Frame Switching Thinking

Idea In Short

Every manager carries a default way of seeing problems. One person sees structure and process, another sees people and morale, a third sees power and politics, and a fourth sees symbols and meaning. A default frame is useful until a problem arrives that it cannot explain. Frame switching is the deliberate act of changing the lens, so that a situation can be read in more than one way. Bolman and Deal's four frames offer a practical set of lenses for organizations, and research on reframing shows how leaders can apply them. This article explains the method, shows how to switch frames in practice, and covers the risks of using a lens as a rigid formula.

A company's new customer portal launches to complaints. The engineering lead says the design is sound and users need training. The head of support says people are frustrated and need a friendlier tone. The chief of staff says that the sales division, which lost budget to build the portal, is quietly telling customers to avoid it. A long-serving employee notes that the old paper forms were a familiar ritual that the portal erased. All four are partly right, and each sees a different problem.

What frames are

A frame is a mental lens that organizes what we notice and how we explain it. Frames are useful because they simplify. They also blind us, since a lens that brings some things into focus puts others out of view.

Bolman and Deal's model gives four such lenses for organizations. A Wake Forest University library write-up of a leadership institute describes the model as structural, human resources, political, and symbolic, and says that in every organizational situation each of the four frames plays a role, so that a good leader will try to examine every situation through each lens.1

The write-up adds that the political and symbolic frames were underrepresented among the participants and that they become more important to master as one moves up the leadership ladder.

The four frames in practice

The structural frame looks at goals, roles, rules, and processes. It asks whether the work is organized well. The human resource frame looks at needs, skills, and relationships. It asks whether people are supported and motivated.

The political frame looks at power, interests, and coalitions. It asks who wins and loses, and who has influence. The symbolic frame looks at meaning, culture, ritual, and story. It asks what the event signifies to people.

A Carleton College teaching note puts the idea simply. Each frame is based on a different worldview and has its own assumptions and guiding principles, and making sure that you pass through all four helps you recognize what others value when they make choices.2

Why switching matters

Most leaders have a favorite frame. An engineer may default to structure, a human resources specialist to people, a salesperson to politics, and a founder to symbols. The favorite frame shapes what they see and what they try first.

A paper on assessment and intervention, published in the Journal of Business and Economics Research, describes reframing as the perspective that organizations can be viewed from more than one angle, and offers short case studies of the four frames used for assessment and intervention.3

A book review summarizes the practical value. The review says that the frames offer a way to identify what is wrong in organizations and what can be done to correct it, and that each frame carries its own image of reality.4

Switching helps because a problem stuck in one frame may move in another. A conflict that resists structural fixes may yield to attention to symbols, and a morale issue may turn out to be a power struggle.

A method for switching

Begin by naming the situation in one sentence without interpretation. "The portal has had 400 support tickets in two weeks" is a fact. "Users are resisting change" is an interpretation.

Next, identify your default frame. Ask yourself which explanation came first, and which kind of fix you reached for. Then write the explanation that each of the other three frames would offer.

Finally, translate each into an action and a test. A structural reading might lead to a clearer help flow. A human reading might lead to coaching sessions. A political reading might lead to a conversation with the sales lead. A symbolic reading might lead to a short celebration of the old forms and a story about what the new one makes possible. Choose a combination and try it.

Multiframe thinking

The aim is not to pick the best frame but to combine insights. The table of contents of the fifth edition of Reframing Organizations lists a chapter on multiframe thinking, along with chapters on frame breaking and on reframing in action.5

In practice, multiframe thinking means holding the four views together and looking for actions that work across them. A reorganization that is structurally sound but stirs fear and ignores power may fail. One that attends to all four is more likely to hold.

Ask a simple question at the end of a plan: "Which frame have we neglected?" The answer often points to the risk that would have surprised you.

Frame switching in conversation

You can also switch frames when talking with others. If a colleague argues in structural terms, try a human question: "How will the team feel about this?" If the debate has become about politics, ask about meaning: "What will this say about what we value?"

Listen for the frame in what others say. "We need a clear process" signals structure. "People are tired" signals human resources. "They will never agree to it" signals politics.

"This is not who we are" signals symbols. Naming the frame can help people see why they are talking past one another.

Use the technique to build bridges. When two groups argue from different frames, translate. Show the engineer how a symbolic concern affects adoption, and show the culture lead how a structural fix would serve the value she cares about.

Building agility over time

Agility comes from practice. Assign frames in meetings: ask one member to speak from each lens on a live issue for ten minutes. Rotate the assignments so that no one is always the structural voice.

Keep a short log. After a decision, note which frames you used, and review the outcome. Over months, you learn which frames you tend to neglect and which of your mistakes trace to a blind spot.

Seek colleagues who see differently. A leader with a structural bent benefits from a trusted partner with a strong symbolic sense, and the pair can offer each other a standing second view.

Common blind spots

Each default frame has a predictable blind spot. Structural thinkers tend to overlook feeling and symbolism, so a well-designed process can still meet quiet resistance. People-focused leaders may underrate power, and so they are surprised when a warm, well-meant plan is blocked by someone whose interests it threatens.

Political thinkers risk seeing every disagreement as a contest, and symbolic thinkers may spend energy on meaning while the work itself drifts. Knowing your own blind spot lets you assign a colleague to watch it, or to schedule a deliberate check before launch.

A hypothetical example

Imagine a hypothetical manufacturing firm whose safety incidents keep rising despite new procedures. The operations head, who defaults to structure, rewrites the procedures twice.

A consultant asks for each of the four frames in turn.

The human resource frame shows that crews are fatigued by overtime. The political frame shows that supervisors who report incidents are criticized by plant managers. The symbolic frame shows that a banner about safety hangs in a hall where leaders skip the safety briefing. The firm cuts overtime, protects reporting supervisors, and has senior leaders attend briefings. Incidents fall over the next two quarters. The case is invented, but it shows how switching frames revealed causes that procedure rewrites missed.

Cautions

Do not treat frames as truth. They are tools for seeing, and a situation may need a lens that the four do not supply. Use them as prompts for inquiry.

Avoid frame-hopping without commitment. Switching is a means to a better decision, and a leader who keeps changing views without acting appears indecisive.

Finally, beware of using frames to label people. Saying "he is just political" or "she is only about people" turns a lens into a stereotype. Treat frames as ways of reading situations, and keep your regard for the people involved.

- 1Leadership Institute: reframing and frame flipping
- 2Seeing the world through multiple frames
- 3Assessment and intervention using the perspective of four organizational frames
- 4Review of Reframing Organizations
- 5Reframing Organizations, fifth edition contents

Summary

Frame switching thinking means changing the lens on purpose so that a problem can be understood in more than one way. Bolman and Deal's structural, human resource, political, and symbolic frames give leaders four ready views of any organizational situation, and practice with all four widens the range of options. Leaders gain agility by naming their default frame, asking what each other frame would notice, and testing the idea that

emerges. The risk is treating frames as truth and not as tools. Take one stubborn problem, describe it through each of the four frames in turn, and write the action each frame suggests.