we fight. We fight like Hell and if you don't fight like Hell, you're not going to have a country anymore" (Jacobo, 2021). The crowd apparently took him at his word and became a pugnacious mob, armed and looking for trouble. The only thing in their way was an undermanned Capitol Police Force.

The federal government has the capacity to deploy massive security forces in the District of Columbia, but it takes substantial planning and coordination. Security assets in the region are widely dispersed across the District of Columbia's metropolitan police force, the neighboring states of Maryland and Virginia, and multiple federal departments, including Defense, Justice, and Homeland Security. That was a problem in the run-up to the president's "Save America" rally:

Two days before Congress was set to formalize President-elect Joe Biden's victory, Capitol Police Chief Steven Sund was growing increasingly worried about the size of the pro-Trump crowds expected to stream into Washington in protest. To be on the safe side, Sund asked House and Senate security officials for

permission to request that the D.C. National Guard be placed on standby in case he needed quick backup. But, Sund said, they turned him down. During the invasion, the chief “pleaded for help five more times as a scene far more dire than he had ever imagined unfolded on the historic Capitol grounds.” (Leonnig, Davis, Hermann, and Demirjian, 2021)

The Capitol police chief as well as Washington’s mayor and the governors of Maryland and Virginia all ran into the same roadblock: they needed approval from the Defense Department or the president to deploy National Guard units. That approval was slow to come, despite their pleading that the situation was desperate. As we write, why that happened is lost in a fog of finger pointing. Ultimate authority lay with the president, but he chose not to use it. He was busy watching the event on television, “and the message from those around him—that he needed to call off the angry mob he had egged on just hours earlier, or lives could be lost—was one to which he was not initially receptive” (Parker, Dawsey, and Rucker, 2021).

In any event, it took three hours before the first Guard units arrived. In the meantime, four people died as thousands of rioters assaulted police officers, vandalized the historic building, and forced the vice president and members of Congress hurriedly to seek refuge. In the aftermath of another day that would live in infamy, all the major players defended their own actions and looked for someone else to blame, confirming the adage that success has many parents, but failure is an orphan. One thing was clear: “Poor planning and communication among a constellation of federal, state and local law enforcement agencies hamstrung the response to the rioting” (Mazzetti, Cooper, Steinhauer, Kanno-Youngs, and Broadwater, 2021).

So much talent and experience, yet key decision makers were at sea. They misread available information and failed to act or did the wrong thing. The technical term is *cluelessness*, a pervasive affliction for leaders everywhere. Being clueless simply means that you don’t really know what’s going on and don’t see better options even if they are close at hand. So, you continue down the wrong thoroughfare, hoping in vain that it will get you where you want to go. Your efforts to make things better make them worse, which is often obvious to those around you even if not to you.

How do leaders become clueless? That is what we explore next. Then we introduce reframing—the conceptual core of the book and our basic prescription for escaping the common and debilitating curse of being at sea without any landmarks to indicate whether you are on course. Reframing requires an ability to think about situations from more than one angle so that you can develop alternative diagnoses and strategies. We introduce four

distinct lenses for sizing things up—structural, human resource, political, and symbolic—each logical and powerful in capturing a detailed snapshot. Together, they help to paint a more comprehensive picture of what’s going on and what to do.

## **VIRTUES AND DRAWBACKS OF ORGANIZED ACTIVITY**

There was little need for professional managers when individuals mostly managed their own affairs, drawing goods and services from family farms and small local businesses. Since the dawn of the industrial revolution some 200 years ago, explosive technological and social changes have produced a world that is far more interconnected, frantic, and complicated. Humans struggle to avoid drowning in complexity that continually threatens to pull them in over their heads (Kegan, 1998). Forms of management and organization effective a few years ago are now obsolete. Sérieyx (1993) calls it the organizational big bang:

The information revolution, the globalization of economies, the proliferation of events that undermine all our certainties, the collapse of the grand ideologies, the arrival of the CNN society which transforms us into an immense, planetary village—all these shocks have overturned the rudimentary rules of the game and suddenly turned yesterday’s organizations into antiques. (pp. 14–15)

The demands on managers’ wisdom, imagination, and agility have never been greater, and the impact of organizations on people’s well-being and happiness has never been more consequential. The proliferation of complex organizations has made most human activities more formalized than they once were. We grow up in families and then start our own. We work for business, government, or nonprofits. We learn in schools and universities. We worship in churches, mosques, and synagogues. We play sports in teams, franchises, and leagues. We join clubs and associations. Many of us will grow old and die in hospitals or nursing homes. We build these enterprises because of what they can do for us. They offer goods, entertainment, social services, health care, and almost everything else that we use or consume.

All too often, however, we experience a darker side of these enterprises. Organizations frustrate and exploit people. Too many people find that work has so little meaning that jobs offer nothing beyond a paycheck. Too often, products are flawed, families are dysfunctional, students fail to learn, patients get worse, and policies backfire. A cruel irony of the Covid-19 panic was that nursing homes meant to protect and prolong life often became death traps for their residents. If we believe mission statements and public

pronouncements, almost every organization these days aims to nurture its employees and delight its customers. But many miss the mark. Schools are blamed for “mis-educating,” universities are said to close more minds than they open, and government is criticized for corruption, red tape, and rigidity.

The private sector has its own problems. Manufacturers recall faulty cars, defective airplanes, or inflammable cell phones. Producers of food and pharmaceuticals make people sick with tainted products. Software companies deliver bugs and “vaporware.” Industrial accidents pump chemicals, oil, toxic gas, and radioactive materials into the air and water. Corporate greed, incompetence, and insensitivity wreak havoc on communities and individuals. The ill-fated bottom line: we seem hard-pressed to manage organizations so that their virtues exceed their vices. The big question: Why?

### **Management’s Track Record**

Year after year, the best and brightest managers maneuver or meander their way to the apex of enterprises great and small. Then they do really dumb things. How do bright people turn out so dim? One theory is that they’re too smart for their own good. Feinberg and Tarrant (1995) label it the “self-destructive intelligence syndrome.” They argue that smart people often act stupid because of personality flaws—things like pride, arrogance, and an unconscious desire to fail. It’s true that psychological flaws have been apparent in brilliant, self-destructive individuals like Bill Clinton and Donald Trump. But on the whole, the best and brightest have no more psychological problems than everyone else. The primary source of cluelessness is not personality or IQ but a failure to make sense of complex circumstances. If we misread a situation, we’ll do the wrong thing. But if we don’t discern that we’re seeing the wrong picture, we won’t understand why we’re not getting the results we want. So, we insist we’re right even when we’re off track. America endured a two-month version of this drama when Donald Trump erroneously insisted that he had won an election he had lost by seven million votes.

Vaughan (1995), in trying to unravel the causes of the 1986 disaster that destroyed the *Challenger* Space Shuttle and its crew, underscored how hard it is for people to surrender their entrenched conceptions of reality:

They puzzle over contradictory evidence, but usually succeed in pushing it aside—until they come across a piece of evidence too fascinating to ignore, too clear to misperceive, too painful to deny, which makes vivid still other signals they do not want to see, forcing them to alter and surrender the world-view they have so meticulously constructed. (p. 235)

We create our own psychic prisons and then lock ourselves in and toss away the key. This helps explain a number of unsettling reports from the managerial front lines:

- Hogan, Curphy, and Hogan (1994) estimate that the skills of one-half to three-quarters of American managers are inadequate for the demands of their jobs. Gallup (2015) puts the number even higher, estimating that more than 80 percent of American managers lack the capabilities they need. But most probably don't realize it: Kruger and Dunning (1999) found that the less competent people are, the more they overestimate their performance, partly because they don't know good performance when they see it.
- About half of the high-profile senior executives that companies hire fail within two years, according to a 2006 study (Burns and Kiley, 2007).
- Year after year, management miscues cause once highly successful companies to skid into bankruptcy. In 2019, a year of economic expansion and a rising stock market, more than 50 major companies went bankrupt. Among the best known were Pacific Gas and Electric (the California utility giant, which has filed for bankruptcy twice in this century) and Purdue Pharma (brought down by lawsuits over its pushing hundreds of thousands of users into opioid addiction). (The pandemic of 2020 brought a new wave of bankruptcies, but not all of them were necessarily the fault of management.)

Small wonder that so many organizational veterans nod in assent to Scott Adams's admittedly unscientific "Dilbert principle": "the most ineffective workers are systematically moved to the place where they can do the least damage—management" (1996, p. 14).

## **Strategies for Improving Organizations**

We have certainly made a noble, sustained effort to improve organizations, despite our limited ability to understand them. Legions of managers report to work each day hoping to create a better future. Authors and consultants spin out a torrent of promising new ideas and erstwhile solutions. Policymakers develop a bale of laws and regulations to guide or shove organizations on the right path.

The most widespread improvement strategy is upgrading management talent. Modern mythology promises that organizations will work splendidly if well managed. Managers are supposed to see the big picture and look out for their organization's overall well-being. They have not always been equal to the task, even when armed with the full array of modern tools and techniques. They go forth with this rational arsenal to try to tame our wild and primitive workplaces. Yet, in the end, irrational forces too often carry the day.

When managers find problems too hard to solve, they hire consultants. The number and variety of advice givers keep growing exponentially. Most of these modern shamans have a specialty: strategy, technology, quality, finance, marketing, mergers, human resource management, executive search, outplacement, coaching, organization development, planning, and many more. For every managerial challenge, there is a consultant willing to offer assistance—at a price.

For all their sage advice and remarkable fees, confident consultants continue to make little dent in persistent problems plaguing organizations. To compensate, they may blame the clients for failing to implement their profound insights. McKinsey & Co., “the high priest of high-level consulting” (Byrne, 2002, p. 66), worked so closely with Enron that its managing partner (Rajat Gupta, who eventually went to jail for insider trading) sent his chief lawyer to Houston after Enron’s collapse to see if his firm might be in legal trouble. The lawyer reported that McKinsey was safe, and a relieved Gupta insisted bravely, “We stand by all the work we did. Beyond that, we can only empathize with the trouble they are going through. It’s a sad thing to see” (p. 68).

When managers and consultants fail, government responds with legislation, policies, and regulations. Constituents badger elected officials to “do something” about a variety of ills: pollution, dangerous products, hazardous working conditions, discrimination, and low-performing schools, to name a few. Governing bodies respond by making “policy.” But policymakers don’t always understand the problem well enough to get the solution right. A sizable body of research records a continuing saga of perverse ways in which the execution undermines even good solutions (Bardach, 1977; Elmore, 1978; Freudenberg and Gramling, 1994; Gottfried and Conchas, 2016; Grindle, 2017; Peters, 1999; Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973). Policymakers, for example, have been trying for decades to reform U.S. public schools. Billions of taxpayer dollars have been spent. The result? About as successful as America’s switch to the metric system. In the 1950s, Congress passed legislation mandating the adoption of metric standards and measures. More than six decades later, if you know what a hectare is or can visualize the size of a 300-gram package of crackers, you’re ahead of most Americans. Legislators did not factor into their solution what it would take to get their decision carried out against longstanding custom and tradition.

In short, the difficulties surrounding improvement strategies are well documented. Exemplary intentions produce more costs than benefits. Problems outlast solutions. Still, there are reasons for optimism. Organizations have changed about as much in recent decades as in the preceding century. To survive, they had to. Revolutionary changes in technology, the rise of the global economy, and shortened product life cycles have spawned a flurry of efforts to design faster, more flexible organizational forms. New models flourish in companies, such

as Valve (the *nonhierarchical* video game powerhouse that shuns job titles and organization charts), Wegman's (the mission-driven supermarket chain that consistently ranks among America's best places to work), Google (the global search giant), Airbnb (a new concept of lodging), and Novo-Nordisk (a Danish pharmaceutical company that includes environmental and social metrics in its bottom line). The dispersed collection of enthusiasts and volunteers who provide content for Wikipedia and the far-flung network of software engineers who have developed the Linux operating system provide dramatic examples of possibilities in the digital world. But despite such successes, failures are still too common. The nagging question: How can leaders and managers improve the odds for themselves as well for their organizations?

## FRAMING

Goran Carstedt, the talented executive who led the turnaround of Volvo's French division in the 1980s, got to the heart of a challenge managers face every day:

The world simply can't be made sense of, facts can't be organized, unless you have a mental model to begin with. That theory does not have to be the right one, because you can alter it along the way as information comes in. But you can't begin to learn without some concept that gives you expectations or hypotheses. (Hampden-Turner, 1992, p. 167)

Such mental models have many labels—maps, mind-sets, schema, paradigms, heuristics, and cognitive lenses, to name but a few.<sup>1</sup> Following the work of Goffman, Dewey, and others, we have chosen the label *frames*, a term that has received increasing attention in organizational research as scholars give greater attention to how managers make sense of a complicated and turbulent world (see, e.g., Cornelissen and Werner, 2014; Foss and Weber, 2015; Gray, Purdy, and Ansari, 2015; Hahn, Preuss, Pinkse, and Figge, 2014; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Seidel, Hannigan, and Phillips, 2020). In describing frames, we deliberately mix metaphors, referring to them as windows, maps, tools, lenses, orientations, prisms, and perspectives, because all these images capture part of the idea we want to convey.

A frame is a mental model—a set of ideas and assumptions—that you carry in your head to help you understand and negotiate a particular “territory.” A good lens makes it easier to know what you are up against and, ultimately, what you can do about it. Mental maps are vital because organizations don't come with computerized navigation systems to guide you turn-by-turn to your destination. Instead, managers need to develop and carry accurate charts in their heads.

Such maps make it possible to register and assemble key bits of perceptual data into a coherent pattern—an image of what’s happening. When framing works fluidly, the process takes the form of “rapid cognition,” the process that Gladwell (2005) examines in his best seller *Blink*. He describes it as a gift that makes it possible to read “deeply into the narrowest slivers of experience. In basketball, the player who can take in and comprehend all that is happening in the moment is said to have ‘court sense’” (p. 44). The military stresses situational awareness to describe the same capacity.

Dane and Pratt (2007) describe four key characteristics of this intuitive “blink” process:

- It is nonconscious—you can do it without thinking about it and without knowing how you did it.
- It is very fast—the process often occurs almost instantly.
- It is holistic—you see a coherent, meaningful pattern.
- It results in “affective judgments”—thought and feeling work together so you feel confident that you know what is going on and what needs to be done.

The essence of this process is matching situational cues with a well-learned mental framework—a “deeply held, nonconscious category or pattern” (Dane and Pratt, 2007, p. 37). This is the key skill that Simon and Chase (1973) found in chess masters—they could instantly recognize more than 50,000 configurations of a chessboard. This ability enables grand masters to play 25 lesser opponents simultaneously, beating all of them while spending only seconds on each move.

The blink process is key to expertise and skill. Kahneman and Klein (2009) argue that it works best for individuals who have developed a deep understanding of a particular domain through experience and deliberate practice with feedback. Skill and expertise come to those who are willing to invest time and effort and learning (Ericsson, 2005). But for nonexperts, fast, intuitive thinking often leads to very bad judgments. Experts typically know when they don’t know, but nonexperts think they know when they don’t (Kahneman and Klein, 2009). “Subjective confidence is therefore an unreliable indication of the validity of intuitive judgments” (p. 524).

Research on human thinking has led to the identification of two distinct modes of cognition that operate in parallel: Type I (intuitive and automatic) and Type II (deliberate and analytic), summarized in Exhibit 1.1. Intuition is faster, requires less cognitive effort, and produces holistic judgments. It works best in the hands of experts dealing with fluid, messy problems, particularly if time is short. Analytic thinking is slower and requires more effort

**Exhibit 1.1.**  
**Characteristics of Two Types of Human Thinking.**

Type I (Intuitive)	Type II (Deliberate)
Fast	Slow
Nonconscious	Conscious
Automatic	Intentional
Does not rely on working memory	Requires use of working memory
Requires less mental energy	Requires more mental energy
Relies on tacit, implicit knowledge	Relies on explicit knowledge

and conscious attention but can lead to superior judgment and decision in situations with well-structured problems and high-quality evidence (Evans and Stanovich, 2013; Hodgkinson and Sadler-Smith, 2018; Kahneman, 2011; Kahneman and Klein, 2009; Luan, Reb, and Gigerenzer, 2019). Many businesses analyze big data to discover insights and patterns culled from mountains of data far beyond the capacity of any human mind.

In medicine, there is a growing emphasis on “evidence-based medicine”—basing diagnosis and treatment on rules derived from research. Emergency room physicians who treat stroke victims, for example, have a detailed set of guidelines for diagnosis and treatment that are periodically updated as new research comes in. Some scholars have argued that the same idea can also work for managers (Barends and Rousseau, 2018; Martelli and Hayirli, 2018; Pfeffer and Sutton, 2006, 2011), though evidence for the benefits of evidence-based management is still sketchy (Reay, Berta, and Kohn, 2017). Pfeffer and Sutton (2011) cite research showing that incentive pay for teachers is a bad idea but teams work better with stable membership as examples of findings that could help managers make better decisions. Tourish (2019) counters that managers hoping to learn from published research will find that most of it is trivial, unreadable, and disconnected from practice.

The bottom line is that Type I intuitive and Type II reflective thinking are both powerful and vital tools for managers and leaders. Each has advantages and disadvantages compared to the other. The key is knowing how and when to use each. Leaders go astray when their knowledge and judgment are inadequate to deal with the complex and elusive problems they face. The quality of their judgments depends on the information at hand, their mental maps, and how well they have learned to use them. Good maps align with the terrain and provide enough detail to keep you on course. If you’re trying to find your

way around Beijing, a map of Chicago won't help much. In the same way, different circumstances require different approaches.

Even with the right map, getting around will be slow and awkward if you have to stop and study at every intersection. The ultimate goal is fluid expertise, the sort of know-how that lets you think on the fly and navigate organizations as easily as you drive on a familiar route. You can make decisions quickly and automatically because you know at a glance where you are and what you need to do next.

There is no shortcut to developing this kind of expertise. It takes effort, time, practice, and feedback. Some of the effort has to go into learning frames and the ideas behind them. Equally important is putting the ideas to use. Experience, one often hears, is the best teacher, but that is true only if one learns from it. McCall, Lombardo, and Morrison (1988, p. 122) found that a distinguishing quality among successful executives was that they were great learners, displaying an “extraordinary tenacity in extracting something worthwhile from their experience and in seeking experiences rich in opportunities for growth.”

## Reframing

Frames define the questions we ask and solutions we consider (Berger, 2014). John Dewey defined freedom as the power to choose among known alternatives. In *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu made a similar point 2,500 years ago: “Many options bring victory, few options bring defeat, no options at all spell disaster” (Sun, 2012). When managers don't see options, they make mistakes but often fail to understand why.

Take a simple question: “What is the sum of 5 plus 5?” The only right answer is “10.” Ask a different way, “What two numbers add up to ten?” Now the number of solutions is infinite (once you include fractions and negative numbers). The two questions differ in how they are framed. Albert Einstein once observed: “If I had a problem to solve and my whole life depended on the solution, I would spend the first fifty-five minutes determining the question to ask, for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in five minutes” (Seelig, 2015, p. 19).

Asking the right question helps to break frames. Why do that? A news story from the summer of 2007 illustrates. Imagine yourself among a group of friends enjoying dinner on the patio of a Washington, D.C., home. An armed, hooded intruder suddenly appears and points a gun at the head of a 14-year-old guest. “Give me your money,” he says, “or I'll start shooting.” If you're at that table, what do you do? You could faint. Or freeze. You could try a heroic frontal attack. You might try to run. Or you could try to break the frame and redefine the situation by asking an unexpected question. That's exactly what Cristina “Cha Cha” Rowan did.

“We were just finishing dinner,” [she] told the man. “Why don’t you have a glass of wine with us?”

The intruder had a sip of their Chateau Malescot St-Exupéry and said, “Damn, that’s good wine.”

The girl’s father . . . told the intruder to take the whole glass, and Rowan offered him the bottle.

The robber, with his hood down, took another sip and a bite of Camembert cheese. He put the gun in his sweatpants . . .

“I think I may have come to the wrong house,” the intruder said before apologizing. “Can I get a hug?”

Rowan . . . stood up and wrapped her arms around the would-be robber. The other guests followed.

“Can we have a group hug?” the man asked. The five adults complied.

The man walked away a few moments later with a filled crystal wine glass, but nothing was stolen, and no one was hurt. Police were called to the scene and found the empty wine glass unbroken on the ground in an alley behind the house. (Hagey, 2007)

In one stroke, Cha Cha Rowan recast the situation from a robbery—“we might all be killed”—to a social occasion—“let’s offer our guest some wine and include him in our party.” Like her, artistic managers frame and reframe experience fluidly, sometimes with extraordinary results. A critic once commented to Cézanne, “That doesn’t look anything like a sunset.” Pondering his painting, Cézanne responded, “Then you don’t see sunsets the way I do.” The critic tacitly assumed that his was the correct way to see sunsets. Like Cézanne and Rowan, leaders have to find ways of asking the right question to shift points of view when needed. This is not easy, which is why “most of us passively accept decision problems as they are framed, and therefore rarely have an opportunity to discover the extent to which our preferences are *frame-bound* rather than *reality-bound*” (Kahneman, 2011, p. 367).

Caldicott (2014) sees reframing as vital for leadership:

One distinguishing difference between leaders that succeed at driving collaboration and innovation versus those that fail is their ability to grasp complexity. This skill set involves framing difficult concepts quickly, synthesizing data in a way that drives new insight, and building teams that can generate future scenarios different from the world they see today.

A growing body of psychological research shows that reframing can improve performance across a range of tasks. Autin and Croizet (2012) gave students a difficult task on which they all struggled. Some students were taught to reframe the struggle as a normal sign of learning. That intervention increased confidence, working memory, and reading comprehension on subsequent tasks. Jamieson and others (2010) found that they could improve scores on the Graduate Record Exam by reframing anxiety as an aid to performance. The old song lyric, “accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative,” is powerful advice.

Like maps, frames are both windows on a terrain and tools for navigating its contours. Every tool has distinctive strengths and limitations. The right tool makes a job easier; the wrong one gets in the way. Tools thus become useful only when a situation is sized up accurately. Furthermore, one or two tools may suffice for simple jobs but not for more complex undertakings. Managers who master the hammer and expect all problems to behave like nails find life at work confusing and frustrating. The wise manager, like a skilled carpenter, wants a diverse collection of high-quality implements at hand. Experienced managers also understand the difference between possessing a tool and knowing when and how to use it. Only experience and practice foster the skill and wisdom to take stock of a situation and use suitable tools with confidence and skill.

### **The Four Frames**

Only in the past 100 years or so have social scientists devoted much time or attention to developing ideas about how organizations work, how they should work, or why they often fail. In the social sciences, several major schools of thought have evolved. Each has its own concepts, assumptions, and evidence espousing a particular view of how to bring social collectives under control. Each tradition claims a scientific foundation. But a theory can easily become a theology that preaches a single, parochial scripture. Modern managers must sort through a cacophony of voices and visions for help.

Sifting through competing voices is one of our goals in this book. We are not seeking or advocating the one best way. Rather, we consolidate major schools of organizational thought and research into a comprehensive framework encompassing four perspectives. Our goal is usable knowledge. We have sought ideas powerful enough to capture the subtlety and complexity of life in organizations yet simple enough to be useful. Our distillation has drawn much from the social sciences—particularly sociology, psychology, political science, and anthropology. Thousands of managers and scores of organizations have helped us sift through social science research to identify ideas that work in practice. We have sorted insights from both research and practice into four major frames—structural, human

resource, political, and symbolic (Bolman and Deal, 1984). Each is used by academics and practitioners alike and can be found, usually independently, on the shelves of libraries and bookstores.

#### Four Frames: As Near as Your Local Bookstore

Imagine a harried executive browsing online or at her local bookseller on a brisk winter day in 2021. She worries about her company's flagging performance and wonders if her own job might soon disappear. She spots the gray cover of *[Re]Creating the Organization You Really Want: Leadership and Organization Design for Sustainable Excellence*.<sup>2</sup> Flipping through the table of contents, she notes topics like "Compelling Directive," "Focused Strategy," and "Comprehensive Scorecard." She is drawn to phrases such as "Leaders today face many challenges that require the design or redesign of organizational structures, systems, and processes to achieve and sustain high performance." (p. 35). "This stuff may be good," the executive tells herself, "but it seems a little dry."

Next, she finds *Lead with LUV: A Different Way to Create Real Success*.<sup>3</sup> Glancing inside, she reads,

Many of our officers handwrite several thousand notes each year. Besides being loving, we know this is meaningful to our People because we hear from them if we miss something significant in their lives like the high school graduation of one of their kids. We just believe in accentuating the positive and celebrating People's successes. (p. 7)

"Sounds nice," she mumbles, "but a little too touchy-feely. Let's look for something more down to earth."

Continuing her search, she looks at *Power: Why Some People Have It and Others Don't*.<sup>4</sup> She reads, "You can compete and triumph in organizations of all types . . . if you understand the principles of power and are willing to use them. Your task is to know how to prevail in the political battles you will face" (p. 5). She wonders, "Does it really all come down to politics? It seems so cynical and scheming. How about something more uplifting?"

She spots *Tribal Leadership: Leveraging Natural Groups to Build a Thriving Organization*.<sup>5</sup> She ponders its message: "Tribal leaders focus their efforts on building the tribe, or, more precisely, upgrading the tribal culture. If they are successful, the tribe recognizes them as leaders, giving them top effort, cult-like loyalty, and a track record of success" (p. 4). "Fascinating," she concludes, "but maybe a little too primitive and nebulous for modern organizations."

In her book excursion, our worried executive has rediscovered the four perspectives at the heart of this book. Four distinct metaphors capture the essence of each of the books she examined: organizations as factories, families, jungles, and temples or carnivals. But she leaves more confused than ever. Some titles seemed to register with her way of thinking. Others fell outside her zone of comfort. Where should she go next? How can she put it all together?

### Factories

The first book she stumbled across, *[Re]Create the Organization You Really Want*, provides counsel on finding the right structure for your situation. It extends a long tradition that treats an organization as a factory. Drawing from sociology, economics, and management science, the structural frame depicts a rational world and emphasizes organizational architecture, including planning, strategy, goals, structure, technology, specialized roles, coordination, formal relationships, metrics, and rubrics. Structures—commonly depicted by organization charts—are designed to fit an organization’s environment and technology. Organizations allocate responsibilities (“division of labor”). They then create rules, policies, procedures, systems, and hierarchies to coordinate diverse activities into a unified effort. Objective indicators measure progress. Problems arise when structure doesn’t line up well with current circumstances or when performance sags. At that point, some form of reorganization or redesign is needed to remedy the mismatch.

### Families

Our executive next encountered *Lead with LUV: A Different Way to Create Real Success*, with its focus on people and relationships. The human resource perspective, rooted in psychology, sees an organization as an extended family, made up of individuals with needs, feelings, prejudices, skills, and limitations. From a human resource view, the key challenge is to tailor organizations to individuals—finding ways for people to get the job done while feeling good about themselves and their work. When basic needs for security and trust are unfulfilled, people withdraw from an organization, join unions, go on strike, sabotage, or quit. Psychologically healthy organizations provide adequate wages and benefits and make sure employees have the skills, support, and resources to do their jobs.

### Jungles

*Power: Why Some People Have It and Others Don’t* is a contemporary application of the political frame, rooted in the work of political scientists. This view sees organizations as

arenas, contests, or jungles. Parochial interests compete for power and scarce resources. Conflict is rampant because of enduring differences in needs, perspectives, and lifestyles among contending individuals and groups. Bargaining, negotiation, coercion, and compromise are a normal part of everyday life. Coalitions form around specific interests and change as issues come and go. Problems arise when power is concentrated in the wrong places or is so widely dispersed that nothing gets done. Solutions arise from political skill and acumen—as Machiavelli suggested five hundred years ago in *The Prince* (1961).

### Temples and Carnivals

Finally, our executive encountered *Tribal Leadership: Leveraging Natural Groups to Build a Thriving Organization*, with its emphasis on culture, symbols, and spirit as keys to organizational success. The symbolic lens, drawing on social and cultural anthropology, treats organizations as temples, tribes, theaters, or carnivals. It stresses meaning, tempers the assumptions of rationality prominent in other frames and depicts organizations as cultures, propelled by rituals, ceremonies, stories, heroes, history, and myths rather than by rules, policies, and managerial authority. Organization is also theater: actors play their roles in an ongoing drama while audiences form impressions from what they see on stage. Problems arise when actors blow their parts, symbols lose their meaning, or ceremonies and rituals lose their potency. We rekindle the expressive or spiritual side of organizations through the use of symbol, myth, and magic.

### The FBI and the CIA: A Four-Frame Story

A saga of two squabbling agencies illustrates how the four frames provide different views of the same situation. Riebling (2002) documents the long history of head-butting between America's two major intelligence agencies, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Both are charged with combating espionage and terrorism, but the FBI operates primarily within the United States, while the CIA's mandate covers everywhere else. Structurally, the two agencies have always been disconnected. The FBI is housed in the Department of Justice and reports to the attorney general. The CIA reported through the Director of Central Intelligence to the president until 2004, when reorganization put it under a new director of national intelligence.

At a number of major junctures in American history (including the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the Iran-Contra scandal, and the 9/11 terrorist attacks), each agency held pieces of a larger puzzle, but coordination snafus made it hard for anyone to see all the pieces, much less put them together. After 9/11, both agencies came under heavy criticism, and each blamed the other for lapses. The FBI complained that the CIA had failed

to tell them that two of the terrorists had entered the United States and had been living for two years in California (Seper, 2005). But an internal Justice Department investigation concluded that the FBI didn't do very well with the information it did have. Key signals were never "documented by the bureau or placed in any system from which they could be retrieved by agents investigating terrorist threats" (Seper, 2005, p. 1).

Structural barriers between the FBI and the CIA were exacerbated by the enmity between the two agencies' patron saints, J. Edgar Hoover and "Wild Bill" Donovan. When Hoover first became FBI director in the 1920s, he reported to Donovan, who didn't trust him and tried unsuccessfully to get him fired. When World War II broke out, Hoover lobbied to get the FBI identified as the nation's worldwide intelligence agency. He fumed when President Franklin D. Roosevelt instead created a new agency and made Donovan its director. As often happens, cooperation between two units was chronically hampered by a rocky personal relationship between two top dogs who never liked one another.

Politically, the relationship between the FBI and CIA was born in turf conflict because of Roosevelt's decision to give responsibility for foreign intelligence to Donovan instead of to Hoover. The friction persisted over the decades as both agencies vied for turf and funding from Congress and the White House.

Symbolically, different histories and missions led to very distinct cultures. The FBI, which built its image with the dramatic capture or killing of notorious gang leaders, bank robbers, and foreign agents, liked to generate headlines by pouncing on suspects quickly and publicly. The CIA preferred to work in the shadows, believing that patience and secrecy were vital to its task of collecting intelligence and rooting out foreign spies.

Senior U.S. officials have known for years that tension between the FBI and CIA damages U.S. security. But most initiatives to improve the relationship have been partial and ephemeral, falling well short of addressing the full range of issues. Ten years after 9/11, Graff (2012) concluded that, "Problems persist and will probably never be fully overcome."

## **Multi-Frame Thinking**

The overview of the four-frame model in Exhibit 1.2 shows that each of the frames has its own image of reality. You may be drawn to some and put off by others. One perspective may seem straightforward, while another seems puzzling or alien. But learning to apply all four deepens your appreciation and understanding of organizations. When Galileo devised the first telescope, he found that each lens he added contributed to a more accurate image of the heavens. Successful managers take advantage of the same truth. Like physicians, they reframe, consciously or intuitively, until they understand the situation at hand. They use more than one lens to develop a diagnosis of what they are up against and how to move forward.

**Exhibit 1.2.**  
**Overview of the Four-Frame Model.**

	Frame			
	Structural	Human Resource	Political	Symbolic
Metaphor for organization	Factory or machine	Family	Jungle	Carnival, temple, theater
Supporting disciplines	Sociology, management science, economics	Psychology	Political science	Anthropology, dramaturgy, institutional theory
Central concepts	Roles, goals, strategies, policies, technology, environment	Needs, skills, relationships	Power, conflict, competition, politics	Culture, myth, meaning, metaphor, ritual, ceremony, stories, heroes
Image of leadership	Social architecture	Empowerment	Advocacy and political savvy	Inspiration
Basic leadership challenge	Attune structure to task, technology, environment	Align organizational and human needs	Develop agenda and power base	Create faith, belief, beauty, meaning

This claim about the advantages of multiple perspectives has stimulated a growing body of research. Dunford and Palmer (1995) discovered that management courses teaching multiple frames had significant positive effects over both the short and long term—in fact, 98 percent of their respondents rated reframing as helpful or very helpful, and about 90 percent felt it gave them a competitive advantage. Other studies have shown that the ability to use multiple frames is associated with greater effectiveness for managers and leaders (Bensimon, 1989, 1990; Birnbaum, 1992; Bolman and Deal, 1991, 1992a, 1992b; Heimovics, Herman, and Jurkiewicz Coughlin, 1993, 1995; Wimpelberg, 1987). Similarly, Pitt and Tepper (2012) found that double-majoring helped college students develop both creative and integrative thinking. As one student put it, “I’m never stuck in one frame of mind because

I'm always switching back and forth between the two" (p. 40). Multi-frame thinking requires moving beyond narrow, mechanical approaches for understanding organizations. We cannot count the number of times managers have told us that they handled some problem the "only way" it could be done. That was United Airline's initial defense in April, 2017, when video of a bloodied doctor being dragged off a plane went viral. United's CEO wrote that "our agents were left with no choice" because the 69-year-old physician had refused to give up his seat. After a few days in public relations hell, United announced that the only choice was a bad one, and they would never do it again. It may be comforting to think that failure was unavoidable and we did all we could. But it can be liberating to realize there is always more than one way to respond to any problem or dilemma. Those who master reframing report a liberating sense of choice and power.

Akira Kurosawa's classic film *Rashomon* recounts the same event through the eyes of several witnesses. Each tells a different story. Similarly, organizations are filled with people who have divergent interpretations of what is and should be happening. Each version contains glimmers of truth, but each is a product of the prejudices and blind spots of its maker. Each frame tells a different story (Gottschall, 2012), but no single story is comprehensive enough to make an organization fully understandable or manageable. Effective managers need frames to generate multiple stories, the skill to sort through the alternatives, and the wisdom to match the right story to the situation.<sup>6</sup>

Lack of imagination—Langer (1989) calls it "mindlessness"—is a major cause of the shortfall between the reach and the grasp of so many organizations—the empty chasm between noble aspirations and disappointing results. The gap is painfully acute in a world where organizations dominate so much of our lives. Taleb (2007) depicts events like the Covid-19 pandemic or the 9/11 attacks as "black swans"—novel events that are unexpected because we have never seen them before. If every swan we've observed is white, we expect the same in the future. But fateful, make-or-break events are more likely to fall outside previous experience and catch us flat-footed, as was true of the 2020 pandemic. Imagination and mindfulness offer our best chance for being ready when a black swan sails into view, and multi-frame thinking is a powerful stimulus to the broad, creative mind-set imagination requires.

## **Engineering and Art**

Exhibit 1.3 presents two contrasting approaches to management and leadership. One is a rational-technical mind-set emphasizing certainty and control. The other is an expressive, artistic conception encouraging flexibility, creativity, and interpretation. The first portrays managers as technicians; the second sees them as artists.

**Exhibit 1.3.**  
**Expanding Managerial Thinking.**

<b>How Managers Often Think</b>	<b>How Managers Might Think</b>
Oversimplify reality (for example, blame problems on individuals' flaws and errors)	Think holistically about a full range of significant issues: people, power, structure, and symbols
Regardless of the problems at hand, rely on facts, logic, restructuring	Use feeling and intuition as well as logic, bargaining as well as training, celebration as well as reorganization
Cling to certainty, rationality, and control while fearing ambiguity, paradox, and "going with the flow"	Develop creativity, risk taking, and playfulness in response to life's dilemmas and paradoxes, and focus as much on finding the right question as the right answer, on finding meaning and faith amid clutter and confusion
Rely on the "one right answer" and the "one best way"	Show passionate, unwavering commitment to principle, combined with flexibility in understanding and responding to events

Artists interpret experience and express it in forms that can be felt, understood, and appreciated by others. Art embraces emotion, subtlety, ambiguity. An artist reframes the world so others can see new possibilities. Modern organizations often rely too much on engineering and too little on art in searching for quality, commitment, and creativity. Art is not a replacement for engineering but an enhancement and a powerful partner. Artistic leaders and managers help us look and probe beyond today's reality to new forms that release untapped individual energies and improve collective performance. The leader as artist relies on abstract images as well as memos, poetry as well as policy, reflection as well as command, and reframing as well as refitting.

**CONCLUSION**

As organizations have become pervasive and dominant, they have also become harder to understand and manage. The result is that managers are often nearly as clueless as their subordinates (the Dillberts of the world) think they are. The consequences of myopic management

and leadership show up every day, sometimes in small and subtle ways, sometimes in large and blatant catastrophes. Think of the enormous differences in levels of suffering and death between the relatively few countries that contained the Covid-19 pandemic effectively, and the many that did not. Our basic premise is that a primary cause of managerial failure is faulty thinking rooted in inadequate ideas and truncated possibilities. Managers and those who try to help them too often rely on narrow models that capture only part of organizational life.

Learning multiple perspectives, or frames, is a defense against thrashing around without a clue about what you are doing or why. Frames serve multiple functions. They are sources of new questions, filters for sorting essence from trivia, maps that aid navigation, and tools for solving problems and getting things done. This book is organized around four frames rooted in both managerial wisdom and social science knowledge. The structural approach focuses on the architecture of organization—the design of units and subunits, rules and roles, goals and policies. The human resource lens emphasizes understanding people—their strengths and foibles, reason and emotion, desires and fears. The political view sees organizations as competitive arenas of scarce resources, competing interests, and struggles for power and advantage. Finally, the symbolic frame focuses on issues of meaning and faith. It puts ritual, ceremony, story, play, and culture at the heart of organizational life.

Each of the frames is powerful and coherent. Collectively, they make it possible to reframe, looking at the same thing from multiple lenses or points of view. When the world seems hopelessly confusing and nothing is working, reframing is a powerful tool for gaining clarity, regaining balance, generating new questions, and finding options that actually make a difference.

## Notes

1. Among the possible ways of talking about frames are schemata or schema theory (Fiedler, 1982; Fiske and Dyer, 1985; Lord and Foti, 1986), representations (Frensch and Sternberg, 1991; Lesgold and Lajoie, 1991; Voss, Wolfe, Lawrence, and Engle, 1991), cognitive maps (Weick and Bougon, 1986), paradigms (Gregory, 1983; Kuhn, 1970), social categorizations (Cronshaw, 1987), implicit theories (Brief and Downey, 1983), mental models (Senge, 1990), definitions of the situation, and root metaphors.
2. J. R. Latham, *[Re]Create the Organization You Really Want!: Leadership and Organization Design for Sustainable Excellence* (Colorado Springs, CO: Organization Design Studio, Ltd., 2016).
3. Ken Blanchard and Colleen Barrett, *Lead with LUV: A Different Way to Create Real Success* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: FT Press, 2010), p. 7.
4. Jeffrey Pfeffer, *Power: Why Some People Have It—and Others Don't* (New York: Harper Business, 2010), p. 5.

5. Dave Logan, John King, and Halee Fischer-Wright, *Tribal Leadership: Leveraging Natural Groups to Build a Thriving Organization* (New York: Harper, 2011), p. 4.
6. A number of scholars (including Allison, 1971; Bergquist, 1992; Birnbaum, 1988; Elmore, 1978; Morgan, 1986; Perrow, 1986; Quinn, 1988; Quinn, Faerman, Thompson, and McGrath, 1996; and Scott, 1981) have made similar arguments for multi-frame approaches to groups and social collectives.