Reframing Thinking

Idea In Short

When a problem resists every solution, the problem statement is often at fault. Reframing means deliberately changing how you define the problem so that new options appear. Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg shows how a slow elevator, framed as a speed problem, turns into a waiting problem with cheaper answers. Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal offer a second route: view the situation through four lenses, which are structural, human resource, political, and symbolic. Use reframing when progress stalls, when the same fix keeps failing, or when people disagree about the cause. Practice it by asking what is missing, studying positive exceptions, and questioning the objective itself.

Teams often work harder when a solution fails. They add resources, increase pressure, and repeat the fix with more energy. Reframing offers a different move: stop pushing and ask whether the problem is the right one. This article explains how reframing works, introduces two practical approaches, and shows how a team can use them in a single working session.

Why problems resist solutions

A problem statement is a theory in disguise. It claims that a certain cause lies behind a certain symptom and that a certain goal defines success. If the theory is wrong, effort poured into solutions will not help. Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg, in a Harvard Business Review article, observed that managers usually solve problems well, and that they struggle more with figuring out what the problems are.1 The remedy he proposed is reframing.

A summary of his work in the Irish Times emphasizes that many people jump quickly to a solution when they meet a business problem. Reframing, the article explains, depends on the ability to question beliefs and challenge assumptions, and it throws up multiple perspectives on how to view a problem.2

The slow elevator

Wedell-Wedellsborg illustrates the idea with a story about the owner of an office building. Tenants complain that the elevators are slow, and the owner considers expensive upgrades. A consultant reframes the issue. The real problem is not the speed of the elevators but the experience of waiting. A cheaper solution, such as giving people something to look at in the lobby, may remove the complaints.

The story works because it moves the problem from engineering to psychology. Each frame opens a different set of options: the first calls for equipment, and the second calls for a change in perception. A team that discovers a frame like the second often finds cheaper and faster ways to meet the goal.

Practices for effective reframing

The same article lists seven practices for reframing. Among them, one calls for establishing legitimacy so that people feel free to question the problem statement. Another asks what is missing, since people tend to study the details they have been given and to overlook what the description leaves out. Another suggests analyzing positive exceptions, which means studying cases in which the problem does not occur. A further practice is to question the objective, because different people may want different outcomes from the same effort.3

Teams can use these practices as prompts in a short session. Ask each member to name one thing the problem statement omits, one place where the problem is absent, and one stakeholder who might define success differently. The answers often point to reframes that nobody had considered.

Four lenses on organizations

Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal offer another way to reframe, built around four lenses. Their book Reframing Organizations examines organizations as factories, families, jungles, and theaters or temples. The human resource frame looks at how to tailor organizations to satisfy human needs, and the political frame looks at how to cope with power and conflict, build coalitions, and deal with internal and external politics.4

A tool summary describes the model as a way of viewing situations from four perspectives, and it adds that these perspectives help managers think about different ways of handling difficult situations.5 The University of Chicago's Network Science tools collection likewise

presents an article that summarizes the structural, political, human resource, and symbolic frames as views through which leaders can understand their work.6

Applying the four frames

Suppose a team keeps missing deadlines. Through the structural lens, the question concerns roles, handoffs, and process design. Through the human resource lens, it concerns workload, skills, and motivation. Through the political lens, it concerns competition for resources and conflicts among stakeholders. Through the symbolic lens, it concerns the meaning that people attach to deadlines and the stories the organization tells about them.

Each lens suggests different remedies. A leader who uses only the structural lens might redraw the process chart, while the real obstacle may be a rivalry between two departments. Moving through all four frames takes a few minutes and often reveals which one the team has been ignoring.

A reframing session

A team can run a session of about forty minutes:

1. Write the current problem statement on a board
2. Ask what the statement omits and who defines success differently
3. Rewrite the problem through at least two of the four frames
4. Study one case in which the problem does not occur
5. Choose the most promising reframe and design a small test

Keep the group small enough that everyone speaks, and appoint a timekeeper so that the discussion moves from the problem to the test within the hour. Capture each reframe in a sentence that begins with the words the real problem might be. Afterward, send a short summary to everyone who took part so that the reframes do not vanish. The session ends with an experiment, not a verdict. A reframe is a hypothesis about the problem, and a cheap test shows whether it holds.

When to reach for reframing

Reframing earns its time when a problem has resisted several earlier fixes, when different

people describe the cause in conflicting ways, or when the cost of the planned solution seems out of proportion to the issue. It also helps when a team feels stuck and cannot say why. In these cases, the first definition probably carries an assumption that no one has examined.

Routine problems with clear causes do not need the treatment. A broken process step with a known fix should simply be repaired. A useful screen is to ask whether the same problem has returned after a previous solution. If it has, the team should spend an hour on reframing before it commits more money to another version of the same answer.

Who should be in the room

The people who see a problem differently are the best sources of reframes. Include someone who experiences the problem directly, such as a customer-facing employee, and someone who has no stake in the existing explanation. Outsiders notice what insiders take for granted, and front-line staff know how the problem appears in daily work. A facilitator should protect dissenting views, since the first reaction to a new frame is often defensive.

Leaders can encourage candor by speaking last and by thanking people who challenge the problem statement. When the most senior person states a view early, others tend to align with it, and the range of frames shrinks. The goal is to surface as many distinct definitions as possible before the group evaluates any of them.

A hypothetical example

Imagine a hospital outpatient clinic with a long wait for appointments. The first frame asks how to add more appointment slots. The team then asks what the statement omits and discovers that many slots go unused because patients miss visits. A positive exception emerges: one practice has few missed visits, because its staff call patients the day before.

The team reframes the problem as a no-show problem and not as a capacity problem. It tests reminder calls in two practices and finds that attendance improves. The change costs far less than hiring staff, and it builds on a practice that already worked inside the organization.

Cautions

Reframing has limits. A fresh frame is not automatically correct, and a team that reframes endlessly never acts. Test each new frame against evidence, and set a time limit for the session. Also take care with politics. Questioning a problem statement may challenge the person who wrote it, so introduce the practice as a standard step and not as a critique of anyone's work.

Finally, record the frames that the team tried, the evidence for each, and the one it chose. The record helps future teams and prevents the same debate from starting again.

- 1Are you solving the right problems?
- 2Re-framing problems can lead to better range of solutions for your company
- 3Are you solving the right problems? Reframing them can reveal unexpected solutions
- 4Reframing organizations: artistry, choice, and leadership
- 5The four frame approach
- 6Reframing organizations

Summary

Reframing converts stuck problems into new ones. It works because the first definition of a problem carries hidden assumptions, and changing the definition changes the set of possible actions. Bolman and Deal show that organizations look different through structural, human resource, political, and symbolic lenses, so a leader who uses only one lens sees only part of the picture. Wedell-Wedellsborg adds practical tools, such as asking what is missing, studying cases where the problem does not occur, and questioning the objective. Build the habit by reframing each major problem at least twice before choosing a solution, and by asking colleagues who see the problem differently to describe it in their own terms.