"REFRAMING" YOUR APPROACH TO NEGOTIATIONS

by Allison Picard

As Adjunct Faculty for Chapman University, I teach all of the core courses for the degree in Organizational Leadership. One these courses uses the book Reframing Organizations (Bolman and Deal) which explores the concept of re-framing situations from multiple perspectives. The authors advance four “frames” or lenses through which people see the world and events. While these concepts apply to organizations in general, they also can function in, and affect, the labor relations arena. This paper will summarize Bolman and Deal’s “frames” and show how they are relevant in the negotiation environment.

The four frames the authors have developed are designed to allow managers or negotiators to see “what is really going on”. They are:

1) The Structural Frame - formal roles, division of labor
2) The Human Resources Frame - human needs
3) The Political Frame - power and conflict, resource allocation
4) The Symbolic Frame - values, culture, drama

Because organizations are made up of human beings, the authors issue a warning about matters that inhibit success. Since people are complex, the color of their individual “lenses” impacts how the frames theory interacts in any setting.

Organizational Inhibitors
Despite the use of a good problem-solving model, factors exist in organizations that make it difficult to reach positive outcomes. Bolman and Deal suggest that organizations, being comprised of people, can be:

- Complex: people are hard to predict and understand
- Surprising: human nature is unpredictable
- Deceptive: organizations can defy expectations and often cover up mistakes
- Ambiguous: information can be incomplete and interpreted in many ways.

People observe actions through the lens of their own personal experiences which are impacted by our culture, life experience, education, family backgrounds and many other factors. Using the wrong mental models or ones that are blurred by preconceptions, leads to misinterpretation of events, learning the wrong lessons and possibly drawing invalid conclusions.

Learning may also be inhibited in organizations because cause and effect are not always linked: you turn out a light but it goes off in another room and you may never see the result of your action. This happens with some regularity in the public sector where decisions can have unintended consequences.
Determining what is “really going on” requires looking through sophisticated “lenses”. Bolman and Deal contend that Western culture in general prefers a single theory or ideology and expects conformity. Japanese culture by contrast has four major religions (Confucianism, Shintoism, Buddhism and Taoism) each with very different histories and tenants. However, the Japanese feel no need to choose only one. Instead, they take advantage of the strengths of each for various occasions. This is precisely the message the authors intend to convey about how to utilize the “frames”.

**Structural Frame**

The structural frame emphasizes the importance of formal roles and relationships. Structures commonly depicted in organization charts are created to fit an organization’s environment and technology. Organizations allocate responsibilities to participants and create rules, policies and management hierarchies to coordinate diverse activities. Problems arise when the structure does not fit the situation. At that point, some form of reorganization is needed to create a re-match of the structure to the current environment. Bolman and Deal define the core assumptions of this frame as:

- Organizations exist primarily to accomplish established goals.
- For any organization, there is a structure appropriate to the goals, the environment, the technology and the participants.
- Organizations work most effectively when environmental turbulence and personal preferences of participants are constrained by norms of rationality.
- Specialization permits higher levels of individual expertise and performance.
- Coordination and control are best accomplished through the exercise of authority and impersonal rules.
- Structures can be systematically designed and implemented.
- Organizational problems usually reflect an inappropriate structure and can be resolved through redesign and reorganization.

In a negotiation setting, this frame is depicted in numerous examples. Both sides of the table (agency and union) come from organizations that have a structure unto themselves to achieve certain goals. How functional these structures are can impact the success of the process. Who speaks for the respective sides? Are they speaking with one voice? Are communications from persons within the organization sending a mixed message? An example of this is when elected officials or administrators comment on the process and undercut the agency negotiator. A disruption to the structured patterns of communication creates confusion.

Both sides have rules and regulations about how to do business that can either assist the process or get in the way. “Ground rules” are established during negotiations in an attempt to give structure to the discussions and maintain impartiality. Agencies have employer-employee relations policies designed to
provide an objective process and remove any appearance of bias or personal considerations. The section of this policy addressing the “appropriateness of bargaining units” contains defined criteria and requires a “community of interest” to insure a match to the organizational environment. The Myers-Milias-Brown Act and other bargaining statutes also reflect an ideal structure for the negotiation process that is meant to provide a framework for meaningful and fair discourse.

The structural frame is evident even in the physicality of the negotiations process. There are expectations about where meetings are held and where people sit in the room. How would it change the meeting dynamic if the agency team, instead of taking seats on one side of the table as usual, took seats interspersed with the union team? Would the union object? Such structural deviations can dramatically impact negotiations.

**Human Resource Frame**

The human resource frame exists because people inhabit organizations. Individuals have needs, feelings and prejudices. They have both skills and limitations. They have a great capacity to learn and often an even greater capacity to defend old attitudes and beliefs. From a human resources perspective, the key to effectiveness is to tailor organizations to people—to find an organizational form that will enable people to get the job done while feeling good about what they are doing. Bolman and Deal believe that problems arise in organizations when human needs are throttled. They define the core assumptions of this frame as follows:

- Organizations exist to serve human needs (and humans do not exist to serve organizational needs).
- Organizations and people need each other. Organizations need the ideas, energy and talent that people provide, while people need their careers, salaries and work opportunities that organizations provide.
- When the fit between the individual and the organization is poor, one or both will suffer: the individual will be exploited or will seek to exploit the organization, or both.
- When the fit is good between the individual and the organization, both benefit: people are able to do meaningful and satisfying work while providing the resources the organization needs to accomplish its mission.

The human resource frame can be seen in the most elemental function of bargaining which is to find a balance between meeting the needs of the workforce and of the organization (while dancing on the head of the pin known as “budget resources”). As a bargaining posture, agencies can have a built-in orientation about the workforce that is either positive or negative. Does the agency care about the employees and have a good faith interest in meeting their needs? Or is there a hostile, confrontational assumption that the workers are
lazy and out to “take” the agency? The same concept can be reversed from the union’s perspective. Does the union understand the context within which the agency is negotiating (environmentally) and appreciate the mutual need for a sustainable organization? Or does the union assume management is out to “get” the employees, so they want their “share” regardless of the implications?

The wide range of human expression seen at the table is especially interesting. Any labor relations professional will have observed the full range of human emotion at one time or another ranging from sincerity, cooperation, and trust to frustration, anger and bitterness. Other papers written for the CalPELRA certification provide explanations for why people behave as they do and give insights about how to successfully interpret this behavior and determine an appropriate response. Suffice it to say, it is well worth understanding the human needs of not only the employees as a group, but of their representatives.

Having this frame of reference in mind can impact how an agency prepares a proposal as well as how the meeting is conducted. Making the effort to understand employees’ needs and, where possible, meet them, leads to a healthy relationship. A recent example of this was a union proposal to increase standby pay significantly. The agency had no interest in doing so because it would apply to a large number of employees and had a large potential cost. By asking questions about why this was an important proposal, it was learned that call back time was the real problem -- and only for one classification. This led to finding a solution that responded to the employee’s needs and also met the agency’s need to limit the financial impact and maintain operational effectiveness.

More than any other factor within the human resource frame, it has been my experience that simple courtesy is a prerequisite to successful negotiations. Treating people with respect and communicating the value of their role in the process, even if we have different points of view, is vital. This seems obvious, but I have observed encounters where these simple rules were not followed, and the entire process became unnecessarily strained. There will always be difficult people who do not act professionally. However, unflagging civility deflates these efforts because it exposes this tactic for what it is, and ultimately, the “high road” has a much better view.

**Political Frame**

The political frame views organizations as arenas of scarce resources where power and influence are constantly affecting the allocations of resources among individuals or groups. Conflict is expected because of differing needs, perspectives and lifestyles among the individuals and groups. Bargaining, coercion and compromise are all part of everyday organizational life. Coalitions form around specific interests and may change as issues come and go. Problems may arise because power is unevenly distributed or is so broadly
dispersed that it is difficult to get anything done. Solutions are developed through political skill and acumen much as Machiavelli suggested centuries ago.

The political frame views organizations as “alive and screaming” political arenas that house a complex variety of individuals and interest groups. The core assumptions of this frame are:

- Most of the important decisions in organizations involve the allocation of scarce resources.
- Organizations are coalitions composed of a number of individuals and interest groups (e.g. hierarchical levels, departments, professional groups, ethnic groups.)
- Individuals and interest groups differ in their values, preferences, beliefs, information and perceptions of reality. Such differences are usually enduring and change slowly if at all.
- Organizational goals and decisions emerge from ongoing processes of bargaining, negotiating, and jockeying for position among individual groups.
- Because of scarce resources and enduring differences, power and conflict are central features of organizational life.

This frame also provides an elemental definition of the negotiations process: the allocation of scarce resources. There are numerous examples of politics in play through this process including the dynamics within each organization. Agencies typically have political considerations such as an elected Board of Supervisors or elected department heads (Sheriff, District Attorney, etc.) being involved. Pressure from constituencies can influence the process as well as those “rogue” elected officials who act outside the structured process.

It has been my observation that on the union side it can be difficult to form a coalition that agrees on specific goals or proposals. What is important to Deputy Sheriffs may not be a priority for Probation Officers represented by the same bargaining unit. Conflict over control of the organization can emerge if these parties do not share similar values.

An example of this was a recent proposal to amend a PERS contract to provide 3% at 55 for the Deputy Sheriff Association which represents both Deputy Sheriffs (previously at 2% at 50) and Probation Officers (previously at 2% at 55). The change to 3% at 55 increased the employee contribution from 7 to 9 percent for Probation Officers but not Deputy Sheriffs whose rate was already 9 percent. As part of the package, Probation Officers had to absorb the 2 percent change. While the union as a whole voted to accept this agreement, PERS required a separate election of only those members whose contribution rate changed. By the time the PERS vote took place, the Probation Officers were so disgruntled about absorbing this increase that they were in the position of voting down the amendment for everyone. There was an internal political showdown and jockeying for position that eventually resulted in a vote for the amendment. The
next time this group negotiates, it will be interesting to see whether the priorities have shifted.

Symbolic Frame

The symbolic frame abandons the assumptions of rationality that appear in each of the other frames and treats organizations as theater or carnival. Organizations are viewed as held together more by shared values and cultures than by goals and policy. They are propelled more by rituals, ceremonies, stories, heroes, and myth than by rules and managerial authority. Organization is drama: the drama engages actors inside, while outside, audiences form impressions based on what they see occurring on stage. Problems arise when the actors play their parts badly, when symbols lose their meaning, when ceremonies and rituals lose their potency. Improvements in organizational dynamic come through the use of symbols, myths and magic. The core assumptions of this frame are:

- What are most important about events are not what happened but the meaning of what happened.
- The meaning of an event is determined not simply by what happened but by the way that people interpret what happened.
- Many of the most significant events and processes in organizations are substantially ambiguous or uncertain. It is often difficult or impossible to know what happened, why it happened or what will happen next.
- Ambiguity and uncertainty undermine rational approaches to analysis, problem solving, and decision-making.
- When faced with uncertainty and ambiguity, people create symbols to resolve confusion, increase predictability and provide direction.

This frame also characterizes the heart of the negotiations experience: the melodrama of it all. Each side has its “roles” to play, and indeed, when someone performs poorly, the entire production suffers. I have had the unfortunate experience of dealing with an incompetent and unprofessional negotiator representing employees. The entire negotiation session was non-productive and frustrating for the employees and the agency. Every stage has different expectations and this person did not prepare his part. He came to meetings late, unprepared, sloppily dressed and was generally belligerent. While I believe this behavior was intended to offend and unsettle agency staff, the message was instead received by the represented employees who eventually terminated the relationship.

While a good portion of the communication is formalized in negotiations through proposals, a tremendous amount of information is exchanged informally. Are the players interpreting the words correctly? Is there not often ambiguity in meaning even after mutual attempts to be as specific as possible? Researchers find that the bulk of human communication is not through the words we choose, but rather through our body language, tone and expression. A seasoned labor relations practitioner watches for those subtle clues through the process. While some
players on this stage may act with flourish by storming out to make a point, others are more discreet. Many a caucus session has been spent trying to determine what someone “really meant”, and sharing observations about the reactions and implications.

The labor relations process is also full of the ritual and ceremonial aspects of the meeting drama. Again where a meeting is conducted (the stage) can be important as well as the positions (players on the stage). Who is the audience? Who is observing this process? All employees and their unions, the elected officials, the agency management and the public will have different responses to the performance of the players. There are symbols and mythology involved in negotiations as well. More seasoned players will reminisce about a previous cast member who either was seen as a righteous hero or tyrant depending on one’s point of view. Strikes, while having an impact, can also be viewed as symbolic gestures within the negotiations arena.

Conclusion

I use many film clips in the course I teach to drive home these frame concepts. One of my favorites is the clip from the film Norma Rae in which the union organizer played by Sally Field stands on a table in the middle of a factory with a sign that simply says “union” until each machine is turned off. Other films used to express these points include Apollo13 (structure), Patch Adams (human resource), and Dead Poets Society (symbolic). In each film, elements of all four frames can be observed and this stimulates lively conversation. It also makes the point that consciously varying your view of events through these frames or lenses can dramatically impact your interpretation and deepen your understanding.

Similarly, in every negotiations encounter, elements of all four frames are present. Depending on the circumstances, one or more frames may require more attention. A thoughtful review of the frames orientation to anticipate these issues can help prepare the labor relations professional for a successful negotiation outcome. These multiple perspectives can help us see “what is really going on” and potentially “re-frame” our responses to achieve our negotiation and organizational goals.

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References:

Required texts for the course:

Other optional texts: