

Beige or Brilliant? A Recipe for Success...

By Tracy M. McIlrath

“Every man takes the limits of his own field of vision for the limits of the world.”

- Arthur Schopenhauer

Okay, you have gathered the best and brightest employees. You know their skills are top notch. They know what needs to be done. So why are results mediocre? Why is so much time and energy wasted in low level abrasion and posturing? Why do you have to re-address the same issues over and over again? Maybe knowing the right amount is as important as knowing what ingredients you need to create your masterpiece.



Issues of organizational structure and triage can be narrowed down and focused through a concept called Reframing. Reframing is useful for viewing situations through various filters in order to extrapolate pertinent patterns, characteristics and elements. Each frame focuses on a different set of significant factors, that when taken together, offer a more holistic view of a given situation, as well as offering remedies and options for difficulties. Use of framing models can provide great insight into complex and challenging organizational situations.

The four avenues utilized are: 1) **Structural**, 2) **Human Resources**, 3) **Political** and 4) **Symbolic**. This practice is useful in sorting the primary from the secondary causes and issues of various situations, and allows the examiner to assume a balanced posture when addressing the overall situation. The advantage to this balance is a more complete address of the current problem or challenge. When all contributing aspects are taken into account and appropriately addressed, odds improve dramatically for an enduring resolution.

Structural Frame

The Structural frame is interested in **rules, roles, goals, policies, technology and environment**. This is the discipline of streamlining and standardizing work processes in the most efficient manner and then plugging personnel into this mechanistic/rational structure. The Structural perspective utilizes organizational charts to plot formal chains of command, responsibilities and relationships between individuals and departments throughout organizations. Advantages of Structural framing include provision of a clear understanding of the seniority/power structure of an organization and a mapping of the informational and decision making chain of command. Drawbacks to sole reliance on the Structural frame include a tendency toward decision-making bottlenecks, a lack of personal investment by staff (due to very structured and limited authority and self-direction), and a predisposition toward bureaucracy.

Human Resources Frame

Examining situations from a Human Resources frame involves looking at the **needs, skills and relationships of employees**. This frame recognizes that people are more satisfied, and therefore function better, when they have a sense of ownership regarding their work. This includes commitment to a purpose, providing input on decision-making regarding their efforts, and the ability/authority to act utilizing their own best judgment/experience/skills to some degree. This frame requires the examiner to peer into the nature of the relationships between people and departments, to gain an understanding of the motivational factors for participants, and to manage the very real role of emotions in the workplace.

Political Frame

The Political frame looks at issues involving **coalitions of diverse individuals and interest groups, enduring differences between coalition members, scarce resources, conflict, bargaining, negotiation and jockeying for position** among competing stakeholders. Each of these are very important and influential factors in corporate life, however, when all our decisions and actions are based on political affect, we lose our humanity, compassion and numinous connection to our work.

Symbolic Frame

The Symbolic frame embraces the influences and impacts of **how events are interpreted within an organization, the overt and covert rules and norms of a group, and the socio/emotional continuity of a group with shared symbology and identity**. Emotionally what is most important is not what happens but what it means. Activity and meaning are loosely coupled; events have multiple meanings because people interpret experience differently. This frame recognizes that culture is the glue that holds an organization together and unites people around shared values and beliefs. When the team is all pulling in the same direction, it is much more effective than when each person is headed off on his/her own.

Each of these perspectives is a powerful factor missing from formal organizational charts, but which guide and flavor decisions and processes on a systemic level. Wise managers are aware of the impact and benefit that proficiency with these tools offer. In a world where employee experience, knowledge and commitment are precious resources, learning how to maximize organizational loyalty and employee satisfaction is paramount. Reframing techniques offer leaders an engaging and useful topographical map for organizational life. **And after all, who doesn't prefer brilliant over beige!**

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