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Well received

How to frame your message to make it more acceptable to the other party

Question:
I heard that how you “frame” a negotiation influences the other party’s willingness to reach an agreement. Can you explain what framing is and how to do it?

Answer:

Framing is technique of contextualizing your message so it is received in the most favorable way possible. It is about creating the framework or filters through which the other party processes your message.

To understand this, compare the two scenarios detailed below.

In scenario one, you decide to buy a portable boom box that has a radio/tape/and three-CD player. The cost is \$75. A friend walks by and tells you that he saw the exact boom box for \$ 30 less at a discount store two blocks away earlier that day. Would you buy the boom box at the store you were at, or make the trip to the discount store?

In scenario two, you found a video camcorder on sale for \$950 that has all the features you want. A friend walks over and tells you he bought the same model just that morning at the discount outlet two blocks away for only \$920, a \$30 savings. Would you buy the camcorder at the store you were at or would you make the trip to the discount outlet?

Interestingly, over 90% of the people surveyed said they would make the extra trip to the discount outlet to buy the boom box, but only 50% would do so for the camcorder. The difference is the context in which the \$30 is presented. The \$30 savings off the cost of the boom box represents a 40% discount, whereas the same \$30 savings off the camcorder is only a 3% discount.

Therefore the value perception of the \$30 savings is different based on the context or frame in which it is presented.

Let’s consider another situation where framing makes a difference.

Framing an employee negotiation

Let’s say you are a supervisor and have an employee who has been late for work three times this month. The employee does good work when he shows up, it’s just getting him to work on time. Following are two different frames for presenting the situation.

Frame 1: “Jack, you have been late three times in the last 30 days. We’ve had this discussion before. The last time this happened, you told me that you would make it a priority to be here by 7:30 a.m. It’s not working. We need to get a handle on this right away or you may be in jeopardy of loosing your job.”

Now compare that frame to this:

Frame 2: “Jack, I know this job is important to you. I know you want to do a great job. In fact, when you are here, your work is excellent. Jack, when you don’t show up on time, it reduces the total team’s productivity level. This makes other people angry because they are in a holding pattern waiting for your handoff.

I must tell you, I am concerned about your position. If this continues we will need to reconsider if you are the right person for this job. Help me to understand what can be done so you can achieve the success you want.”

Which of those two communications would you rate as the most effective? I hope you chose the second.

In Frame 2, the supervisor created an environment of trust. She gave Jack the benefit of the doubt by validating his intentions and reinforcing the quality of his work.

By framing the negotiation with Jack’s goals, intentions and work quality up front, she created a positive environment of respect and support. Her frame put Jack in a positive mindset so he would receive the feedback feeling the least amount of resistance. That created the environment where they could talk freely and focus on resolving the issue.

Notice the supervisor in Frame 2 didn’t

attack Jack. Instead, she engaged him in a non-threatening way. In doing so, she was able to communicate the facts in a straightforward manner.

She expressed concern for Jack. By linking Jack’s goals to his behaviors, she hoped Jack would see the effect of his actions. His tardiness was undermining his ability to achieve his own goals as well as the team’s goals. She framed her communications so Jack could simultaneously take ownership of his behavior and feel comfortable in finding a solution.

Since Jack’s tardiness is a reoccurring problem, she may have been tempted to let her emotions influence her communications. She may have wanted to blow off some steam, but she chose to not let her emotions drive her communications. She realized that this would only trigger Jack’s defensiveness and in doing so, she would have been dead-ended.

Building a frame

1. Define what’s important to the other party. Look at the bigger picture and consider the other party’s intentions or goals.

2. Define what’s important to you. What outcomes are you trying to achieve?

3. Develop a bridge between the two.

4. Open the negotiation by focusing on what’s important to the other party.

When framing a negotiation, remember it’s important to be sincere in your delivery. People know when they are being manipulated. And if you give the other person a reason to distrust you, future communications will become even more strained.

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