FRAMING

Context, Framing, *and Influence*

B. Kim Barnes

THE INFLUENCE GURU

Influence happens in the mind of the other person. Framing means presenting your idea so it makes sense inside their model of the world — without misrepresenting anything.

ABSTRACT

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to help readers consider the value of identifying the values, beliefs, and vested interests of someone they wish to influence and to frame their idea, request, or call to action in a way that will make sense in the other person's internal model of the world and be interesting and attractive to him or her.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper defines several key terms and presents a rationale for exploring the point of view of individuals one wishes to influence and framing an idea in a way that will be most meaningful to the other.

Findings – There is no one way to view any idea. People have a set of mental filters that any influence attempt must pass through. These filters shape the impact and meaning of the other person's idea or request. The skillful influencer takes this into account in framing his or her influence approach.

Research limitations/implications – This paper is the result of many years of observation and pattern recognition in situations where people are asked to influence one another. It is also consistent with current behavioral economics research, but is not itself based on laboratory research.

Practical implications – Applying this approach should enable readers to have better results in influencing a variety of people.

Originality/value – Influence is a key skill set for leaders and key contributors.

Keywords: Values, Context, Influence, Framing, Beliefs, Interests · **Paper type:** Conceptual paper

In preparing for an important influence opportunity, you need to be aware of the context within which that opportunity exists. Context includes everything that may be relevant to the opportunity but over which

you have no control. There are a number of factors to consider – the external environment including, for example, the economy, competitors, national politics; organizational factors such as culture, structure, strategy, internal politics; and individual qualities, characteristics, beliefs, values, preferences and vested interests. In this article, I will focus on the individual factors of values, beliefs, and vested interests.

Values include what we believe to be true, ethical, and important. Our core values determine our most important decisions. For example, in choosing a career, those who value contributing to their community may choose teaching as a profession, whereas those who value justice may choose to study law. **Beliefs** are based on experiences and biases – they are the lenses through which we see the world and often determine our assumptions and behavior. For example, many people believe that human behavior is the primary cause of climate change, while others believe that climate change is part of a natural cycle. Both groups find evidence to support their beliefs, regardless of where the scientific consensus comes down. **Vested interests** are related to what we have to gain or to lose. For example, we may believe a promotion depends on taking advice from a senior manager rather than the recommendation of a colleague with great expertise or we fear losing the respect and confidence of others if we acknowledge a mistake.

The filters we see through

We like to think we are rational beings, weighing facts and making decisions based on the best available knowledge. If only that were true. Whether we acknowledge it or not, we see the world through a set of filters – these filters usually strain out everything that is not consistent with our core values, assumptions, and cherished beliefs. In a recent study, groups of students from rival schools saw a video of a portion of a basketball game. Each group believed that the team from the other school made far more fouls, even though they were looking at exactly the same video.

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Social scientists have known for a very long time that what seems to be an incontrovertible disproving of an irrational belief can cause believers to become even more committed to their position. In his acclaimed 1956 book, *When Prophecy Fails*, Leon Festinger and his colleagues pointed out that when the predicted date for the end of the world passes without such an event occurring, believers tend to find an explanation that fixes them even more firmly in their belief. Perhaps the calendar has changed since the prediction. Perhaps the continuation of the world is an illusion. Perhaps time has been extended due to their appeals. Festinger called this phenomenon “cognitive dissonance.” The book followed a group of people who were preparing to be rescued by a flying saucer based on “automatic writing” that predicted the end of the world. They had made deep commitments – given away their belongings, left their jobs, said goodbye to those who were not accompanying them on the journey they expected to take. When the event did not occur as predicted (more

automatic writing assured them that the end had been postponed due to their influence) they redoubled their efforts to gain social support. In the years since, many examples of this phenomenon have occurred – I can remember only one in which the fervent believers said, "Well, I guess we were wrong!" and went back to their lives.

Why we form tribes

Dissonance makes us uncomfortable. When we are committed to something, we work very hard to confirm the rightness of it. One way to do this is by joining with a group that shares the belief – we reinforce one another (if so many people whom I like and admire believe the same thing, it must be right!). Although people have always done this through belonging to political, charitable, and religious organizations, the internet has made this process much easier – it has given us a broader community to search for those who are like-minded. Others become defined as like me / not like me in relation to key topics. We trust those who are like us – we believe them. Many of us screen out disconfirming information as much as possible and either ignore or disparage the views of those who are not like us. Our on-line lives become an echo chamber. In the US, for example, we listen to NPR and read the *New York Times* or we watch Fox News and read *The Washington Times*. Few people are equally comfortable with both. We belong to different tribes. We see the same game and score it differently.

The influencer's challenge

Every important event or communication regarding something we are interested in goes through the process of fitting into our worldview. This presents an interesting challenge for influencers. Since influencing someone requires that you treat him or her with respect and offer a choice, the other must be consciously willing to take the action you are looking for. Being influenced requires that the other person see it as an action that "people like me" would really take. You, as an influencer, must be willing to frame the action as something that seems reasonable to the other person, while maintaining your own integrity.

Framing means that you present a call to action or idea in a way that fits the facts and the content – does not misrepresent them in any way – but is worded so that it is aligned with the other person's values, beliefs, and vested interests. One important key to success is this:

> **THE KEY**
>
> The other person does not have to take the action for the same purpose as you have in calling for the action — though it must be a valid purpose from his or her point of view, and one you are willing to acknowledge as legitimate.

The student, the teacher, and the principal

Many years ago, I led a program in a large public school system focused on children with behavior and "attitude" problems. In one of the schools I worked with, a teacher in the program was lamenting the fact that one of her most promising students had gotten into an altercation with another teacher and had been summarily suspended by the principal, an ex-military man. She had worked all year with the boy to get him to attend school regularly and improve his grades and now she feared that if the suspension continued, all of her efforts would have been in vain – the boy would go back to his previous pattern of skipping school, then returning only to misbehave and be suspended and the old cycle would continue.

I asked her how she planned to appeal to the principal and she said that she would tell him the same thing that she had just told me. I counseled her against doing so – her rationale appealed to me, but would not to the principal. We developed an alternative approach: she would tell the principal that she thought it would set a good example for other students if instead of getting to stay away from school, he was forced to return and publicly apologize to the teacher he had argued with. He would have to take responsibility for his actions rather than avoiding the consequences. This approach worked – she had framed the issue in a way that appealed to the principal, who deeply valued responsibility and facing the consequences of one's actions. Of course, the teacher did as well – it just did not come up for her as the first concern.

Four ways to make the same request

Suppose that I want to influence a number of people to work with me on a project that is outside of their area of responsibility and will take some time. They will not be directly compensated for their efforts. I could frame my request in several different ways, being honest and yet varying it to fit the context for each person I am trying to influence:

THE SAME ASK, FRAMED FOUR WAYS

- *I really need your help with this project – you have the ideal set of skills to make it successful.*
- *This project is going to be highly visible – I wonder if you'd like to contribute to it?*
- *It would be a lot of fun to work on this together – we can do something really creative with it.*
- *I'm looking for someone to work on this project with me and you came to mind because of your commitment to our profession.*

In each case, I considered what might be important to the individuals (respect, career development, creativity, community) before I made the request. My emphasis was different for each person. I could be honest, yet focus on an aspect of the situation that I believed would be most meaningful to the other.

Opening our minds to the myriad concerns, values, and needs that others have and, where possible, refraining from judging them, enables us to influence in a way that is both ethical and effective. Expecting another to think and believe as we do about a controversial topic is naïve and unproductive. Instead, we can frame an idea

or suggestion in a way that makes sense within his or her worldview. Influence happens in the mind of the other person; taking the time to learn about him or her or make an educated guess about what it would be like to be in his or her shoes can help create the influence results we hope for.

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