GAIL T. FAIRHURST

THE *POWER* OF FRAMING

CREATING THE LANGUAGE of LEADERSHIP

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Creating the Language of Leadership

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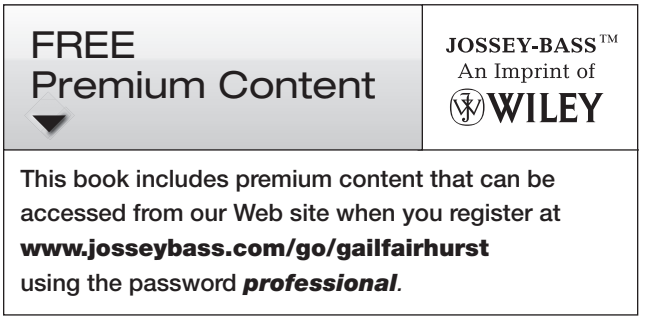

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To Verne, Katie, Tom, and Kelsey

PREFACE

There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, "Morning, boys, how's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, "What the hell is water?"

—David Foster Wallace, commencement address at Kenyon College, 2005[1]

SINCE *The Art of Framing* was published in 1996, I have spoken with many in the United States and abroad on the role of communications in leadership. Some really seem to grasp its importance. Too many others still do not. For them, as for Wallace's young fish, the most profound realities of life are those most difficult to see and talk about, and one of those realities is the remarkable gift of human communication. Substitute *communication* for *water*, and "What the hell is water?" wonderfully describes many leaders in organizations today. They take their communication for granted, dismissing it as something they just do automatically.

"If I am talking, I must be communicating, right?" Many leaders (and others, of course) make that assumption, because communication looks like a simple act of transmission. The "Sender → Message → Receiver" model, which describes communication in terms of a message passing over a channel subject to noise, is still commonly taught.[2] And our language is full of expressions that reinforce it—as when we say, "I got my message across," or "I can't seem to get through to this employee." The transmission model is not incorrect, but it is woefully inadequate when considering the tasks facing today's leaders.

A better way to view communication is to emphasize the way it creates a shared reality. Consider the global economic crisis that began in 2008, which according to *Newsweek* writer Daniel Gross created a whole new genre of linguistics: "financial linguistics." In a 2009 article, he recalled George Orwell's 1946 essay "Politics and the English Language," in which Orwell decried political rhetoric used "to make lies sound truthful" and "to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind."[3]

Indeed, Gross makes an excellent case that the captains of Wall Street have had a boundless energy for repackaging discredited financial products with new legit-sounding names like "legacy loans," "legacy securities," "nonprime mortgages," "high-yield debt," and the like. Framing alone didn't produce this crisis, but communications played a central role. To add insult to injury, Harry Truman's maxim—"If you can't convince them, confuse them"—appears to have become the modus operandi of leaders asked to account for their firm's performance.[4] Whether these leaders are speaking to Wall Street, Congress, or everyday citizens, they often explain their firm's actions in accounting doublespeak. If we are not left wondering just what it is they said, we are left questioning their capacity for corporate responsibility.

So the financial crisis reminds me that there is a large group of generally smart and articulate leaders out there who need to reflect on their communications and ethics a great deal more. They need to *not* take their communications for granted quite so much. They need to understand how our financial realities (and those of others) are created through their communications. They need

to understand that untrustworthy leaders already understand all of this—and are betting that most others don't.

French philosopher Michel Foucault had it right when he said—and I'm paraphrasing here—that people know *what* they say, and they usually know *why* they say what they say. What they do not understand is what what they say *does*.[5] Most of us fail to understand the context-shaping features of our language and the meanings for events that we have had a hand in creating. It is easier to attribute those harsh realities to someone else's doing. However, I would be lying if I did not also acknowledge that the transmission model of communication, the "meaning-lite" model, is far easier to understand. How we create meaning with others is among the most elusive aspects of leadership communications.

With this mind-set, I am tackling the subject of framing once again as the means by which leaders and students of leadership, and not just those in the financial sector, learn to manage meaning. However, this time around my task has been made both a little easier and more difficult. What makes writing about framing easier today is that the terms *frame* and *framing* are not as foreign as they were in 1996. In part, this is because a tremendous amount of research on framing has been done in a wide range of disciplines, including communication and media studies, linguistics, economics, psychology, sociology, psychiatry, and management.

Moreover, we have seen the language of framing enter the vernacular of everyday speech with the 2006 and 2008 U.S. political campaigns. Professional pollsters like Frank Luntz have begun to use it as a campaign tool, and media outlets like the *New York Times* feature articles about the "framing wars" to analyze key campaign messages.[6]

What is a little more difficult this time around is that framing is turning out to be what the German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein describes as a "blurred concept."[7] Like the terms *leadership* and *communication, frame* and *framing* can be used in several different ways as people play language games. For example, does *framing* denote a cognitive process—a way of seeing—or an act of communication? Is a *frame* narrow and lens-like, or is it broad and schema-like? Do frames organize and can they expand, or are they neat little self-contained packages?

Chapters One and Two are largely devoted to answering these questions, but whichever way you slice the framing pie, it is clear that frames have consequences. After 9/11, the United States was not attacked again on its soil under the tough-talking language and action of the Bush presidency, but the "coalition of the willing" also grew perilously close to a "coalition of one" in the war in Iraq.[8] As mentioned, the consequences of irresponsible framing (among other irresponsible actions) can be seen in the near meltdown of the world's financial system. Even the financial industries themselves, according to Gross, "believed so fervently in their own rhetoric that they bet their financial houses on it."[9]

And so this book is for leaders or students of leadership who want to have a greater impact on the world through their communications. Echoing David Foster Wallace, it is for the fish who want to know about the water.

Who Should Read This Book

I have written *The Power of Framing* for three specific audiences. Carrying on the tradition of *The Art of Framing*, the first audience consists of practicing leaders and managers. If you fall into this category, you are likely battle-worn and tested in your everyday communications on the job. I am hoping that my book gives you a renewed set of ideals for communications effectiveness, a better communications vocabulary, and a means by which to analyze the many challenges that you face.

My second intended audience is MBA students. I am hoping that *The Power of Framing* supplants your usual training in public speaking and Power Point presentations as your primary introduction to communication in the workplace. This is because framing is a skill that underlies all others.

My third intended audience is communications students in upper-level undergraduate and graduate programs worldwide. You already possess a special affinity for the communications process. I am hoping that my book adds depth and understanding to your knowledge of this skill.

Given the potentially wide-ranging interests of these audiences, I have taken a different approach in this book as compared to *The Art of Framing*, which focused on routine conversations on the shop floors of the manufacturing

division of a multinational consumer goods firm. The purpose there was to draw attention to framing as an everyday skill, not one reserved for special occasions in need of soaring rhetoric.

This time around I draw communication examples from a variety of sources: business, politics, sports, academia, the arts, and many more. I am hoping that the diversity of examples I supply demonstrates the widespread relevance and utility of this skill. But please do not read between the lines—I am not advancing a particular political point of view in this book, for example, as an American, whether Republican or Democrat. I try to view my role as an equal-opportunity critic!

Overview of the Contents

After an introduction to the realities of framing for leaders (Chapter One), I address the idea of framing as a skill (Chapter Two), a science (Chapter Three), an art form (Chapter Four), an emotional connection (Chapter Five), an ethical commitment (Chapter Six), a context for leadership (Chapter Seven), and a set of applications (Chapter Eight).

In addition, four other features of the book should be mentioned. First, each chapter contains a set of practice exercises designed to help you build your skills at framing. Second, each chapter ends with a chapter summary for a quick review. Third, each chapter has an extensive set of notes at the back of the book for those wishing to pursue a particular aspect of framing in greater depth (though the book can easily be read without consulting the notes). Finally, there is a glossary at the end of the book should you want to remind yourself of the definition of one or more framing terms.

More specifically, Chapter One begins with six rules for framing communications in leadership situations. Collectively, they show that when you lead, your communications help create realities to which you and others must respond. This is not to explain away the constraints that you face in your job. It does, however, underscore the importance of *how* you choose to respond to these constraints. Chapter One also shows you how to diagnose your sensitivity to the framing concept and your style of communicating, and it discusses ways to meet the challenges of your framing style while not losing any of the benefits.

Chapter Two concerns itself with framing as a skill, which is your underlying ability to be articulate and persuasive more or less on demand. The skill sets in this chapter correspond to three concepts that are the foundation of framing:

- *Cultural Discourses*, which are where the content of your communications comes from
- *Mental models*, which are how you regulate that content
- *Core framing tasks*, which are the chief communication requirements of your job

In this chapter you will learn how to use the linguistic tool bags that accompany cultural Discourses, develop awareness of your mental models, and diagnose your core framing tasks.

Chapter Three explores the science of framing—in particular, the conscious and unconscious learning processes that contribute to the development of frames. As Bob Sarr and I argued in *The Art of Framing*, you can exert a measure of control over your spontaneous communications when you store your memories. We called this *priming for spontaneity*, a label that I will continue to use for this deceptively simple concept. This time around, however, my emphasis is on understanding what exactly priming does inside the human brain and what builds complexity into your mental models for the best framing possible. Current research supports the idea that the more you notice the better your framing.

Chapter Four concerns itself with the art form of framing. Even though many people are inclined to dismiss communication as something of an automatic process, this chapter challenges you to see framing as a craft. It deemphasizes the idea of framing as a natural ability and focuses on the work involved in honing your skills. You will discover a number of ways to create more memorable messages. For example, metaphorical frames breathe life into your communications; master frames offer great organizing potential; simplifying frames give you needle-like precision in your framing; while believability frames show you how to be a more credible communicator. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how to combine frames for maximum effect.

Chapter Five addresses the emotional connections that you can make through framing. It begins with a discussion of emotional intelligence and why you must join reason and emotion to frame effectively. Emotional contagion or "contagious emotions" in a work or team context is the second major topic with framing implications. Here the key topics include the mirror neurons in the brain, the human tendency to mirror the behavior of others, and the importance of nonverbal communications in framing emotions. The third and final topic addresses two framing techniques necessary for regulating your emotions as a leader: *priming for spontaneity* and *reframing*.

Chapter Six addresses questions of ethics and morality. It begins with a discussion of ethical codes and how to use them to morally position yourself and others in your communications. Moral positioning is a form of framing and is crucially important when you must justify certain means-end relationships or the kind of leader you claim to be. Your moral positioning may be contested by those who view you differently, so it is an important framing topic to explore. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the ways in which crucibles—events that pose great stress and require difficult choices—if properly used, can be important framing moments for leaders who mean to shape ethical organizational cultures.

Chapter Seven emphasizes the overall leadership context of your framing communications. It stresses that framing may be just one element among many in an attribution of leadership. This chapter also proposes four key questions as a way to understand how leadership, context, and framing all fit together to create an outcome. The bulk of the chapter then exposes you to a variety of leadership situations to gain practice in deciphering the ways in which framing factors into a leadership context.

Chapter Eight is about applications; it builds on the framing exercises of the first seven chapters in two ways. First, I don my hat as your executive coach and answer a number of common framing dilemmas that you might encounter as a leader. Second, I present an extended practice exercise highlighting the main points of this book in the context of framing communications involving organizational change and extended campaigns.

Gail T. Fairhurst
Cincinnati, Ohio
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1

The Reality of Framing

THE WORDS *frame* or *framing* have many meanings these days. Most often, they refer to a form or structure, as in "the house has a sturdy frame," or they refer to the act of constructing such a form, as in "framing a house." However, a "frame" can also be a structured way of thinking such as the concept of customer service (designating anything that serves or supports the purchasers of a product or service). *Framing* then is the act of communicating that concept—even something as clichéd as saying, "The customer is always right." However, the English vernacular allows for a lot of wordplay using *frame* or *framing*; we can refer to "framing someone for murder" (sometimes referred to as a *frame-up*), or to "framing an argument," or to "framing the issues."

But could you also talk about "framing reality"? If you're familiar with the old baseball yarn of the three umpires who disagreed about the task of

calling balls and strikes, you might.[1] As the story goes, the first umpire said, "I calls them as they is." The second one said, "I calls them as I sees them." The third and cleverest umpire said, "They ain't nothin' till I calls them."[2] The first two might argue that the swing and a miss can be objectively determined, especially in this age of instant replays and multiple camera angles. True enough, but the third understands that one needs a society's invented game of baseball for a strike to mean something in the first place. A strike is a strike by virtue of the agreed-upon rules of baseball and pronouncement by its authorities. Without the institution of baseball, a swing and a miss could just as easily be fly or mosquito swatting. So as long as the game is under way, the third umpire understands best of all that he frames reality by gesturing and calling, "Strrriiike three. You're out!"

If leadership is like umpiring baseball, what kind of umpire are you? This book will help you answer this question. Unfortunately, the overwhelming majority of leaders are like the first and second umpires. Only a small minority come close to the third, who understands the real power of human communication. Not just a simple transmission, it is the very stuff of reality-making itself.

The Rules of Reality Construction

What is the relationship between leadership and the task of constructing reality? Well, that's what this book is all about. For starters, let's begin with a few guiding rules.

Reality Construction Rule #1: Control the Context

Leaders often cannot control events, but they can control the context under which events are seen if they recognize a framing opportunity.

Some leaders disparage communication as something they just do automatically. They may also label communication "mere rhetoric," "window dressing," or "just words" because it cannot change the hard cold facts of a situation. True as that observation may be, however, it falls far short of being complete.

Consider the situation Robert E. Murray—chairman of the Murray Energy Corporation and co-owner of the Crandall Canyon mine in Utah—faced on August 6, 2007, when the mine caved in with six miners trapped

inside. It was perhaps the most important communications challenge of his career, and it serves to illustrate the effect of most of the rules in this chapter.

As soon as news of the collapse reached him, he could be sure that anxious families, the mining community, and the press would hang on his every word. But could any communication by him change the reality of a mine collapse with six entombed miners?

Of course, neither words nor symbols can alter the physical or material conditions of our world (although they may influence our perceptions of them). However, communications can play a huge role in many other issues surrounding a mine collapse—the comfort and rescue effort updates to the families and mining community; the moral and legal assignment of blame that could ultimately prove costly in a court of law; the efforts at image management for Murray Energy Corporation and its partner that could be key to future business and treatment by federal regulators; the treatment of the press as a means to an end in this regard, and many more.

Robert Murray was not in Utah at the time of the collapse, but upon hearing of it, he reportedly boarded a private jet and was at the Crandall Canyon site within hours, taking command of the rescue operation and giving frequent media updates.[3] Although not all situations so clearly mark their communication exigencies, Murray appeared to recognize an important communication opportunity with the mine collapse. This was his chance to frame reality, and he took it. But was he *competent* in his crisis communications?

Reality Construction Rule #2: Define the Situation

At its most basic level, framing reality means defining "the situation here and now" in ways that connect with others.

In the sense I use it here, *framing* involves the ability to shape the meaning of a subject—usually the situation at hand—to judge its character and significance through the meanings we include and exclude, as well as those we emphasize when communicating.[4] At his first formal news conference on August 7, 2007, how did Robert Murray define "the situation here and now"? He was adamant that an earthquake had caused the mine's collapse—not his company's practice of "retreat mining," which is exceedingly dangerous and tightly regulated. In this "situation here and now," Murray sought to portray

Murray Energy Corporation as without blame. (You can check out Murray's news conference on YouTube.[5])

But Murray went on from there, confidently proclaiming, "We know exactly where the miners are," promising, "I will not leave this mine until the men are rescued dead or alive," and then boldly predicting, "We're going to get them."[6] Curiously, at that same news conference, he spoke of subjects as wide-ranging as the essential nature of the U.S. coal industry for American consumers, new technologies, global warming, and his own rise from miner to founder, co-owner, and president of Murray Energy Corporation. On that hot August day, Robert Murray chose very specific meanings to define "the situation here and now" for those in attendance (and ruled out others that might suggest his company's culpability). That is the essence of framing.

One of the most frequently asked questions about framing is a matter of definition: Is it a structured way of thinking or an act of communicating? In reality, it is both, because a *frame* is that mental picture, and *framing* is the process of communicating that picture to others.[7] However, it can be a little confusing to talk about those "mental pictures" because they can be a single frame or snapshot of a situation, as in "I (Gail Fairhurst) am writing Chapter One right now." Or they can be rather persistent patterns of thought that I have formed, for example, about "book writing" or "first chapter book writing."

I prefer to call these more general structures *mental models* because they help organize our thoughts and serve as underlying expectations for what is likely to happen in new situations.[8] Think of them as a library of past cases from which specific frames emerge each time we communicate.[9] For example, from Robert Murray's mental models for crisis communications, his "deflect responsibility" framing emerged, coupled with the tendency to make some rather bold predictions.

What motivates us to choose one framing strategy over another? The simple and perhaps slightly cynical answer is "self-interest" or "personal goals," but the better answers are "culture" and "sensemaking." As Chapter Two discusses, *culture* supplies us with a tool bag of specific language and arguments to consider when we communicate with another. *Sensemaking* is the situational engagement of mental models (just as the mine collapse

triggered Murray's mental models for crisis communications).[10] In practical terms, to have made sense is to know how to go on in a situation, that is, to know what to say or do next.[11] Chapter Two discusses how mental models make this all possible.

Language becomes a key issue not just in our own sensemaking, but in how effectively we impact the sensemaking of others. In an increasingly complex world, language that is nuanced, precise, and eloquent enables leaders to draw distinctions that others may not see or be able to describe (Chapter Four). Quite often, options for surviving a complex world lie in those distinctions.[12] However, as Freudian slips also demonstrate, more than just conscious processes are at work when we use language. We need to know how to harness our unconscious as a result (Chapter Three).

Finally, and most important, a suitable definition of "the situation here and now" requires that we connect with others in some meaningful way. We have to be able to align others' interests with our own because we are rarely free agents. We are interdependent and often so inextricably so that we cannot accomplish objectives on our own. When we operate with a sense of that interdependence, we are motivated to look for the best ways to connect to others. Robert Murray clearly aimed for such a connection, but did he succeed?

Reality Construction Rule #3: Apply Ethics

"*Reality" is often contested. Framing a subject is an act of persuasion by leaders, one imbued with ethical choices.*

Robert Murray might have made himself the hero of one of those uniquely American success stories were it not for the challenges to his credibility in the hours and days following the mine collapse. U.S. government seismologists from the National Earthquake Information Center in Colorado indicated that it was likely the mine collapse itself that caused the ground to shake, not an earthquake.[13] It also became clear that Murray did not know where the miners were; bore holes were drilled in several unsuccessful attempts to supply oxygen and look for signs of life. Murray's promise not to leave the mine was also broken after three rescuers died and six were injured while trying to reach the miners. By August 23, Murray was telling *National Public Radio*, "It's a deadly mountain, and I'm not going near it."[14]