

Transcript: Frame101x Episode 2 Part 1

Once you've come up with a good frame, what does it do? This episode is about the impact of frames.

Opponents of development aid have a frame: Don't give a poor man a fish; teach him how to fish. Now suppose a development minister is faced with this frame and has to defend herself. She could say something like this:

'This is a very simplistic interpretation of my policy. Fishing rods... Cheap rhetoric.

My policy has always been to empower people. It goes without saying that I am committed to handing out fishing rods rather than fish. The essence of my policy is to teach people how to fish.'

This defense may succeed in convincing others, but the minister is taking a big risk by stepping into her opponents' frame. What impact does this have?

The first effect. In her statement, the minister uses the language – the words and images – of her opponent. Language is not a neutral vehicle for conveying information: it is loaded with value. If you use your opponents' language, you give their frame free airtime.

Suppose we had watched a debate on television, including this statement of the minister. What would we remember about it a few days later? If nothing else, it would be the message that instead of giving poor people fish, you should teach them how to fish. Thanks to this minister.

The second effect is obvious. By stepping into your opponents' frame, you put yourself on the defensive. That is never a comfortable position to be in.

The third effect, imagine for a moment that we – the audience – have been convinced that the "teach them how to fish" frame makes sense. This will have a strong impact on the division of the burden of proof in the debate. Suppose that a politician who opposes development aid presents two reports describing failed development projects. There may be twenty other reports on projects that have been successful. However, because we are observing the debate through the "teach them how to fish" frame, the two negative reports are enough to confirm our views and convince us that, once again, we have been giving poor people fish instead of teaching them how to fish. In other words, we are inclined to impose a lighter burden of proof on the owner of the frame and a heavier burden of proof on those who challenge it.

The fourth effect relates to complexity. Frames are almost always simple, but a simple frame often requires a complicated response. An example: a road authority has built a new tunnel that is experiencing many accidents and traffic jams. The authority's chief engineer is asked to explain why there are so many problems with the tunnel. Her opponent is a

politician who has criticized the road authority for many years. Take a look at the following discussion:

'The tunnel has a new type of road marking that confuses some motorists and we are going to fix that. We're also going to look into the lighting in the tunnel. Motorists have said that the tunnel is a bit too dark at certain points, especially where the road curves slightly.'

'Look, of course we have to talk about road markings and lighting and curves. But there is a far more fundamental problem here. The road authority no longer has the expertise to build this type of tunnel. Your managers have made your organization "lean and mean." As a result, you have lost all your expertise. And when you don't have the expertise, things go wrong.'

'We do not lack expertise. We have more than a hundred senior engineers working for us. We invest a great deal of time and money in our people's professional development. We make sure that we keep up with the latest innovations. And all our work processes are certified.'

'I understand completely that you are investing heavily in professional development, because there is a lack of expertise within your organization. We are hearing this from the market, from contractors and even from sources within the road authority itself. When there is a lack of expertise, things inevitably go wrong.'

Look, I just...

The road authority does not have enough expertise. Engineers without technical expertise? This frame attacks the authority's core values. How does the chief engineer respond? She steps into the politician's frame. She has an impressive set of arguments. However, because she puts forward four arguments, she gives the politician four possible ways to respond. The politician of course takes the weakest of the four arguments and builds on it.

The engineer's response is what we call a multiple-hurdle response. One missed hurdle means that the whole race is lost.