Reframing as an Essential Coaching Strategy and Tool

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Mendelsohn was walking down a street in Prague. It was 1936. Mendelsohn is Jewish and is accustomed to abuse being showered on him by the many bigots in his city. He confronts a large man who sneers at him and declares: "Swine!" Mendelsohn responds by bowing and stating: "It is an honor to meet you Swine, my name is Mendelsohn."

My daughter-in-law who works at the philosophy department at Bowdoin College gave me a T-Shirt as a gift. It came from a student from her department who was competing in a departmental contest regarding best names to put on a T-Shirt. The statement on my shirt was: "Is it solipsistic in here, or is it just me?" I loved this T-Shirt. For those who are not philosophically-inclined, 'Solipsism" is a school of philosophy that is based on the assumption that one's own internal reality is the only thing about which we can be certain. External reality is something we assume to be the case.

Both Prague's Mendelsohn and Bowdoin College's student of philosophy are engaged in a process of reframing. They both have taken the most common way in which to interpret what has been said and then standing the statement (and underlying thought) on its head. In the case of Mendelsohn, the bigot had assigned the term "Swine" to Mendelsohn (as a Jew). Mendelsohn, in turn, reframed the situation by assigning this term to the bigot.

In the case of the philosophy student's statement, the term "solipsism" is shifted (reframed) from a statement about a shared perspective ("in here") to a statement about one's own unique perspective ("is it just me")—the latter being in keeping with the school of philosophy being addressed. Both of these reframes elicit humor, a moment of mental gymnastics, and appreciation for a specific way of thinking (bigotry and solipsism). The Mendelsohn episode comes from a book of Jewish Humor (Novak and Waldoks, 1981, p. 82), while the T-Shirt statement comes for a competition in which clever philosophic thinking is being honored.

There are two other T-Shirts that are being sold on the PBS website. The statement on one of these T-Shirts is quite puzzling: "What has 4 letters, occasionally has 12 letters, always has 6 letters, but never has 5 letters." This totally baffling until periods are placed after "letters" in each instance—and several additional words are inserted. Instead of this statement being a convoluted question, it is a series of declarations. The word "what" has 4 letters. The word "occasionally" has 12 letters. The word "always" has 6 letters. The word "never" has 5 letters. We have to reframe in order to understand.

The second T-Shirt contains a musical clef and staff with three sets of numbers placed on the staff. One set is 6/4, the second is 9/8, and the third is 11/10. Under the musical staff is a simple statement: "These are difficult times." While we would probably all agree that the world in which we are living presents us with many "difficult" challenges, the statement on this T-Shirt concerns a different meaning for the word "times." This word refers to the three sets of numbers. They are time signatures indicating the number of beats in each measure (top number) and type of beats that are to be performed in each measure (bottom number). Each of these three different time signatures represents a way of performing music that is quite challenging for the musician. These three "times" portend a difficult "time" for the performer. We have to reframe the meaning of "times" if we are to savor the musical "joke" being played on us.

What is the Source of Reframing?

To gain a full appreciation of the mental gymnastics involved in reframing, we need to first draw a distinction between what Gregory Bateson (1979) and those following him have labeled First-Order and Second-Order thinking (and the accompanying concepts of first and second order change). The distinction to be drawn might best be understood by offering a brief dialogue between two people (Fred and Alan), with Fred serving as Alan's boss:

Fred: "Why don't you just try harder."

Alan: "Would you get off my back! I'm already working as hard as I can! It just won't work."
Fred: "O.K., maybe we should add one or two more people to your crew."

Alan: "No! That would only make things worse. I would have to devote all of my time to training these new guys."

Fred: "Well, I give up . . . what do you think could be done?"

Alan: "I don't know . . . but I'm getting desperate . . . I guess like you must feel. Maybe we need to change the goal . . . be a little less ambitious. Or maybe we've taken on the wrong job . . . maybe our division is simply unable to meet this goal. Or even more basically, maybe we've approached this problem in an entirely wrong way."

This interaction between Fred and Alan is typical of those that occur in many organizations from time to time. A problem resists solution. More (or less) of the same thing is tried with no results. People try harder or they ease off a bit. No difference. More money is thrown in or a significant amount of money is pulled out of the project -- still no appreciable effect.

Someone like Alan comes along to suggest the unthinkable -- maybe the problem itself should be reviewed and even redefined.

Maybe a goal was set too high or too low, or a person or department is conceived as a barrier when actually a resource (or vice versa). This reconceptualization of a problem requires a "second order" change in the way the situation is being addressed, instead of the "first order" way of thinking that usually is initiated when a problem is encountered.

The notion of first and second order thinking finds its origins in two unlikely fields of study: linguistics and experimental psychology. We will briefly detour to these two fields in order to better explain the nature and use of the powerful. techniques associated with second-order thinking—and the related strategy of re-framing.

Meta-Language and Learning How to Learn
One of the dilemmas faced by linguistics, semanticists and philosophers in recent years who study languages and their use is that one must use language in order to discuss language. In discussing the inability of most languages to describe ongoing, organic processes, for instance, one must make use of a specific language which is itself limited, static and unyielding to an accurate and vivid description of these dynamic processes. This paradoxical condition concerning the use of language to talk about language was addressed by Bertrand Russell (Whitehead and Russell, 1910) in his Theory of Logical Types. This noted philosopher (and social activist) observed that any system, words, or taxonomies that are being used to describe a particular collection of objects, experiences and so forth, cannot itself be a part of this collection. In other words, we must somehow move outside of a system when we are trying to describe it.

Alfred Korzybski (2024) has similarly noted that a map of a territory is not itself the territory. A map of Seattle Washington, for instance, is not Seattle, but only a map. Similarly, the word "cat" cannot scratch you. The word "chair" is not actually a chair, but only a representation of this type of furniture. These examples are obvious, and even absurd. Yet, often we find ourselves in the difficult and puzzling situation of not being sure whether we are addressing the real problem or only a representation of the problem.

We encounter people (often ourselves) who confuse the concept (e.g. "superego") with the reality that this concept is supposed to represent. Thus, we search for the location of the superego in the cerebral cortex, rather than accepting the concept as a useful metaphor to describe a complex set of human activities and experiences. We must somehow be able to distinguish between the map and territory, between words and things, between "first-order"

language that describes things and "second-order" language that describes how we use language.

In an entirely different field, experimental psychology, a similar problem was confronted in the 1940s and 1950s by Edward Tolman (1948). Animals which were being run through a maze not only learned how to execute this particular maze more rapidly and with fewer errors over time, they also were able to run through a new maze more rapidly and with fewer errors. Apparently, these animals learned not only how to run a specific maze, but also learned how to run mazes in general. This same phenomenon has been observed in the learning of many other types of tasks and puzzles by human as well as nonhuman subjects. This phenomenon has been labeled "the establishment of a learning set" or, more simply, "learning how to learn."

In the case of both meta-language and "learning how to learn", two levels of activity seem to be taking place simultaneously. On the one level, people are using language and are learning how to perform certain tasks. On the second level, they are talking about language and learning about how they learn to perform certain tasks. Similarly, there are two levels at which change seems to be taking place. At one level, the function of any planned change effort can be conceived as the acceleration (facilitation) of a desired transition or deceleration (blocking) of an undesirable transition that has already begun in an organization.

First order thinking and resulting first-order change effort, for example, might involve increasing the efficiency of an accounting system that is already in place or extending the length of a training workshop from three to four days. This first order perspective requires only that a person or organization do more or less of something than now is the case. It often requires that we apply readily available habits of thought—what Daniel Kahneman (2013) identified as the "heuristics" involved in the process of "fast thinking."

The success resulting from this way of thinking and the change that is being made can usually be measured in quantitative terms. The change and resulting outcomes are rather easily observed and understood. First-order thinking and change occur frequently in the life of individuals and organizations. We find that personal habits and collective routines reign supreme in daily. Often it is hardly even noticed if the way of thinking in routinized and the quantity of change is minimal.

At a second level, thinking is "slowed down." Assumptions are challenged. Collaborative dialogue is encouraged among people offering diverse perspectives (Page, 2010; Bergquist, 2013). Planned second-order change can be conceived as the transformation of some structure, process or attitude in the organization. A transformation process involves a qualitative shift.

Something is altered in form, such that the old ways of measuring it is no longer valid. An organization, for instance, installs a new accounting system rather than seeking to improve the current system. The training program is abandoned, in favor of social-technical systems consultation (Taylor and Felten, 1993), rather than being lengthened.

Second-order thinking and change is always abrupt and noticeable. It may arise from a series of smaller, first-order thoughts and changes that eventually require new ways of thinking and/or a second-order change: "the straw that broke the camel's back." To keep with the straw metaphor, one piece of straw which is placed on the ground becomes two pieces of straw when a second piece is set down beside it. At some point, when a certain number of pieces of straw are laid on top of one another, we no longer have pieces of straw, but rather a haystack. The haystack is a single, coherent whole -- a system of sorts -- that can be identified by a single word. A qualitative, second-order change has taken place, based on several, incremental first-order changes. Similarly, a child at some point becomes an adult, a group of people become an organization--a set of minor irritations become a problem.

First-order thinking involves gradual assessment and reassessing of a situation, while first-order change involves gradual evolutionary alteration in some system. Second-order thinking involves a major, rapid shift—such as we will find in the engagement of re-framing processes. Second-order change, in turn, involves abrupt revolutionary alteration. Typically, the changes we make in any social institution or in our own individual lives are either evolutionary or revolutionary in nature. While the end of a first-order, evolutionary change may represent a qualitative difference from the beginning, each change that is made will be minimal and may represent no qualitative difference from the immediately preceding change. The change can be considered transitional rather than transformational -- in Thomas Kuhn's terms, a part of "normal science" rather than a "paradigm shift".

Thus, the change is likely to be more acceptable and less stressful for a greater number of people than would be the case if the change were large and abrupt. This incremental strategy of personal and social change holds one major disadvantage. In the slow, progressive movement toward some change goal, the sense of direction and motivation to be found at the beginning of the change initiative may be lost. As a result, the change effort may simply fade away before the goal is attained ("not with a bang, but a whimper") or the change effort may become misguided and end at a quite different point from that first intended.

Second-order, revolutionary change represents a profound transformation in the person or institution—a paradigm shift. We must keep this in mind when considering the powerful tools of reframing. In recalling the opening case of Mendelsohn, we might wonder if the bigot will

knock Mendelsohn to the ground (or do something even more violent) after the term "Swine" has been placed back on him. The shift in one's consideration of reality—as portrayed on the solipsism T-shirt—might not be so funny when the barracking of one's own reality from external confirmation is found in someone who is schizophrenic or in someone embracing as "insane" conspiracy theory (Weitz and Bergquist, 2022).

Because re-thinking is disruptive and abrupt, the motivation to think slowly in a new way must be great, for it is much easier and less energy-consuming to rely on habitual, fast thinking than to engage in slow, self-critical thinking. Similarly, the motivation needed to begin a second-order change and a sense of the direction that the change should take must not be lost during the course of the change. Levels of stress, and resistance to this transformational change will be great. Typically, power and manipulation are required to bring about a re-thinking of a challenging situation or to bring about second-order change. Alternatively, one can adopt a strategy that involves careful movement between first and second order change -- between evolution and revolution. One can also make occasional and appropriate use of reframing as second-order process.

Reframing as Second Order Thinking

Reframing encourages a shift from first to second order conceptualizations of a problem, yielding valuable insights (second-order learning), creative solutions or even recognition that a problem does not in fact exist. The problem can be viewed from a different angle or from the viewpoint of a person who comes from a very different context (the proverbial "person from Mars"). The three sets of numbers, for instance, can be viewed from the perspective of someone coming from the world of music rather than from the world of daily-life.

Second-order thinking is encouraged, following by second-order learning, when a professional coach challenges their client to re-think and potentially reframe their goals and when they invite their client to re-think and potentially reframe the way they are viewing their current context. Ultimately, the coach can support and work with their client in re-thinking and re-framing the strategies and tactics they will engage in moving from their current state (context) to their desired state (goals).

The reframing might even mean moving between personal and collective versions of reality (current state) and purpose (desired state). With a coach's assistance, a client can move from the collective to the personal level ("What ultimately does all of this mean for me?") or in the opposite direction from the personal to the collective ("Will this initiative actually make any difference for anyone?"). We see inquiry into the source of reality on our Solipsism T-Shirt. Is this my reality or is this a shared reality? There might ultimately be no more important—or profoundly disturbing—question to be asked and

potential reframing to be engaged than that associated with an inquiry into the source of ones' version of reality.

Specifically, a leader reframes an issue (often with the assistance of a coach) by taking one of three approaches:

- Defining the goals associated with a specific problem in a new way.
- Describing the current context within which the problem exists in a new way.
- Identifying a new set of strategies for solving the problem.

I turn to a more complete description of each approach as a way to arrive at a fuller appreciation of the powerful and diverse use of this coaching tool.

The Reframing of Goals

Professional coaching is often described as a process that helps clients define and achieve their personal and/or career goals. While I would suggest that most coaches do much more than this, this statement does identify an important coaching model, namely reflection on and then planning for implementation of goals. In many instances, individuals and organizations tend to work hard to accomplish a specific, elusive goal (first order), rather than reconsidering whether or not this goal, in its present form, is actually important or worth-while. This is where reframing can add new perspectives. Problems inevitably involve a discrepancy between the current and desired states of a system. Many problems can be at least partially solved by reconsidering the importance, relevance or the very nature of the desired state.

I turn, by way of example, to a personnel problem facing Susan, manager in a medium-sized high-tech firm. She is not satisfied with the work of her subordinate, Ralph. Susan firmly believes that Ralph needs to change his behavior, yet she also knows that she is sometimes perceived as a hard-driving manager who sets goals that are too high for her managers. Is she being accused of pushing too hard because she is a female? Perhaps her hard-driving reputation is nothing more than her commitment to the company. Or is she really setting goals too high? If she is being unrealistic in setting goals, then her problem with Ralph (and perhaps with other managers) might best be solved not by finding new ways of motivating her managers or by introducing new technologies (first-order change), but by helping her managers to re-examine their priorities and potentially re-adjust their production goals according to valid strategic imperatives (second-order change).

The conversation between Susan and her coach, Alicia, might go something like this:

> Susan: I can't seem to find an effective way of getting Ralph to meet the goals I have set for him. He keeps offering excuses rather than solutions and frequently pushes his problems up to me or down to his own subordinates. Yet I know Ralph is trying hard and

that he has hired great people who work hard. He is particularly effective in motivating new employees. I wonder what I can do to make these goals a reality.

Alicia: It sounds like you have tried several different strategies. [Susan had already identified three different approaches she has taken in working with Ralph, ranging from incentive plans to suggesting a reorganization of his department.] Why is it important that you achieve these production goals?

Susan: Because we established these goals in our five-year plan for Ralph's department.

Alicia: Why is it important for you to accomplish the goals set in your five-year plan?

Susan: If I don't accomplish these goals, it will look bad for my division and—frankly—for me and my own future in this organization.

Alicia: How do you know that other people in this organization expect you and your division to meet these goals?

Susan: Well, the five-year plan says that we should . . . but actually I don't really know how important these goals are for our CEO or the other division directors. We rarely seem to talk about our five-year plan during our Executive Council meetings. It's often frustrating for me. I seem to be the only one who is interested in that crazy plan!

Alicia: So why are you so interested in that "crazy plan"?

Susan: You know, that's a good question. Sometimes I worry that I might be using the five-year plan as an excuse. Maybe I rely on these goals because I'm ambitious and look for any argument to get my managers motivated.

Alicia: So, you're a very ambitious person and this leads to increased productivity on the part of other members of your division—including Ralph. They want to help you achieve your ambitious goals. I wouldn't even be surprised to learn that they want to achieve these goals because of their loyalty to you, rather than because they are interested in the five-year plan. Is this possible?

Susan: Interesting. You know, I'm not sure.

Alicia: Maybe this is something you could find out.

Susan: Yeah. Let's talk a bit about how I could find this out.

Alicia: And you might also want to reflect on what your goals would really be if you didn't have to rely on the five-year plan. Or perhaps you might verify how relevant the 5-year plan really is to the CEO and the company's future. If it's critical, you might want to reflect on ways in which you could influence the other managers and your CEO to either take the five-year plan more seriously… or maybe replace or adjust it.

Susan: I would like to discuss this five-year plan issue at some time in the future. But right now . . . I would like to re-examine my own goals for this division in this new light and, in particular, the goals that have been identified for Ralph's department.

Susan and Alicia move on to explore other aspects of Susan's problem with Ralph. However, at this point Alicia has already been valuable to Susan in helping her reflect on one aspect of her problem with Ralph. Specifically, Alicia has helped Susan reframe a set of goals. What specifically are the approaches available to Alicia as a professional coach?

Goal Replacement
One goal can be replaced by a second goal that is more closely affiliated with an individual's or an organization's true interests. A coach like Alicia might ask her client questions like:
- What do you really want to see happen?
- What do you/your department really need?
- What is even more important than this goal?
- What would happen if you really took this goal seriously?
- What would you like the outcomes of this project to be?
- What would you like to celebrate three years from now if you were very successful in this unit of the organization?

When forced to clarify goals, a manager like Susan often can be more successful simply by directing her efforts more consistently toward the truly important goals of her division or organization. Other coaching strategies (particularly Aspirational coaching) that emphasize the clarification of one's purpose or broader goals also provide leaders with an opportunity to establish and monitor their goals; however, the professional coaching process additionally encourages leaders to reflect on her actions and question their choices from a higher level of awareness (second order change).

Espoused and Enacted Goals

A leader can also be encouraged by her coach to examine her current behavior and the behavior of other people in her department, division or organization against their respective goals. She engages in this professional process in order to consider whether or not the current, enacted behavior exemplifies the espoused goal or actually another, as yet unidentified, goal. A coach might ask his coaching colleague:

- If you are not moving very effectively toward your espoused goal then perhaps this is not truly the goal toward which you are working. What might this goal be?
- If you were someone from Mars who came to your unit and observed what is being done and what people are talking about, what would you assume to be the goals and purposes of this part of the organization?
- How do you think members of your unit benefit from the way(s) in which your unit now operates?
- What are some of the unspoken truths about this goal around here?

Seemingly irrational or counterproductive actions often yield *secondary gains* for an individual or organization. (Bandler and Grinder, 1979) A work team that never meets its production quota may be meeting its real goal: controlling the operations of the company. All of the other production units of the company must adjust their work schedule around this slower unit. Similarly, the director of a social service agency may actually want to retain control over all aspects of the agency's operations. He attempts to keep the organization in a state of crisis to justify his active involvement in all parts of the organization.

If a client can identify these secondary gains/benefits and the goals that lie behind these goals, then she can identify other behaviors that more successfully meet these goals or that meet these goals without hindering the work of other people in the organization. This is an appreciative approach to addressing a seemingly intractable process. One first appreciates the secondary gains—then looks to other strategies for achieving these gains. Given the work team's interest in influencing the overall operations of the company, for instance, one can set up new structures in the organization that enable workers to influence production decisions without having to resort to surreptitious production slowdowns. Similarly, the social service agency director can be encouraged to employ alternative methods of being involved in all aspects of agency operations without having to resort to crisis management.

Sequencing and Timing of Goals

Alicia can use a approach to coaching. This approach involves the re-sequencing of existing goals: one goal no longer is considered to be in conflict with another but rather is conceived as enabling the other goal to be achieved. Two members of a management team, for instance, argue about whether the

company should spend its money on a new marketing venture or on a major new research and development initiative. The argument is best reframed by asking whether or not the achievement of either of these goals is likely to increase or decrease the achievement of the other goal.

Rather than argue about the isolated importance of either of these goals, one can reflect on sequence and timing. A coach might ask:

- Would the new marketing venture, if successful, increase the probability that a research and development initiative will be mounted and funded?
- Would a successful R&D project enhance the prospects of a new marketing push?

By reframing a conflict in terms of synergistic sequence rather than isolated importance, one can break up many log-jams concerning program priorities.

Appealing to a Higher-Level Goal

One can also re-conceptualize a coaching issue by appealing to a higher-level goal. This can move an individual or organization from a first order to second order conceptualization of a coaching issue—in particular a problem or dilemma. A coach might ask:

- You have identified X as a goal, while Ralph has identified Y. In what ways are these goals compatible? Is there an overarching goal about which you can both agree?
- What goal(s) can all members of your executive team agree on?

A masterful professional coach can often assist her client by focusing on meta-level outcomes, so that the client can negotiate differences with other members of her organization at a point of common agreement and need. (Bandler and Grinder, 1979, pp. 160-162) Two production teams, for instance, might disagree about quality control. A coach can help one or both leaders of these teams reframe their argument by first seeing if they can agree on a definition of quality standards. Then, given that definition, they can design a series of pilot tests to assess the effectiveness of each quality control procedure.

Managers may also experience internal conflict regarding priorities. Perhaps part of Ralph's problem concerns the number and diversity of goals that have been assigned to his department. He is confronted with what we described earlier as a rugged landscape. There are many peaks rather than there being one dominant peak. At another level, we might wonder if part of the problem resides not in the landscape but rather in Ralph's predisposition to dreaming. Is Ralph a bit of a dreamer because he is trying to escape from a set of conflicting priorities? Are his dreams nothing more than a mirror of the disparate or mis-aligned goals that have been placed on his department by other dreamers in his organization? He might become more effective as a manager if he is given a clearer and more strategically congruous set of goals. At the very least, Ralph and the people who report to him will

become more fully accountable for accomplishing departmental goals if these goals are thoughtful and explicitly aligned with one another.

The Reframing of Contexts

As in the case of goal reframing, there are several ways in which a masterful coach can help her client reframe the context within which he is operating. First, the professional coach can encourage her client to re-interpret the so-called facts associated with the context in a different way. Second, she can encourage her client to shift his attention from one aspect of the context to another. Third, a masterful coach can help her client re-punctuate the events that occur in a particular context, so that the cause and effects associated with each of these events are redefined. We will briefly describe each of these approaches.

Re-interpreting Facts

Any context can readily be interpreted and described in a variety of ways. For instance, in the puzzle found on the first PBS T-Shirt, there are specific words ("what," "occasionally," "always" and "never") that are immediately identified as the qualifiers or initiators of a question rather than being the focus of the question. The puzzle is solved when we suddenly realize that a focus must be placed on the number of letters in each of these words. We move from a "macro" level (words) to a "micro" level (letters) in our re-framing of the question and re-interpretation of the statements being asked on the T-Shirt. These statements are declarations rather than questions. A second-order change in our viewpoint is required if we are to make sense of that which we are reading on the T-Shirt.

Similarly, our second PBS T-Shirt requires a re-interpretation of a specific word ("times") which, in turn, unlocks the mystery of three sets of numbers. A first order examination of this T-Shirt would leave us bewildered. What does a musical clef, staff and set of numbers have to do with our recognition that the world in which we are living is quite challenging right now. In fact, it is a bit insulting to bring in music when I am faced with "difficult times." As in the case of all-too-many circumstances, we become irritated with something because we simply don't understand what is being said or written. A moment of reflection and reframing can help us reduce the irritation, resulting stress and (frequently) inappropriate reaction.

Any second order change in the prevalent interpretation of any statement or situation may have this calming and restraining effect--and have a profound impact on an individual or organization. One can reframe an interpretation of a context by choosing to focus on the strengths and resources inherent in the situation rather than focusing on its weaknesses and deficits. This appreciative perspective can be very effectively employed as a means to effect change. As Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch (1974) noted in their thoughtful analysis of the reframing process:

> To reframe . . . means to change the conceptual and/or emotional setting or viewpoint in relation to which a situation is experienced and to place it in another frame which fits the "facts" of the same concrete situation equally well or even better, and thereby changes its entire meaning . . . . What turns out to be changed as a result of reframing is the meaning attributed to the situation, and therefore its consequences, but not its concrete facts—or, as the philosopher Epictetus expressed it as early as the first century A. D.: "It is not the things themselves which trouble us, but the opinions that we have about these things."

I have already offered the quite poignant example of the reframing of facts and its potential power is found in a story about Anti-Semitism. In this case, the potential recipient of an insult chose to reframe the context by first shifting the referent of the other person's insult back onto the person delivering the insult and then cushioning this shift with courtesy. By reframing the context, Mendelssohn places the responsibility back on the insulter. The bigot may choose to accept the reframe and consider the whole matter to be a misunderstanding that resulted in a sign of courtesy from the person being insulted (a variant on turning the other cheek). Alternatively, the bigot can view the whole thing as a very unsuccessful attempt at delivering an insult that ended up with the other person winning the battle. The latter choice would probably be unacceptable to the proud bigot, hence leaving him with no option other than the appreciative reframe. A remarkable interaction!

The self-fulfilling prophecy that Robert Rosenthal (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 2003) made famous (often called the "Pygmalion effect") further exemplifies this model. If one person judges another person as stupid or unmotivated, and interacts with them from that attitude (e.g. talks down at them, withholds information and encouragement) then the labeled person is likely to end up acting unmotivated and less competent, whether or not he initially was so inclined. People inadvertently comply with our expectations of them, because we treat them differently, depending on how we view them. Thus, if we choose to enter into an interpersonal relationship with a positive mind-set, we will interact with the other from an appreciative perspective, and then this person is likely to relate in a positive manner toward us and be as productive as they can – thus having the greatest chance of fulfilling our positive expectations, and validating our original frame of mind.

In order to help a manager notice what expectations he might hold (and no doubt act out) towards a colleague he perceives as under-performing, a coach might ask her client:
- Be honest with yourself: are you sharing information generously with this person, or sometimes withholding it?
- Are you available or unavailable to this colleague when they need your guidance?
- Do you appreciate their work product and encourage their good accomplishments, or are you primed to look for errors and disappointments?

- Do you give them feedback and coaching, or are you withholding your input, leaving them in the dark?
- Is your body language and tone of voice with them open and receptive, or curt, impatient or even punitive?

Erich Fromm (1947) and Elias Porter (1996) use a similar kind of reframing in defining a person's interpersonal weaknesses as his strengths used inappropriately or in excess. One must first acknowledge that a weakness is also a strength that, under most conditions, produces positive results for us. One must also acknowledge the secondary gains obtained from existing behavior patterns— much as in the case of reframing goals. Thus, *rather than attempting to "eliminate a weakness," we need only modify the extent to which it is being used or the setting in which it is being used*. This is a central feature in masterful coaching: focusing on a client's abilities and helping a client recognize and perhaps create the settings in which these strengths are fully and appropriately deployed.

The CEO of a non-profit, for instance, who is an excellent speaker and socializer, is ineffective in working with troubled members of her local community on a one-on-one basis. Her verbal skills help her in the first situation but not in the second. She is rewarded for being verbally active when working with many people, but not when she is expected to be a quiet and sympathetic listener in attending to complaints of members of her community. She could try to improve her ability to work one-on-one. This would be a first-order change.

A second-order reframing by this administrator could involve a shift in her job assignment. She could assign the responsibility for meeting with individual members of her community to other members of her staff, reserving more of her work with these constituencies to large team gatherings. Rather than focusing on her weaknesses, this administrator is encouraged by her coach to focus on her considerable skills in working with large teams and groups. In recognizing that these skills are distinctive and appropriate in most settings, she may become less nervous about being quiet enough in the one-on-one setting, and with the reduction in anxiety and in the frequency with which she works with other people she might eventually feel less need to be highly verbal. It is at the moment when a person does not have to feel threatened that she is most inclined to open up to alternative behaviors.

Alicia takes a similar approach in working with Susan. Susan can be encouraged to reframe the problem she is experiencing with her direct report, Ralph. Susan can be encouraged to focus on Ralph's strengths and on ways in which Ralph can more frequently be placed in settings where these strengths are effectively employed. Perhaps, he could be more actively involved in strategic planning, so that his tendency to dream becomes appropriate and helpful to the organization.

Ralph might also be asked to assist with new employee orientation in the company, making use of his capacity to inspire and motivate. He might be assigned to more start-up operations or given the opportunity to work autonomously on more projects. In order for any of these options to be explored, Susan must first be willing to reframe her perceptions of Ralph, focusing on his strengths, achievements and potential, rather than his weaknesses or failures. This is the essence of an appreciative approach to professional coaching.

Shifting Attention

This second way in which to reframe context requires a shift in attention—to another aspect of the context. To begin with, we can turn to an important distinction drawn by Michael Polanyi (scientist turned philosopher) between that which we are attending to and that which we are attending from (Polanyi, 1969). There is always some conceptual (and even physiological) foundation from which we are attending when pointing to something. Why is this person pointing to this specific object, person or event in their writing, speaking or physical behavior (literally points toward something)? This focus on the source of attention rather than object of attention is a fundamental re-framing operation.

Polanyi notes that even scientists can be asked to identify the reason why they are doing research on this specific phenomenon rather than some other phenomenon. The reason for their choice—their priority—is never "rational" or "scientific." It always has to do with the scientist's personal emotions ("I find this interesting" or "I find this to be a great challenge.") Or it has to do with their assessment of values ("This is an important issue to address." or "This can make a real difference in the quality of human life.") A third possibility is that their scientific engagement is based on a set of assumptions about what constitutes "good science" and "valid" inferences regarding data obtained.

One of the most powerful reframing questions for a professional coach to ask concerns that from which their client is attending: "Why is it important that you are focusing on this issue?" "What makes you think this is valid?" The reframing can even be invited in the form of a new narrative: "Tell me about the reasons why you have chosen to pick this particular project." "It might be informative for you to share the reasons why you want this change to take place." It might also be valuable to shift attention by asserting something that is challenging that from which one's client is attending: "Your conclusion is truly astounding. Tell me about the reasoning." "I could see someone taking a very different view. Why is your perspective of value?"

We see this shifting of attention in full operation when turning back to Mendelsohn. The bigot is focusing on Mendelsohn as the "swine" and is attending from a set of prejudicial and hate-filled assumptions about Jews. Conversely, Mendelsohn is focusing on the bigot as the person about which they are both attending. The bigot is simply introducing himself by giving his name ("swine") or by sharing his depreciating assignment of a label to himself (as a swine). Mendelsohn is attending from an

assumption that he and the bigot are of equal standing and can engaged in a hospitable conversation. Mendelsohn can be gracious even if the bigot is depreciation himself. Their conversation certainly has flipped on its head via a process of reframing.

As in the case of Mendelsohn, attention is often shifted in a reframing process to an area that has been denied, ignored or forgotten. (Bandler and Grinder, 1982, p. 166) It can be denied because it is ugly (such as the prejudice of the bigot). It can also be ignored or forgotten because it relates to some past event that is traumatizing. Sometimes, it is a matter of "good manners." We do not attend to that from which other people are attending because this would bring up some "ugly" matters to which on one wants to attend. A seemingly naive outsider asks: why isn't George at the meeting at 7:00 a.m.?

Everyone knows that George has a drinking problem. The outsider brings up this issue. A professional coach often serves this same role. She asks the un-askable question about the forbidden topic. In this case, the un-askable question is: why isn't George at the meeting and what is this organization going to do about his chronically unreliable scheduling? The coach can couple the challenge of this difficult question with a supportive attitude. Her coaching client soon realizes that he can discuss this issue in a reasonable manner, while keeping George's welfare in mind. He begins to address the problem of George's alcoholism, as well as attendant problems, for the first time.

At other times, a topic is broached by a professional coach that previously was simply ignored or not recognized as distinctive and influential in the life of a person or organization. The culture of an organization, for instance, strongly influences the behavior of employees, yet is rarely given much direct attention. Dress codes reinforce status differences. The jargon used by various units in the organization not only defines status differences but also sensitive boundaries and barriers between certain teams. Attention to the dress and language of an individual or organizational unit, and open discussion about the impact of this dress or language, often leads to new cultural insights and changed behavior patterns. In the case of Ralph's performance as a manager, perhaps the culture of his department (or of the entire organization) encourages a split between the real and the espoused, and places people in conflicted roles with regard to living with short-term pressures without long-term clarity of purpose.

Re-punctuating Events
By shifting time perspectives and definitions of beginnings and endings, we can often gain a new perspective and a new set of solutions to complex, ongoing problems. This third approach to contextual reframing concerns the "punctuation" of specific events that occur within a specific context (Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch (1974, pp. 54ff). Any series of interactions between two people, two units in an organization or two organizations can be punctuated in a variety of ways, depending on the perspective of the person or persons doing the punctuating.

One party to a conflict, for instance, might identify the absence of the other party at a critical meeting as the point when the conflict started (hence the responsibility of the other party). The second party might punctuate this same series of events quite differently: He did not attend the meeting because of the first party's abusive behavior at a previous meeting. When did the conflict begin? Who is responsible? This all depends on how the continuous, interrelated stream of events is interpreted. Is Ralph a dreamer because other members of his department can't get off the ground and refuse to identify ambitious goals? Or are other members of his department highly realistic because Ralph is always out there dreaming of some unattainable goal? Both are probably the case. It all depends on how the sequence of events is punctuated.

Any problem or conflict can be reframed by asking a client to consider alternative punctuation. As a professional coach, Alicia might ask Susan:

- What if you were to consider point B rather than point A to be the time when Ralph's performance difficulties began? Would the problem look any different from this vantage point?
- What if we were to go back two months and look at some of the earlier events that might have influenced your perceptions of Ralph's working relationships and managerial style? What might Ralph's problem look like if we were to focus just on the events of this past week?
- What would be Ralph's interpretation of the causes for the problems being experienced in his department right now?

A significant perceptual change can often occur through reframing long before overt change in behavior becomes readily apparent. In many instances, individuals and organizations move through periods of apparent stagnation or dormancy. They may actually be gradually re-examining and reframing their perceptions of the context within which they live and work. A major developmental spurt may follow this period of conceptual reorganization, leading an outsider to conclude that there are sequential stages of stabilization and change.

The Reframing of Solutions

The field of creative problem-solving is filled with examples of reframed solutions. People generate new and quite different solutions to complex problems through the use of such longstanding think tank techniques as *brainstorming,* (Clark, 1958) *synectics* (Prince, 1970)*, conceptual block-busting (*Adams, 1974), and *mind-mapping* (Knight, 2012). With regard to ways in which to change human behavior or organizational life, two stand out as being particularly effective.

One of these is paradoxical in nature and is usually labeled '*prescribing the symptoms*.' (Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson, 1967) The other is in many ways equally paradoxical, for it concerns the use of existing features of the system to create a new system. Both of these approaches begin, as do goal and contextual reframing, by acknowledging the power of existing conditions and the need to work in an appreciative manner with and through these conditions rather than fighting against them.

It should also be noted that both of these approaches are controversial, for they often seem to require that a trick be played on the person or organization that is being changed. While goals and contexts are usually reframed with the full awareness of all participants, solution reframing often seems to take place without that awareness. On the other hand, solution reframing is particularly effective in helping people and organizations move out of situations in which they are "stuck"—for which there appears to be no adequate first-order solutions.

Prescribing the Symptom
We offer a classic example of this approach. It concerns a restless child who is unable to fall asleep. The more the child is encouraged to fall asleep, the harder she will try to relax. Paradoxically, she is less likely to relax given her concerted effort to fall asleep. Instead of encouraging the child to relax and fall asleep, an astute parent might instead encourage the child to stay awake: "See if you can stay awake for fifteen minutes!" When the child tries to stay awake and attempts to keep her eyes open, then she is likely to fall asleep. As adults we often follow the same path. We tend to fall asleep in front of the television or at the theater. Later, we lie wide-awake in bed.

In an organizational setting, the always-late manager chooses to employ this same paradoxical model with the encouragement of his coach. Rather than showing up at a meeting fifteen minutes late (his usual practice), the manager is asked to work on showing up twenty minutes late. He has to wait five minutes before walking into the meeting and in doing so realizes that he controls his own time. Next week he shows up ten minutes late, then fifteen minutes late, then five minutes late, then ten minutes and then five minutes early. Finally, he shows up on time. He discovers that he can, in fact, arrive on time.

Masterful professional coaches often help their clients with these types of difficult situations. Clients who hold negative (and potentially distorted) images of other individuals or units of the organization are encouraged by their coach to actually distort their images of the other person or unit even more. Their coach might also ask their colleague to distort their perceptions of the image that they think the other person or unit has of them. The client then reflects on the secondary gains he receives from these distorted images, as well as the evidence he holds regarding the validity of these images.

Organizational issues often only become clear when considered in their extreme form. With the support of his coach, a harried manager can often confront embarrassing distortions with a sense of humor and greater appreciation for the power of stereotypes and untested assumptions. Alicia might suggest this approach when coaching Susan regarding Ralph's tendency to dream while his department is confronted with serious problems. Rather than trying to get Ralph to become more realistic, Susan might actually ask Ralph to become even more visionary and might place him in roles that are highly visionary (such as chairing a task force on new ideas for the organization).

Susan (and Ralph) may discover that he soon grows weary of this one-dimensional role. After all, he does like to be realistic on occasion, particularly when completing a specific project about which he cares. Some people thrive under conditions of opposition and lose all motivation when they get exactly what they want. Alternatively, Alicia could suggest that Susan herself become more of a dreamer and less of a realist when working with Ralph. A colleague reports that she often copes with her visionary boss by out-dreaming him. When she becomes a dreamer, then her boss suddenly becomes realistic, asking "do we have the money to complete this?" or "are you sure this will work?" Susan might similarly out-dream Ralph and thereby (paradoxically) move him into a more realistic role. Other members of Ralph's staff could use Susan as a role model and similarly take on more of a visionary role in their relationships with Ralph.

Using the Existing System
This second solutions-reframing approach is actually a hybrid of the other forms of reframing. (Bandler and Grinder, 1982, p. 171) The existing resources and dynamics of the system (individual or organization) that is being changed are framed in positive terms. Forces that are resistant to change, for instance, come to be seen as the bases for stability in the newly changed system. Many years ago, Seymour Sarason (1972) observed that revolutionary leaders must bring in managers from the old regime to help bring stability to the new government. His observation seems to still hold true. Kurt Lewin and his colleagues similarly noted that any planned change effort must be followed by *refreezing*—a process that brings stability back to the system. (Lippitt, Watson and Westley, 1958)

People who resist a change can themselves become invaluable resources in promoting and planning for the change. Many resistors, for example, point to past history when declaring that a planned change will never be successful: "We tried that ten years ago and it didn't work." Rather than arguing with or ignoring this person, one asks him to help plan for the new change effort so that some of the mistakes that occurred ten years ago can be avoided. The skeptic can also be made the historian of the new project or can assist in the design of its evaluation. Alternatively, those who are usually the innovators and proponents of new ideas—men and women like Ralph—can be placed in the role of program auditor or member of a panel that reviews new program proposals. This helps to shake up old roles and provides everyone with new perspectives on one another and the organization.

Professional coaches can help their clients reframe sources of resistance as assets in yet another way. Typically, policies and procedures are set up to thwart new enterprises. Yet these same policies and procedures that often make it difficult to start something new also make it difficult for anyone to stop the new venture once started. A large organization is often the perfect place to try a new idea. After all, it takes one to two months to find out that something new is being tried. It then takes another month or two to gain the attention of those in the bureaucracy who have the authority to do anything about this new venture—and another two to three months to work through the channels to block it. By this time, the new venture may have proven its worth and can make it on its own. As the popular adage from the 1960s goes: "it is easier to beg for *forgiveness* [after an action step has been taken] than to ask for *permission* [before the action step is taken]."

Conclusions

These various reframing tools are not without their own problems—as I have often noted more generally with regard to all second-order thinking and change initiatives. The strategies and tools of reframing certainly should be used by coaches and their clients with discretion and ethical awareness. They significantly expand the repertoire of a coach and make significant change possible in difficult and resistant circumstances. The very forces that bind people and organizations to one way of doing things can be used as levers for change. With such powerful tools we must be certain that these individuals and organizations actually desire the proposed change and trust the intentions and competencies of those aiding in the reframing process.

One coaching client will find a solutions-oriented reframing most helpful, while another may find it more beneficial to focus on the framing of a current or desired state. In working with Susan, for instance, Alicia may think that the most important role she can play is to be reflective with Susan about her relationship with Ralph. Susan might decide that they should focus on Ralph's problem. They might both decide instead (with Ralph's concurrence) that Alicia should coach both Susan and Ralph—focusing on the relationship between them rather than on either Susan's perceptions of Ralph's problem or the solutions Susan will initiate to solve Ralph's problem.

In many cases, reframing is most beneficial when directed toward a client's blind spot—the spot where this leader is absolutely certain there is no room for change in perspective. The purpose of professional coaching is not to show anyone "the right way" in which to relate to one another, solve problems or make decisions. It is rather to provide both challenge and support and to help a client reflect on her own thought processes, identify her own distinctive strengths and competencies, and take actions that are appropriate to her own value system and aspirations.

In conclusion, there is one simple statement to be made regarding reframing; it can be of great benefit whether we are encountering a bigot on the street, seeking to unravel the mystery of a T-Shirt statement—or assisting a coaching client as they confront an elusive interpersonal or organizational issue.

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