chapter
1

Introduction
The Power of Reframing

Like other iconic tech entrepreneurs including Steve Jobs or Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk was often the smartest guy in the room, but rarely the nicest. Brilliant at analyzing and solving tough technical problems, he thrived on levels of risk that would paralyze most humans. Critical to his achievements as well as his missteps was his distinct and unconventional way of framing leadership and management. Musk was driven by an "impulse to aim high, act impulsively, take wild risks, and accomplish amazing things—but also to blow things up and leave smoldering debris in his wake" (Isaacson, 2023). That led the world's richest man into a fateful partnership with newly re-elected President Donald Trump in 2025.

Musk had bankrolled Trump's re-election bid to the tune of $291 million, far more than any other donor. During the campaign, he made an audacious promise—he could save at least $2 trillion in federal spending if Trump were elected. Trump put Musk at the head of the newly created Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). Musk went to work, firing thousands of employees and disrupting almost every federal agency. After a very odd White House Press conference in which Trump was an onlooker and Elon did most of the talking (occasionally upstaged by his four-year-old son), some in the media speculated that Musk had become the power behind Trump's throne. *Time* magazine published a provocative cover showing Musk looking very presidential behind Trump's Resolute Desk. But the partnership between two mercurial, thin-skinned, limelight-craving billionaires was not built to last. Musk's efforts at DOGE produced more disruption than savings (Picchi, 2025), and over time Elon became a political liability for the president. By May, the word was out that Musk would be leaving Washington to return to his businesses. June brought a soap-opera climax that was stunning in its ferocity. In a cat fight on social media, Musk criticized the president's "big, beautiful" spending bill as a "massive, outrageous, pork-filled disgusting abomination," took credit for Trump's election, supported a call for Trump's impeachment, and said that the files on child sex offender Jeffrey Epstein were still under wraps because they implicated Donald Trump. Trump said that Musk was mad about losing tax credits for electric vehicles and that he'd asked Musk to leave because he was "wearing thin" and had gone "CRAZY!" Trump twisted the knife by suggesting that the best way to save billions of dollars would be to cancel all of Musk's contracts with the government.

Like a twenty-first-century Icarus, Musk regularly courted disaster by flying dangerously close to the sun. With Donald Trump, he flew too close and crashed painfully. Musk's foray into government damaged his reputation and dented his personal wealth. He alienated much of the demographic that buys electric vehicles, which led to a global decline in Tesla sales. He antagonized the man who had been his "first buddy" only months earlier, severing his relationship with a president with whom he shared "go-for-jugular instincts and willingness to scorch the earth to achieve even short-term advantage" (Broadwater, 2025). Musk fell more than 90 percent short of his initial estimate of a $2 trillion reduction in government spending. As he left Washington under a cloud of acrimony, he had reduced his savings estimate to $150 billion, and independent analysts doubted even that diminished estimate (Picchi, 2025). Some estimated that Musk's efforts would ultimately generate more costs than savings, more smoldering debris than government efficiency. What went wrong?

As brilliant as he was, Musk was clueless about what he was getting himself into, one more victim of a pervasive affliction of even the best and brightest leaders. The cause of cluelessness is simple—a blinkered understanding of organizations and leadership. As with Elon Musk, cluelessness often leads to personal and institutional disaster. Musk was a brilliant technical visionary and entrepreneur, well equipped to lead Tesla and SpaceX to business success. His mistake was believing that he was equally ready to cope with political and bureaucratic complexity at the scale of the United States government.

Management history is replete with examples of cluelessness felling great leaders and enterprises. Take Sears, which dominated American retailing for most of the twentieth century before falling from the top spot in the 1990s. Founded in 1892, Sears peaked around 1962, the year that Sam Walton opened the first Walmart store in tiny Rogers, Arkansas. If the squadrons of executives in the Sears Tower in Chicago had been paying attention when Walmart kept adding stores, they might have realized that something new and powerful was coming their way. But their size and success made it easy to believe that they knew more about retail than anyone else. Victims of "collective myopia" (Boakye, Siaw, and Sarpong, 2022), they missed both of the two great retailing waves that would soon engulf them.

Sears could have been Walmart. It had more stores than anyone else in America in the late twentieth century. It was Amazon long before there was an Amazon. It began selling direct to consumers from its catalog in the 1890s, decades before opening its first brick-and-mortar store in the 1920s. The catalog business peaked at $4 billion a year in the 1980s before becoming unprofitable, and Sears pulled the plug in 1994, the same year that Jeff Bezos founded Amazon. Sears tried to get into e-commerce a few years later, but arrived late when competitors were too far down the track for Sears to catch up.

Despite an abundance of talent and experience, Sears' leadership was at sea. They misread a changing retail scene and repeatedly missed opportunities. You're clueless when you don't know what's going on but think you do. You don't see better choices even if they are right at hand. So you continue down the wrong road, hoping in vain that it will take you where you want to go. Your efforts to make things better make them worse, which may be obvious to others but not to you. Eddie Lampert had made billions as an investor and was viewed as one of the smartest people on Wall Street until he bought Sears and ran it into the ground, presiding over billions of dollars of value destruction (Hartung, 2016). The same fate could eventually come to firms that seem now impregnable—like Walmart and Amazon, the world's two largest employers in 2025—if their leadership falls victim to the same arrogance and cluelessness that killed Sears. Amazon founder Jeff Bezos understands this, and told a group of Amazon associates in 2018, "I predict one day Amazon will fail." General Electric, the only American corporation among the top 25 at both the beginning and end of the twentieth century, went into a tailspin after legendary CEO Jack Welch retired in 2001. The company has yet to recover (Gelles, 2022).

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 averting the curse of getting lost at sea without maps or landmarks. 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—structural, human resource, political, and symbolic—each with its own logic and power. Together, they help to paint a more comprehensive picture of what's going on and what to do.

VIRTUES AND DRAWBACKS OF ORGANIZED ACTIVITY

Organizations today are powerful and ubiquitous, but that was not always the case. Before the nineteenth century, organizations were mostly "small, weak and rare" (Haveman, 2022, p. x). 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 much human activity more formalized than it once was. We work for business, government, or non-profits. 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, services, health care, and almost everything else that we use or consume.

All too often, however, we experience the darker side. Organizations frustrate and exploit people. They leave employees feeling 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 sometimes became death traps for their residents. If we believe mission statements and public pronouncements, almost every organization aims to nurture its employees and delight its customers. But many miss the mark.

Schools are blamed for miseducating, universities are said to close more minds than they open, and government is criticized for corruption, waste, 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 dump chemicals, oil, toxic gas, and radioactive materials into the air and water. Corporate greed, incompetence, and insensitivity wreak havoc on communities and individuals. The bottom line: We are hard-pressed to manage organizations so that their virtues exceed their vices. The big question is: 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 stupidly 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 tech entrepreneurs Travis Kalanick at Uber, Elizabeth Holmes at Theranos, and Elon Musk at DOGE. But on the whole, the best and brightest have no more psychological problems than anyone 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 realize that we're seeing the wrong picture, we won't understand why we're not getting the results we want. Instead, we insist we're right and blame someone else instead of recognizing that we're off track.

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, then lock ourselves in and toss 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. Most probably don't realize it, because Kruger and Dunning (1999) found that the less competent people are, the more they overestimate their performance (partly because they don't know what good performance looks like).
- 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 2024, almost 700 companies went under in a year of economic expansion and a rising stock market. Among the best known were Red Lobster, Spirit Airlines, True Value Hardware, and Tupperware.

It's a small wonder that so many organizational veterans nod in rueful 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 sustained and noble effort to improve organizations despite our limited ability to understand them. Legions of managers report to work each day, hoping to make things better. Authors and consultants spin out a torrent of promising new ideas and solutions. Policymakers develop a raft 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. Most of these modern shamans have a specialty: strategy, technology, quality, finance, marketing, mergers, human resource management, executive search, outplacement, coaching, organization development, and more. For every managerial challenge, there is a consultant willing to offer assistance—for a price.

For all their sage advice and remarkable fees, consultants often make little dent in persistent problems plaguing organizations. Mazzucato and Collington (2023) call consultants' work "The Big Con," arguing that they "earn incomes that far exceed the actual value" they provide (p. 3), but they know how "to create an impression of value." If results are poor, "it is their clients' employees and citizens that most often end up taking the risks of consultancy failure" (p. 6). McKinsey & Co., "the high priest of high-level consulting" (Byrne, 2002, p. 66), worked so closely with Enron that McKinsey's 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 get the solution right, and, even if they do, a sizable body of research records a continuing saga of perverse ways that 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 US 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 long-standing 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 Valve (the non-hierarchical video game powerhouse that shuns job titles and organization charts), Wegmans (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 develop and maintain 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, a talented Volvo executive, 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, mindsets, schema, paradigms, heuristics, and cognitive lenses, to name a few.[1, 2]

Following the work of Goffman, Dewey, and others, we have chosen the label *frames,* a term which has received increasing attention in organizational research as scholars give more attention to how managers make sense of a complicated and turbulent world (see, for example, Cornelissen and Werner, 2014; Foss and Weber, 2016; Gray, Purdy, and Ansari, 2015; Hahn et al., 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, and perspectives, because all these images capture part of the idea we want to convey. Such maps make it possible to register and assemble key bits of perceptual data into a coherent pattern—an image of what's happening.

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.

When framing works fluidly, it takes the form of "rapid cognition," the process that Gladwell (2005) examines in his bestseller *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:

1. It is nonconscious; you can do it without thinking about it and without knowing how you did it.
2. It is very fast; the process often occurs almost instantly.
3. It is holistic; you see a coherent, meaningful pattern.
4. 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 and works best for individuals who have developed a deep understanding of a particular domain through experience, practice, and feedback (Ericsson, 2005; Kahneman and Klein, 2009). Experts usually know when they don't know, but non-experts they think they know when they don't and often have high confidence in bad judgments (Kahneman and Klein, 2009).

Research on human thinking has led to the identification of two distinct modes of cognition that operate in parallel: Type I intuitive and Type II analytic summarized in Exhibit 1.1. Intuition is faster, requires less cognitive effort, and produces holistic judgments. It works best for experts dealing with fluid, messy problems, particularly if time is short. Analytic thinking is slower and requires more effort 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). Businesses analyze big data to discover insights and patterns culled from mountains of data far beyond the capacity of any human mind.

Exhibit 1.1.
Characteristics of Two Types of Human Thinking.

Type I (Intuitive)	Type II (Deliberate)
Fast	Slow
Non-conscious	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 evidence

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 which 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 sparse (Reay, Berta, and Kohn, 2017). Pfeffer and Sutton (2011) cite research showing that stable membership helps teams work better, and that incentive pay for teachers is a bad idea 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. Luan, Reb, and Gigerenzer (2019) offer an "ecological rationality" perspective, arguing that fast and frugal heuristics can produce better and cheaper outcomes than more elaborate analytic approaches when dealing with messy problems and high uncertainty.

Leaders go astray when their knowledge and judgment are inadequate to 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. 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 the 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 successful executives were typically great learners who displayed 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.

Albert Einstein once observed: "If I had a problem to solve and my whole life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 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 reframe. 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 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 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 et al. (2010) found that they could improve scores on the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) 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. Fligstein, Stuart Brundage, and Schultz (2017) argue that in 2008, the Federal Reserve was too slow to recognize the impending collapse of the financial system because regulators were using a frame that focused on the wrong story. They relied on concepts from macroeconomics that obscured "the links between foreclosures in the housing market, the financial instruments used to package the mortgages into securities, and the threats to the larger economy" (p. 779).

The right tools help to size up a situation and to deal with the challenges it presents. 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. Wise managers, like skilled carpenters, want at hand a diverse collection of high-quality implements. They 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 leading to 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 a goal of 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 2025. She worries about her company's flagging performance and wonders if her own job might soon disappear. She spots the blue cover of Eli Goldratt's *The Goal: A Process of Ongoing Improvement*. She reads that it's a longtime management bestseller. Flipping through the pages, she runs into phrases like theory of constraints, throughput, inventory, and operational expense. "This stuff might be good if I ran a factory," the executive tells herself, "but it seems a little dry."

Next, she finds *Lead with LUV: A Different Way to Create Real Success*. 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" (Blanchard and Barrett, 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 scans *Power: Why Some People Have It—and Others Don't*. 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" (Pfeffer, 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*. 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" (Logan, King, and Fischer-Wright, p. 4). "Fascinating," she concludes, "but maybe a little too primitive. I'm not looking for a cult."

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 as confused as 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, *The Goal: A Process of Ongoing Improvement,* provides counsel on analyzing your production processes to reduce costs and improve efficiencies. 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 align with current circumstances. 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 malinger, join unions, go on strike, sabotage, or quit. 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 theaters, temples, tribes, or carnivals. It stresses meaning, tempers assumptions of rationality, and depicts organizations as cultures, propelled more by rituals, ceremonies, stories, heroes, history, and myths 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 and the Central Intelligence Agency. 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 meant no one could see all the pieces to 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 US officials have known for years that tension between the FBI and CIA damages US 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."

Multiframe Thinking

An 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.

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 the short and long term. In fact, 98 percent of their respondents rated reframing as helpful or very helpful, and about

Exhibit 1.2.
Overview of the Four-Frame Model.

	Frame			
	Structural	**Human Resource**	**Political**	**Symbolic**
Organization metaphor	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

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 (2020) 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).

Multiframe 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 mistake, 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 sufficient. 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.[2]

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 habitually 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 multiframe thinking is a powerful stimulus to the broad, creative mindset imagination requires.

Engineering and Art

Exhibit 1.3 presents two contrasting approaches to management and leadership. One is a rational-technical mindset 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.

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.

Exhibit 1.3.
Expanding Managerial Thinking.

How Managers Often Think	How Managers Might Think
Oversimplify reality (e.g., 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 commitment to principle combined with flexibility in understanding and responding to events.

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 think they are. The consequences of myopic management and leadership show up every day, sometimes in small and subtle ways, sometimes in blatant catastrophes. A primary cause of managerial failure is faulty thinking rooted in pinched ideas and truncated possibilities. Managers and those who try to help them too often rely on narrow models that capture only one slice of organizational life.

Multiple frames are a defense against thrashing around without a clue about what you are doing or why. Frames serve many 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 people—their strengths and foibles, reason and emotion, desires and fears, and their relationships with systems. 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 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 et al., 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. A number of scholars (including Allison, 1971; Bergquist, 1992; Birnbaum, 1988; Elmore, 1978; Morgan, 1986; Perrow, 1986; Quinn, 1988; Quinn et al., 1996; and Scott, 1981) have made similar arguments for multiframe approaches to groups and social collectives.