

Executive meetings are full of conversations aimed at getting everyone “on the same page” by negotiating a shared understanding. Highly persuasive executives will try to influence others by *reframing* issues; that is, by changing the language and implicit mental models that help a group make sense of things. These conversations are called **framing contests** (Kaplan, 2008). Have you ever wondered why executives can get so preoccupied with setting context, word-smithing, defining terms, and tone-policing around an issue? Such talk may seem overly finicky but without a shared frame of reference there is a risk people will talk past one another. Moreover, gaining early acceptance of a particular “spin” on issues can have an enduring impact on an agenda. This graphic describes the main features of these contests.

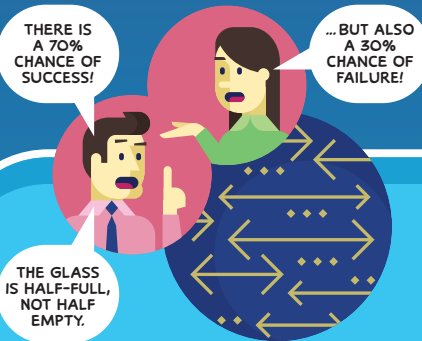


Framing contests come with a curse for communication. When decision-makers negotiate plans and policies around the table, they share understandings of issues at a tacit (unstated) level. Yet those who were not privy to the conversation will not share those implicit frames. When communicating more broadly, messages have to be explicitly reframed for the outside audience too, not treated as self-evident. That is unlikely if decision-makers are only mildly attentive to how things were framed in the first place.

REFERENCE: Sarah Kaplan, “Framing Contests,” *Organization Science*, vol. 19, no. 5 (2008), pp. 729-752.

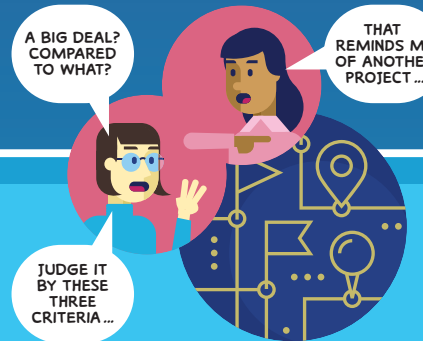
VALENCE

Is the issue a problem or challenge? A danger or opportunity? Politically left-wing or right-wing? These are all questions about **valence**, or where an issue falls on a continuum with emotional or ideological resonance. For example, it is easier to shoot down a proposal by describing it in terms of potential losses (negative valence) instead of gains (positive valence) given humans’ loss-aversion bias.



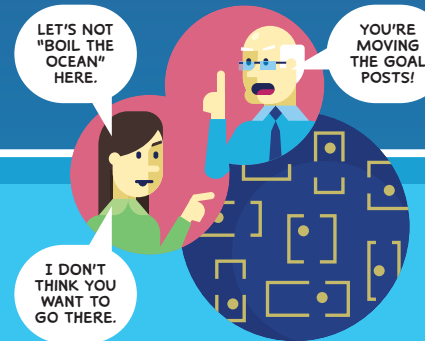
REFERENCE POINTS

What features of an issue, argument, or claim are most salient? On what basis are those features evaluated? What criteria are used? What comparisons are made, both explicitly and implicitly? Many ideas are evaluated in relative terms. Moreover, the associations we make can put an idea in a favourable or unfavourable light. Thus, persuasion is often about picking the right **reference points**.



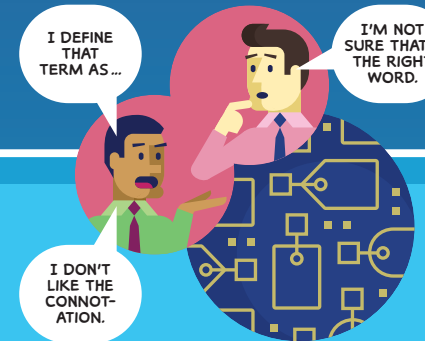
BOUNDARIES

The Overton window refers to the range of ideas that is considered politically acceptable to talk about. That range expands and contracts as norms evolve. Executives will also set the **scope and boundaries** of the discussion to make it wieldy or make an agenda “do-able.” They may even set up turf-guarding “no-go zones” by limiting the subjects under discussion.



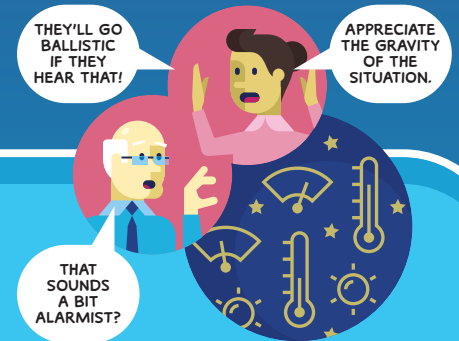
LABELS

Pollsters have long known that the **wording** of a question—particularly the main issue or stance—strongly influences answers. Terms can have positive and negative connotations. A vivid coinage evokes images in the mind, while a euphemism suppresses them. Buzzwords gain currency. Terms can take on symbolic importance or acquire political baggage. Even vagueness can be used strategically.



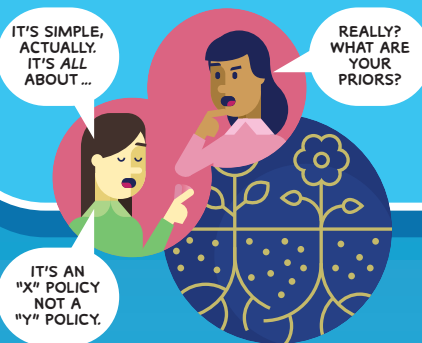
INTENSITY

What is the **emotional temperature** surrounding an issue? What are the “hot button” or “triggering” issues that evoke strong responses from particular stakeholders. How do people perceive the stakes? Various rhetorical gambits can exaggerate or downplay the significance of factors under consideration. The overall tone of messages will be scrutinized for appropriateness.



FOUNDATION

How the problem or predicament is defined at the level of assumption



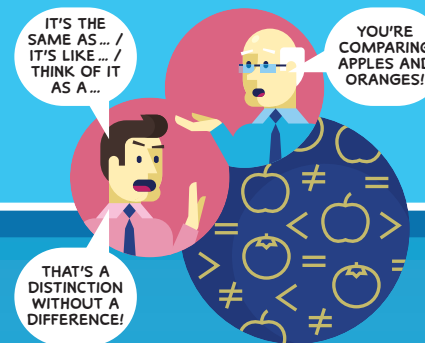
BACKDROP

How the smaller pieces relate to a much bigger picture



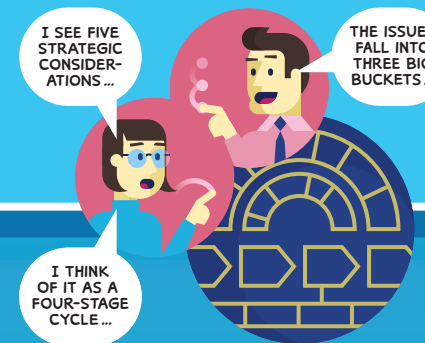
LIMITS

What is and isn't within the range of acceptable considerations



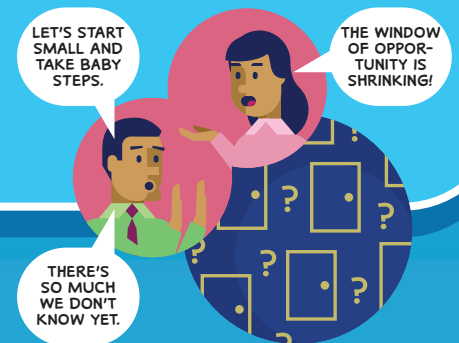
LANGUAGE

Key concepts and how they cohere to form descriptive or explanatory models



STAKES

Fears and aspirations given the various unknowns and risks



PREMISES

John Dewey pointed out, “A problem well-defined is a problem half solved.” That is why those with a stake in a particular solution will dwell on the **problematique**. What type of issue is it? Environmental or economic? Political or legal? What are the basic facts of the case? Core assumptions? Reasons for caring? What values apply? The answers narrow down what is considered relevant.

CONTEXT

Executives tell stories, parables, and cautionary tales. These narratives set the stage by describing the players and their motivations. They fill in the **backstory** with important historical considerations. They describe the **predicament** in a nuanced way. All told, these retellings highlight important issues and situate them within a bigger picture, while giving that picture greater coherence.

EQUIVALENCE

Is state-sponsored hacking an act of war? Is prison labour a form of slavery? Is human and animal life distinguishable morally? These are invitations to consider **equivalence** or **contrast**. If either are established, several implications follow logically. That is why we are quick to dispute “false equivalencies” and “hair-splitting”. Metaphors, similes, and analogies can be sly forms of comparison.

FRAMEWORK

We tidy analysis by organizing concepts and their interrelations into **mental models**. These are shared as visual frameworks, maps, categorization schemes, and diagrams. Official frameworks are negotiated attempts to collectively structure thinking around an issue. For executives, the stakes are high for what gets included and excluded, which is why frameworks are regularly renegotiated.

UNCERTAINTY

There is always uncertainty surrounding an issue. The acceptability of a proposal is partly determined by a group’s **threshold for risk** and the proposal’s structuring of risk. Efforts then go into bolstering confidence and assuaging doubt. Or ramping up fears and highlighting dangers. Or stressing the necessity of safeguards, fall-backs, and half-measures. The extent of not knowing becomes contested.