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Tips for framing for success

1. First, recognise that all your behaviour is driven by how you frame the world. An example of a very high-level frame is a 'glass half-full or half-empty' approach to life. Note down some of your over-arching frames.

2. Closely related to frames are our 'implicit theories' about everything. We formulate these based on our experience of life. You'll have your own theories, for example, about the ideal partner, about leadership and about how you influence your boss.

   But, implicit theories aren't always accurate - due to 'unscientific formulation'. It's a good idea to surface and test your key theories.

3. Disagreements are often as a result of clashing frames. If you're interested in resolving the clash, it is often helpful to get base assumptions (frames) on the table. You may find that there is not much in dispute or that differences are irreconcilable. Either way, it will help you move on.

4. Strong teams often use shared frames for key aspects of their work. A great teambuilding exercise is to have your team identify and clarify the team's shared frames.

ARE YOU FRAMING FOR SUCCESS OR FRAMING FOR FAILURE?

It's all in the frame

Imagine you're on a field trip. It's no ordinary excursion and you're taking pictures to prove it! Looming large on your camera's digital screen is a magnificently framed picture of the tallest mountain on earth. What mountain would you be looking at?

It may surprise you that it isn't Everest! In fact, you're not anywhere near Asia. The mountain before you is Mauna Kea and you're in Hawaii. Mount Everest is indeed the highest mountain in the world – standing at 8,850m above sea level. But 'highest' measures height above sea level. 'Tallest' measures from the mountain's base. From its base, some 6000m below sea level, Mauna Kea stands at 10,200m. In a mountain context, that's head and shoulders above Everest.

Making sense of the world

The lure of Everest is not that it is the tallest mountain, but that it is the highest. Summiting Everest means that you're literally standing on the highest point in the whole world. And, far more important than the picture you've framed in the camera's screen, to prove you arrived, are your many mental frames that will have got you to the summit.

We all make sense of the world by breaking information into manageable chunks. Then we categorise it, based on what we've learned before. Psychologists refer to this categorisation as framing. Importantly, framing isn't objective – it's extremely personal. Hopefully though, your common experiences and shared insights (including through education) means that others will hold similar frames. Common experiences will mostly be interpreted in the same way. For example, agreeing definitions of 'highest' and 'tallest'.

Framing for the future

In a competitive world though, we don't always want to see things as everyone else does. Innovation is about seeing what everyone else does, but in new ways. The crisis currently confronting newspapers (and their staff) is a dramatic and obviously very painful example of innovation and reframing.

Using a much broader, historical frame, the imminent decline of the printed newspaper is unsurprising. The phenomenon of the 'newspaper' is tightly linked with that of the industrial economy. One-off news sheets go back thousands of years, but the first newspaper appeared in the early part of the 17th century. Invention of the newspaper followed the invention of the printing press, less than two hundred years before.

Had you been a scribe at the time, with a near monopoly on printed matter, the rise of the mechanised press would have upset your frame.

Several hundred years later, it's again the incumbents, who have enjoyed relative monopoly, who are being displaced. Today, anyone with a mobile device and an internet connection can contribute and distribute 'news'. Like scribes in their day, printed newspapers will soon largely be assigned to history. Their time is over. Digital media and the internet have reframed the news game.

Winners and losers

Frames usually determine winners and losers. When there is a paradigm shift, there will also be a shift in fortunes. People and organisations that are unable to make the shift undoubtedly lose out – remember the scribe!

Initially, the impact of the 'new way' may not be very noticeable. There may even be a sense that old and new can co-exist. However, as the new frame gains momentum the old frame becomes increasingly irrelevant. Recognising the frame change is vital for success and survival.

From macro-frame to micro-frame

The macro-level examples of framing help illustrate the concept. But, we must return to micro-level framing to derive insights that are actionable at a personal level. Your own set of 'frames according to me' impact on everything you do. Yet, because they operate pretty much subconsciously and on automatic, you're probably not too aware of them.

The benefit of 'automatic' is that your brainpower is focussed elsewhere. The downside is that you may not detect changes in the wider context that require you to adjust your deeply-held frames to avoid being 'out of synch'. For example, many hold the mindset of stability coming from staying in one place. Then, macro-frames change which result in business closure and job loss. However, instead of looking to places where new opportunities have opened up, their unconscious 'stability frame' chains them to a place with limited or no job prospects.

Challenges, such as change in work circumstances, often force us to re-examine our frames. Usually though, the timing is really, really bad! At those times personal stress increases, which has the effect of closing down the brain's creative centres. Although options usually do emerge out of necessity, the more productive time to think about your frames is when things are going well.

What are your frames?

The frames you hold and use impact your life profoundly. How aware are you of these frequently used frames? Stop now, if you can, and note down and reflect on the frames that are driving current behaviour. If, like most, you find it a challenge, you probably need to think about framing more often.