

# How to Frame a Message: The Art of Persuasion and Negotiation

Lyle Sussman

*Persuasive content needs a focused context. Framing gives perspective, rationale, and structure to what you want to say.*

If the management mantra of the 1990s was "Do more with less," the mantra for the new millennium will be "Do *even* more with *even* less." Managers must accept the reality that the competition for external customers will be reflected in increasing competition for internal resources. More and more, managers will feel the antagonistic forces of requests from team mem-

bers for increased resources and pressure from senior staff to curb those requests and conserve those resources.

The major implication of this scenario is that those managers who thrive will both implicitly understand the importance of negotiation and manifest the skills of effective persuasion. They will view the firm as a "marketplace" where ideas are "bought and sold." Rather than bemoaning their fate, they will learn to sell their proposals and overcome any objections others might raise.

The good news for consultants, in-house trainers, and managers is that the management literature offers an ever-expanding body of theoretical models and practical strategies that provide a solid foundation for designing in-house training programs and crafting personalized coaching tips. However, scanning this work results in a troubling conclusion. Although most of the literature underscores the importance of *framing the argument* or position one is trying to sell, there is precious little how-to advice.

We are usually instructed to follow two parallel streams of logic. First, we are taught to frame the message based on the other party's needs and the specifics of the situation. Unfortunately, this advice is tantamount to telling an insomniac that the best cure for his problem is a good night's sleep. Exactly, but how does he get it? Yes, a frame should be based on needs and the situation; but how does one construct it?

Second, we are told to construct the message so that the listener/reader perceives it with an overarching theme, either evaluative or descriptive. Depending on the specific proposal, we might want the party to interpret the message through a filter of "good-bad," "profit-loss," or "cost-benefit." Unfortunately, this advice still is not specific enough for the manager looking for the words, phrase, or script most likely to elicit the appropriate impression.

We need a new and simple model designed to help managers find those words and write that script. The ability to craft frames may well be the essence of persuasion and negotiation.

## THE FRAME: WHAT IT IS AND WHY IT IS IMPORTANT

A frame orients a reader or listener to examine a message with a certain disposition or inclination. Just as framing a picture focuses attention on what is enclosed *within* that frame, framing a message focuses a reader's or listener's attention on data and premises within the frame. The manager selling an idea frames the message to focus attention on what he believes are the most pivotal or salient issues. Frames help decision makers reduce the complexity of issues and make sense of their

environments. When they see one problem as more urgent or more costly than another, they necessarily focus their attention and marshal corporate resources to reflect that focus. In short, the frame is neither the specific objective of the message nor the data supporting that objective, but rather a focus for assessing the total message.

The use of a frame will vary depending on the persuader's specific agenda and forum. A frame could be the title of a speech a CEO hopes will rally the troops. The CEO establishes the big picture and the perceptual filter he wants the audience to employ while listening to the message. By entitling the speech "My Vision, Your Gain," he establishes the frame by linking his corporate vision with employees' personal needs.

In a one-on-one negotiation, the frame could be stated a number of times to reinforce both its impact and the validity of the request. A manager trying to negotiate a bigger raise from her boss could present a frame during the initial stages of the "sale" and at those points at which the boss seems resistant. The manager might try to use the frame of "fairness and justice" to make her case and refer to the inequity in her current pay or the injustice of her less skilled coworkers receiving higher pay.

When we frame a message, we achieve three interrelated goals. First, we select an evaluative theme or perspective believed to be the most credible, compelling, and appropriate to our intent. That perspective provides a filter through which we want the other party to assess our position and the supporting evidence. Second, we decide on the specific evidence that best supports that perspective. Finally, we create a structure for organizing that evidence. Thus, the frame provides the *perspective* we want the other party to adopt, a *rationale* for the evidence we present, and the *sequential pattern* for presenting that evidence.

Consider this analogy. Suppose you and a colleague wagered on who could complete the same jigsaw puzzle first. A third party buys two copies of the same 350-piece puzzle, dumping the contents of both boxes on a table in front of each of you. Your opponent has access to the box with a picture of the completed puzzle. You do not. Who will win?

A frame is to a persuasive argument as the picture of a completed puzzle is to the jumbled pieces of the puzzle. Both show the "big picture" and provide implicit rules for putting the pieces together. Without the picture and without the frame, chaos prevails over coherence.

### **An Example: The Tough Sell**

Although hypothetical, the example of Cosmos Electronics illustrates the importance of a frame

and key contextual factors in trying to convey a persuasive message under difficult conditions.

Cosmos is a major player in the digital communication industry. Founded with the combined genius of an electrical engineer and the savvy of a street-wise entrepreneur, Cosmos developed an international presence in less than five years from its inception. The founders still maintain day-to-day operational responsibilities and continue to take pride in the company's growth and entrepreneurial spirit.

Tanya Edwards has been at Cosmos for three years and is in charge of product development. In a weekly staff meeting, one of her team members convinces her and the other members that his idea for a breakthrough hand-held digital communicator will "blow away the competition" and create a huge, long-term revenue stream for the company.

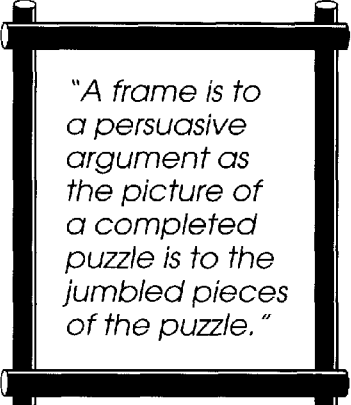
Tanya agrees to champion the cause and to solicit R&D funding from the three-person executive team that signs off on all product development requests. With help from her team, she sets her goal at obtaining \$250,000 to develop a working prototype.

Tanya knows she faces a tough sell. Until recently, Cosmos had experienced a meteoric rise in stock price, sales volume, and market penetration, but the last two quarters have sent shock waves through the company. Because of greater competition and new FCC regulations affecting the product line, its stock has dropped 15 percent, sales have plateaued, and large customers are defecting. As a result, the executive committee has taken a stance of maintenance over growth.

To make matters worse, the last R&D project funded by the committee never got off the drawing board and is still referred to at Cosmos as that "\$500,000 sink hole." In short, the last thing the committee wants to do is risk capital. Nevertheless, out of respect for Tanya they grudgingly agree to give her 20 minutes to make her best case.

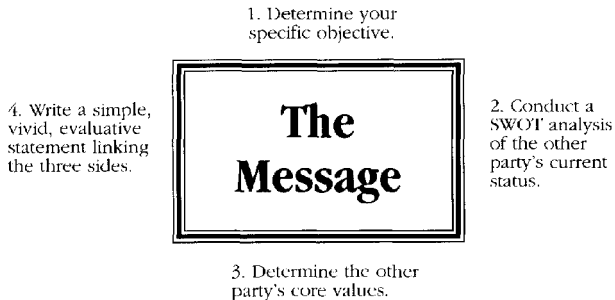
She brings her team together and says, "You guys have to help me plan my sales pitch. We all know that they're geared to say no. We need a hook. How can we get the executive team to at least consider our proposal?" She then turns to a flip chart and says, "OK. Let's brainstorm. How do we hook 'em?" Her team members offer the following hooks:

- \$250,000 is an investment, not a cost.
- \$250,000 is only a small percentage of our gross margin.



*"A frame is to a persuasive argument as the picture of a completed puzzle is to the jumbled pieces of the puzzle."*

**Figure 1**  
**The Four Steps to Framing a Message**



- The last R&D effort was not a sink hole but a learning curve.
- Our mission and values require R&D.

This last statement generates further brainstorming related to the corporate culture, history and philosophy of Cosmos.

After 15 minutes of bristling, energetic discussion, Tanya says, "That's it. I've got it." She then writes the following statement on the flip chart:

Our paralysis and fear is our competitors' greatest asset.

That hook (frame) quickly generated a 20-minute presentation built around three major points:

1. In our competitive industry, managing for the status quo will guarantee our corporate self-destruction.
2. We created this company to bring innovation to the market. Why back off now?
3. My team's proposal for a hand-held digital communicator will return us to our glory and terrify our competitors.

She made the pitch and got the funding.

Tanya's frame was specifically created for a persuasive message to the senior management team. However, it could have been incorporated into a negotiation session. Tanya might have been asked to sit down with the team to craft a negotiated compromise, a position falling somewhere between their reluctance to fund any R&D and her attempt to secure \$250,000. But again, she would have tried to focus the negotiation on the belief that failure to fund her prototype would put Cosmos at a competitive disadvantage.

#### **BUILDING A FRAME**

**I**n our hypothetical example, Tanya Edwards developed the frame for her proposal through a brainstorming session with her

team. However, not all managers have access to brainstorming teams, or the skill to facilitate such a session. Moreover, brainstorming depends on the creative potential and commitment of participants, which is inherently variable. What follows are four sequential steps for building a frame regardless of one's creative potential or access to group brainstorming. These strategies reflect the metaphor presented in **Figure 1**.

#### **Step 1: Determine your specific objective.**

This step is reflected at the top of the frame in Figure 1. What specifically do you want the decision-maker (person or group) to do? In the example above, the specific objective was to secure \$250,000 in R&D funding from the executive committee.

There is a fundamental reason why you must begin here when constructing your frame: *All subsequent decisions about your frame are made on the basis of your specific objective.* In other words, decisions about values, threats, or opportunities are necessarily driven by what you are asking the party to do. Tanya Edwards knew she had a tough sell not only because of Cosmos's declining market position but, more important, because of her specific request relative to that decline.

Sometimes the objective (opening/bid/position) will be stated in financial terms, as demonstrated in the example. Other objectives will reflect the specific agenda of the person or group making the proposal. A manager might try to "sell" upper management on implementing flextime for his staff. Or a marketing manager might try to "sell" senior managers on a new compensation program for the field sales force.

Obviously, your objective could change during the course of the presentation, depending on the "buyer's" counter arguments. For many, if not most, in-house sales calls, the final agreement often represents a compromise between the parties. Nevertheless, without a clear way to measure success or failure, you approach the sale without a vision, direction, or purpose. Moreover, without a clear proposal to accept, negotiate, or reject, buyers will feel that their valuable time is being wasted.

#### **2. Conduct a focused SWOT analysis of the other party's current status.**

Positioned at the right side of the frame, a SWOT (Strength, Weakness, Opportunity and Threat) analysis is a fundamental tool in corporate strategic planning. Once planners have conducted a SWOT analysis, they are in a position to articulate the mission, strategy, and objectives of the organization. The logic of SWOT also provides a

powerful tool for framing your message. You are trying to persuade a specific person or group at a certain point in time. At the time of your proposal, that party possesses certain strengths and weaknesses while being buffeted by an external environment composed of threats and opportunities.

Strengths are typically defined as abilities, talents, core competencies, and resources. Weaknesses are defined as a deficiency in or lack of same. When you analyze other parties' strengths and weaknesses, you answer a basic question: What makes them strong and what makes them weak?

Opportunities and threats denote the external environment affecting the party. Any force in the environment that enhances the party's ability to perform represents an opportunity. Examples include favorable economic conditions, positive customer relations, and brand loyalty. On the other hand, any force that diminishes the party's ability to perform is a threat. Examples include poor economic conditions, customer defection, and increasing competition. Opportunities represent potential gain, threats potential loss.

The goal of a SWOT analysis is to develop strategies that (a) make the most of organizational strengths and external opportunities and/or (b) minimize internal weaknesses and external threats. Although Tanya Edwards did not explicitly ask her team to conduct a SWOT analysis, they created a frame that implicitly addressed Cosmos's internal weaknesses and external threats. What her team accomplished implicitly and serendipitously, you can accomplish deliberately and explicitly.

The major guideline for completing Step 2 is to focus on *the most significant element* in each of the four SWOT dimensions. Thus, rather than searching exhaustively for all strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, focus on the most significant of them. Follow the 80-20 rule: What single issue or factor provides the greatest insight into each of the four SWOT dimensions?

### 3. Determine the other party's core values.

This step is shown at the bottom of Figure 1. Values reflect character, motives and behavior. What underlying principles guide the other party's behavior? What values do they cherish? What basic beliefs about themselves and others direct their actions? When you answer these questions, you have determined the values affecting the buyer's decision.

Values may be demonstrated directly (explicitly) or indirectly (implicitly). Examples of the former include personal or corporate mission statements, slogans or posters, and overt comments (written or spoken) expressing values and beliefs. For some individuals and groups, how-

ever, the values are implicit and must be inferred. Examples here include unstated norms, attitudes toward working conditions, and personal appearance.

One useful technique for developing a frame based on analyzing core values is to demonstrate any inconsistency between what other parties espouse and how they actually behave. This technique is an application of Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory. If you are able to frame your message by demonstrating a contradiction between stated values and actual behavior, you have tapped into a powerful persuasive technique. Tanya Edwards and her team crafted a frame that highlighted Cosmos's espoused belief in the importance of entrepreneurship while running daily operations contrary to that belief. The company "talked" competition and entrepreneurship, but "walked" fear and conservatism.

### 4. Write a simple, vivid, evaluative statement that links Steps 1, 2, and 3.

This final step is represented at the left side of Figure 1. The statement Tanya Edwards wrote on the flip chart that both summarized and synthesized the team's brainstorming session met the three defining characteristics of Step 4.

*Simple:* The statement was only a single sentence, without adverbial clauses or complex construction. It contained only nine words. If the statement of your frame has more than 15 words, it is probably too complex and too long.

*Vivid:* Suppose Tanya had written the following statement on the flip chart:

Our inability to take decisive action and our apparent trepidation are weaknesses that our competitors can use to our disadvantage.

Although this statement is close in meaning to the actual statement, its *psychological impact* is not. (Moreover, it is 20 words long). Tanya's statement used the words "paralysis," "fear," and "asset," all of which carry an emotional punch. Choose words that are not only heard or read but also *felt*. There is a simple test to determine whether or not your frame is vivid: Can the other party remember the exact wording two hours after you presented it?

*Evaluative:* The frame must orient a decision maker to assess information from the specific perspective that casts the most favorable light on your proposal.

Depending on your specific objective, the statement of your frame could prepare your reader or listener to judge subsequent arguments and evidence as representing a position on either end of the following value dichotomies: good-

bad, right-wrong, smart-stupid, risky-conservative.

In constructing the frame along an evaluative dimension, recognize that the valence of the statement may be implicit rather than explicit. For example, Tanya Edwards did not use the words "good," "bad," "right," "wrong," "smart," or "stupid" in her statement. She used connotation rather than denotation to create the intended valence.

*Links steps 1, 2, and 3:* Tanya's goal was to obtain R&D funding. Her team implicitly recognized the company's external threats and internal weaknesses. Finally, their statement reflected a mismatch between an espoused value of entrepreneurship and daily actions motivated by fear.

Because the frame must meet the three characteristics of simplicity, vividness, and evaluation, the third characteristic will necessarily produce a statement that intimates and suggests. In other words, the best frames *imply* the specific request, the SWOT analysis, and value assessment, rather than *explicitly* elaborating them. If the frame were to explicitly elaborate the top, right side, and bottom, the statement of the frame might be longer than the message itself. Recall the definition presented earlier. The frame is not the request. Rather, it is the theme, focus, or perceptual set you want the other party to accept or adopt.

Just as there is a test for the frame's vividness, there is also a test for its ability to link steps 1, 2, and 3. If the frame raises thoughtful questions and introspection rather than immediate dismissal, it passes the test.

**A** popular negotiation skills program builds its promotional materials on the following ad copy: "You don't get what you deserve; you get what you negotiate." We can take this ad copy one step further. Effective negotiators do more than simply ask for what they want; they frame what they ask. The model and four steps presented in this article will not guarantee that all your proposals will be ac-

cepted or funded. However, these steps will increase the probability that your proposal will be considered. And without consideration, there can be no acceptance. □

## References

- Jay Conger, "The Necessary Art of Persuasion," *Harvard Business Review*, May-June 1998, pp. 85-95
- Jane E. Dutton and Susan E. Ashford, "Selling Issues to Top Management," *Academy of Management Review*, July 1993, pp. 397-410.
- S.E. Dutton and S. Jackson, "Categorizing Strategic Issues: Links to Organizational Action," *Academy of Management Review*, 12 (1987): 76-90.
- K. Eisenhardt, "Making Fast Decisions in High Velocity Environments," *Academy of Management Journal*, 32 (1989): 543-576.
- A. Festinger, *Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957).
- Terri Fine, "The Impact of Issue Framing on Public Opinion: Toward Affirmative Action Programs," *Social Science Journal*, 29, 3 (1992): 323-335.
- A. Margaret Neale and Max Bazerman, "The Effects of Framing and Negotiator Overconfidence on Bargaining Behaviors and Outcomes," *Academy of Management Journal*, 28 (1985): 34.
- W.K. Schilit and F.J. Paine, "Are Examinations of the Underlying Dynamics of Strategic Decision Subject to Upward Influence Activity?" *Journal of Management Studies*, 24 (1986): 161-187.

**Lyle Sussman** is a professor of management at the University of Louisville, Kentucky.