A Framework for Managing People

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Introduction

Managers in the Education area are often promoted due to their excellent teaching skills and teaching related qualifications and have often very little or no experience in managing people. Once promoted, they have to deal with budgets, disgruntled teachers (former friends and colleagues), unhappy students, the Union and Senior Management. Training, if any, comes much later when many fires have been extinguished and many nights spent wondering what possible solution there is to the problem.

This paper aims to provide a framework for new managers and coordinators to help them analyse situations from several viewpoints and deal with them appropriately. The framework is based on Bolman and Deal's analysis of the four-frame model (Jossey-Bass, 2003) and how managers can use it effectively.

The four-frame model

This framework incorporates most of the current theories on organisational behaviour, arguing that each of those popular approaches - such as Six Sigma and Emotional Intelligence - is appropriate and applicable in certain situations but not for all situations and circumstances. Bolman and Deal argue that a broader approach is needed, an approach which allows the manager to view each situation from a variety of frames and then determine what action to take.

They compare this approach with Galileo’s approach to devising the first telescope. Each lens he added contributed to a more accurate image of the heavens. Similarly, managers need to use more than one frame to develop both an accurate diagnosis of what the problem at hand is and strategies to move forward.

The four frames aim to do just that. Each of the frames has its own metaphors, concepts and challenges and managers will find some of them easy to use and others will be puzzling. The challenge is to be able to apply each of the frames when needed.
The four frames are: structural, psychological, political and symbolic. The following table is an adaptation of Bolman and Deal's overview of the four frame model:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frame</th>
<th>Metaphor or machine</th>
<th>Central concepts</th>
<th>Image of leadership</th>
<th>Challenge for manager</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Structural</td>
<td>Factory or machine</td>
<td>Rules, roles, goals, policies</td>
<td>Social architecture</td>
<td>Keep on top of large complex set of activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Needs, skills, relationships</td>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>Motivate, coordinate and control large, diverse group of subordinates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Power, conflict, competitions, organisational politics</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>Achieve balance in allocating resources; get support from bosses; get support from corporate staff and other constituents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>Jungle</td>
<td>Culture, meaning, ritual, stories, ceremony</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>Develop credible premises; identify and focus on core activities that give meaning to employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic</td>
<td>Temple, theatre</td>
<td></td>
<td>Inspiration</td>
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The structural frame

The structural frame focuses on the architecture of organisations, the design of units, rules and roles, goals and policies, that shape and channel decisions and activities. The leader in the structural frame needs to ensure roles and responsibilities fit tasks and responsibilities, success is adequately rewarded and that the organisation aligns with developments in technology and changes in the environment.

The psychological frame

The psychological frame highlights the importance of understanding people, their strengths and peculiarities, emotions, desires and fears. The challenge for the leader in this frame is to align the subordinate's needs and interests with the requirements of management. The leader empowers through participation and openness and by ensuring that people have the autonomy and resources they need to do their job.

The political frame

The political frame views organisations as competitive arenas characterised by scarce resources, competing interests and struggles for power and advantage. It looks at different interest groups within an organisation and outside the organisation and focuses on concepts such as conflict, power and
competition – and, above all, networking. The political leader understands clearly what they want and what they can get, assesses the distribution of power and interests and builds linkages to key stakeholders.

The symbolic frame

The symbolic frame looks at an organisation as a theatre or circus ménage where the key elements are the culture of the organisation, values, beliefs and attitudes. Those are communicated through rituals, ceremonies, stories and positive cultural behaviour. The symbolic leader is sensitive to an organisation’s history and culture. They seek to use the best in an organisation’s traditions and values as a base for building a culture that has cohesiveness and meaning. They articulate a vision that communicates the organisation’s unique capabilities and mission.

The four frames in action

Applying the frames appropriately is not as easy as it may seem. The leader or manager needs to assess the situation, evaluate what frame the other participants are applying and act accordingly. To give an example of how the four frames can be used effectively but also the dangers they present if not used appropriately, this section uses a scenario from Bolman and Deal’s book (Jossey-Bass, 2003) to highlight this.

Scenario

Cindy Marshall is on her way to the office on her first day in a new job. Her company has transferred her to this office to manage a customer service unit. It is a big promotion, with a substantial increase in pay and responsibility. She is inheriting a department with a reputation for slow and substandard service. Senior management blames her predecessor, Bill Howard, who is seen as too authoritarian and rigid. Howard is moving to another job but the company has asked him to stay on for a week to help Cindy with the orientation.

When Cindy arrives she is greeted with a frosty hello from the department secretary. As she walks into her office she sees Howard behind the desk in a conversation with three other staff members. She says hello, to which he responds with “Didn’t the secretary tell you that we’re in a meeting right now? If you wait outside, I’ll be able to see you in about an hour.”

Structural frame – take 1

Howard Didn’t the secretary tell you that we’re in a meeting right now? If you’ll wait outside, I’ll be able to see you in about an hour.

Marshall My appointment as manager of this office began at nine this morning. This is now my office, and you’re sitting behind my
desk. Either you relinquish the desk immediately, or I will call headquarters and report you for insubordination.

Howard I was asked to stay on the job for one more week to try to help you learn the ropes. Frankly, I doubt that you’re ready for this job, but you don’t seem to want any help.

Marshall I repeat, I am now in charge of this office. Let me also remind you that headquarters assigned you to stay this week to assist me. I expect you to carry out that assignment. If you don’t, I will submit a letter for your file detailing your lack of cooperation. Now, (firmly) I want my desk.

Howard Well, we were working on important office business, but since the princess here is more interested in giving orders than in getting work done, let’s move our meeting down to your office, Joe. Enjoy the desk!

In the first exchange Cindy places a lot of emphasis on her formal authority and the chain of command. By invoking her superiors and her legitimate authority, she takes charge but at a price. She risks long-term tension with her subordinates who surely feel awkward during this combative encounter. They may see the new boss as autocratic and defensive.

Structural frame – take 2

Howard Didn’t the secretary tell you that we’re in a meeting right now? If you’ll wait outside, I’ll be able to see you in about an hour.

Marshall She didn’t mention it, and I don’t want to interrupt important work, but we also need to set some priorities and work out an agenda for the day anyway. Bill, have you developed a plan for how you and I can get to work on the transition?

Howard We can meet later on, after I get through some pressing business.

Marshall The pressing business is just the kind of thing I need to learn about as the new manager here. What issues are you discussing?

Howard How to keep the office functioning when the new manager is not ready for the job.

Marshall Well, I have a lot to learn, but feel I’m ready. With your help, I think we can have a smooth and productive transition. How about if you continue your meeting and I just sit in as an observer? Then, Bill, you and I could meet to work out a plan for how we’ll handle the transition. After that, I’d like to schedule a meeting with each manager to get an individual progress report. I’d like to hear from each of you about your major customer service objectives and how you would assess your progress against objectives. Now, what were you talking about before I got here?

In the second encounter Cindy is still clear and firm in establishing her authority but she does it without appearing too harsh or dictatorial. She
underscores the importance of setting priorities. She focuses persistently on the task and not on Howard's provocations. In keeping the exchange on a rational level and outlining a transition plan she avoids escalating the conflict. She also communicates to her new staff that she has done her homework, is organised and knows what she wants. When she says she would like to hear their personal objectives and progress, she communicates an expectation that they should follow her example.

**Psychological frame – take 1**

Howard  Didn't the secretary tell you that we're in a meeting right now? If you'll wait outside, I'll be able to see you in about an hour.

Marshall  Oh, gosh, no, she didn't. I just feel terrible about interrupting your meeting. I hope I didn't offend anyone because to me, it's really important to establish good working relationships right from the onset. While I'm waiting, is there anything I can do to help? Would anyone like a cup of coffee?

Howard  No. We'll let you know when we're finished.

Marshall  Oh. Well, have a good meeting, and I'll see you in an hour.

In the effort to be friendly and accommodating Cindy acts more like a waitress than a manager. She defuses the conflict but her staff will see their new boss as weak.

**Psychological frame – take 2**

Howard  Didn't the secretary tell you that we're in a meeting right now? If you'll wait outside, I'll be able to see you in about an hour.

Marshall  I'm sorry if I'm interrupting, but I'm eager to get started, and I'll need all your help. (She walks around, introduces herself, and shakes hand with each member of her new staff. Howard scowls silently). Bill, could we take a few minutes to talk about how we can work together on the transition, now that I'm coming in to manage the department?

Howard  You're not the manager yet. I was asked to stay on for a week to get you started – though, frankly, I doubt that you're ready for this job.

Marshall  I understand your concern, Bill. I know how committed you are to the success of the department. If I were you, I might be worried about whether I was turning my baby over to someone who wouldn't be able to take care of it. But I wouldn't be here if I didn't feel ready. I want to benefit as much as I can from your experience. Is it urgent to get on with what you were talking about, or could we take some time first to talk about how we can start working together?

Howard  We have some things we need to finish.

Marshall  Well, as a manager, I always prefer to trust the judgement of the people who are closest to the action. I'll just sit in while you
finish up, and then we can talk about how we move forward from there.

Her Cindy is unfazed and relentlessly cheerful. She avoids a battle and acknowledges Howard’s perspective. She demonstrates an important skill of the leader in the psychological frame: the ability to combine advocacy and inquiry. She listens carefully to Howard but gently stands her ground. When he says they have things to finish, she responds very skilfully using Howard’s energy to her advantage. She manages to express her philosophy of trusting people and is sending a message to her new staff that she is a firm but people-oriented manager.

**Political frame – take 1**

Howard Didn’t the secretary tell you that we’re in a meeting right now? If you’ll wait outside, I’ll be able to see you in about an hour.

Marshall In your next job, maybe you should train your secretary better. Anyway, I can’t waste time sitting around in hallways. Everyone in this room knows why I’m here. You’ve got a choice, Bill. You can cooperate with me, or you can lose any credibility you still have in this company.

Howard If I didn’t have more experience than you do, I wouldn’t be so quick to throw my weight around. But if you think you know it all already, I guess you won’t need any help from me.

Marshall What I know is that this department has gone downhill under your leadership, and it’s my job to turn it around. You can go home right now, if you want – you know where the door is. But if you’re smart, you’ll stay and help. The vice president wants my report on the transition. You’ll be a lot better off if I can tell him you’ve been cooperative.

Cindy establishes that she is tough and dangerous. Such coercive tactics can be expensive in the long run. Her attack may offend him and frighten her new staff. Even if they dislike Howard, they might see Cindy as arrogant and callous. She may have done political damage that will be difficult to reverse.

**Political frame – take 2**

Howard Didn’t the secretary tell you that we’re in a meeting right now? If you’ll wait outside, I’ll be able to see you in about an hour.

Marshall *(pleasantly)* Bill, if it’s OK with you, I’d prefer to skip games and go to work. I expect this department to be a winner, and I hope that’s what we all want. I also would like to manage the transition in a way that’s good for your career, Bill, and for the careers of others in the room.

Howard If I need advice from you on my career, I’ll ask.

Marshall OK, but the vice president has asked me to let him know about the cooperation I get here. I’d like to be able to say that
everyone has been helping me as much as possible. Is that what you'd like, too?

Howard: I've known the vice president a lot longer than you have. I can talk to him myself.

Marshall: I know, Bill, he's told me that. In fact, I just came from his office. If you'd like, we could both go see him right now.

Howard: Uh, no, not right now.

Marshall: Well, then, let's get on with it. Do you want to finish what you were discussing, or is this a good time for us to develop some agreement on how we're going to work together?

Here is avoids a naked demonstration of power while managing to appeal to the self-interest of potential adversaries. She is open and direct using a light touch in dismissing Howard's initial salvo. She speaks directly to Howard's interest in his career and her subordinates' interest in theirs. She draws on her power resources but she does not humiliate Howard.

Symbolic frame – take 1

Howard: Didn't the secretary tell you that we're in a meeting right now? If you'll wait outside, I'll be able to see you in about an hour.

Marshall: It's great to see that you're all hard at work. It's proof that we all share a commitment to excellence in customer service. In fact, I've already made up buttons for all the staff. Here — I have one for each of you. They read "The customer is always first." They look great, and they communicate the spirit that we all want in the department. Go on with your meeting. I can use the hour to talk to some of the staff about their visions for the department.

(She walks out of the office)

Howard: (to remaining staff) Did you believe that? I told you they hired a real space cadet to replace me. Maybe you didn't believe me, but you just saw it with your own eyes.

Cindy's symbolic direction but symbols need to be attuned to people and place. As a newcomer, she needs to pay close attention to her audience. Meaningless symbols antagonise and empty symbolic events backfire.

Symbolic frame – take 2

Howard: Didn't the secretary tell you that we're in a meeting right now? If you'll wait outside, I'll be able to see you in about an hour.

Marshall: (smiling) Maybe this is just the traditional initiation ritual in this department, Bill, but let me ask a question. If one of our customers came through the door right now, would you ask them to wait outside for an hour?

Howard: If they just came barging in like you did, sure.

Marshall: Are you working on something that's more important than responding to our customers?
Howard: They’re not your customers. You’ve only been here five minutes.
Marshall: True, but I’ve been with this company long enough to know the importance of putting customers first.
Howard: Look, you don’t know the first thing about how this department functions. Before you go off on some customer crusade, you ought to learn a little about how we do things.
Marshall: There’s a lot I can learn from all of you, and I’m eager to get started. For example, I’m very interested in your ideas on how we can make this a department where as soon as a person walks in, he or she gets the sense that this is a place where people care, are responsive and genuinely want to be helpful. I’d like that to be true for anyone who comes in – a staff member, a customer or just someone who got lost and came into the wrong office. That’s not the message I got from my initiation a couple of minutes ago, but I’m sure we can think of lots of ways to change that. How does that fit with your image of what the department should be like?

Notice how Cindy reframes the situation. Instead of engaging in a personal confrontation she focuses on the department’s core values. She brought her ‘customer first’ commitment with her but she avoids positioning that value as something imposed from the outside. Instead she grounds it in experience everyone in the room just shared: the way she was greeted when she entered. Like many successful symbolic leaders she attuned to the cues about values and culture that are expressed in every day life. She communicates her philosophy but also asks questions to draw out Howard and her new staff.

Application to the educational environment

Scenario

Principal Granger found himself the focus of a fierce battle between 12,000 residents of the small town where he had been Principal of the High School for the last 10 years, and the Education Department, which pays his salary, and is insisting he take a promotion to an administrative role in the head office.

Granger doesn’t want to go and his students and their parents don’t want him to go either. The parents and residents are so upset that they have enlisted the help of their local Member of Parliament, Ms Carmel Tebby, to keep him here.

It’s certainly not the prestige or glamour of the job that is holding Granger. He often has to take sick students home as there is no public transport in the small town; he answers the phone at any time of day and night to help distressed parents resolve issues with their teenage children and spends a large proportion of his weekends on extracurricular activities.
Apparently unyielding in their insistence that Granger accept the promotion or resign, the Education Department officials were startled by the spate of protests from angry residents, which prompted nationwide media attention and enquiries in the Senate. The Education Department says it would probably not replace Granger and close the High School over the next few years, considering that the town, in the Department’s view, is now able to send children to a number of private schools in the area.

Tebby describes herself as “frustrated by the lack of responsiveness of lower-level bureaucrats.” But to the Education Department, Granger is a foot soldier in a military organisation. And he’s had the audacity to question the orders of a superior officer.

Analysis

The Education Department officials have trouble seeing beyond the structural frame; they had a task to do and a strategy for achieving it. Granger’s opposition was illegitimate. Granger saw the situation in the psychological frame. He felt the work he was doing was meaningful and satisfying and the little town needed him. For MP Tebb, it was a political issue; could minor bureaucrats be allowed to harm her constituents through mindless abuse of power? For the town’s residents, Granger was the heroic figure of mythic proportions. The residents were full of stories about Granger’s humility, skill humaneness, dedication, wit, confidence and caring.

With everyone peering through distinct frames, confusion and conflict were predictable. The inability of the Education Department officials to understand and acknowledge the existence of other perceptions illustrates costs of clinging to a single view of a situation. Whenever someone’s actions seem to make no sense, it is worth asking if all parties involved are seeing the contrasting realities. It helps to understand their perspective, even if it seems inappropriate. Their frame – not ours – determines how they act.

Recommendation

Based on the above example it is always worthwhile to analyse every situation from a variety of frames and then decide what frame to apply and what action to take.

If an individual’s commitment and motivation are essential to success, it is probably best to apply the psychological and symbolic frames. For example, a new curriculum will fail without teacher support. It is therefore essential to involve teachers in the early stages of its implementation and to show its links to values and symbols the teachers hold in high regard.
If the major thrust of a decision is based on technical quality it is recommended to apply the structural frame. It is essential to provide rational decisions and logical procedures.

If ambiguity and uncertainty are high in the decision making process, it is best to apply the political and symbolic frames. For example, if a new manager is appointed, the majority of people will try and form alliances either with or against the new boss, pursuing their self-interest. This is a time of great uncertainty and confusion and it is important for the manager to realise who the real allies are but also, by applying symbols, ceremonies and rituals, show to staff that the organisation’s core values had not changed and enable staff to find comfort in well-tried rituals and processes. This also applies to situations where resources are scarce and potential for conflict is high. A shared symbol or story can defuse many tense situations and help bridge the chasm.

These recommendations cannot be applied mechanically. But they can guide and enhance a process. The most important step is the analysis of a situation and applying the right frame. It is important to keep one’s options open and be prepared to reframe and communicate the new approach to others who still see another reality.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to give a brief overview of applying the four frame approach to managing people. It is an attempt to provide a tool for managers when analysing the messy world of management that we encounter on a daily basis. It is similar to a diagnostic map that helps managers assess which frames are likely to be helpful in a given situation. It is not fool-proof and has some inherent dangers, but, hopefully, it will help managers make sense of complex issues and provide a first step in dealing with those problems.

References