

Transcript: Frame101x Episode 3

In this episode, we begin our search for patterns in the game of framing and reframing. Let's start straight away with an example.

Two local politicians are having a disagreement. The right-wing politician wants to abolish several local tax benefits for the unemployed. The left-wing politician responds as follows:

'This measure will hit people over 55 the hardest. Some of them have become unemployed after working for 30 years or more. It is almost impossible for them to find work again, because many companies don't want to hire people over 55.

These people have had their jobs taken away from them, and now you are proposing to take away their tax benefits as well. For many of them, this could mean the difference between being able to pay their mortgage or losing their home. And if you take that away from them, you'll take away their dignity as well. Your proposal is therefore extremely antisocial.'

Your feelings on this issue obviously depend on your political views, but something else is going on in this example as well. The left-wing politician is trying to appeal to our emotions. Specifically our compassion for the older unemployed. Once she has achieved this, it turns out that there are three characters in her frame: a victim (the older unemployed), a villain (the right-wing politician) and a hero (the left-wing politician who stands up for the victim).

This brings us to the first model in the game of framing and reframing: the Victim, Villain, Hero model. In this case, the trigger – the device that activates the model – is emotion.

We expect three things from a hero. First, he must adopt a clear moral position in which the victim is the good guy and the villain is the bad guy. Second, he must take action. In other words, he must go after the villain and protect the victim. Thirdly, he must act swiftly. When we're emotional, we want action to be taken as soon as possible. Our feelings are so strong that we won't tolerate any delay.

The greater our outrage, the more susceptible we are to this frame. Think about debates about crime or serious environmental pollution, which often involve an actual victim and an actual villain - a criminal or a major polluter. As our emotional involvement increases, so does our belief that somebody should go after the villain. In these circumstances, any politician who coldly reasons that crime is caused by poverty or that environmental accidents will just happen, does not take on the role of the hero. This leaves them vulnerable to attack.

Now suppose that you have been framed as a villain. How should you respond? One thing is clear: if you step into this frame you are taking a big risk. Let's say you claim that older people can find work. That there are companies that are willing to hire them. There is a good chance that people will continue to regard you as a villain who refuses to acknowledge how hard it is to find work.

Reframing is the act of telling a different story with a different division of roles. This is how our right wing politician might respond.

'We all know that our city has several public playgrounds. These playgrounds, which are incredibly important to families with young children, are run by volunteers. Unfortunately, I find myself forced to close some of these playgrounds due to a lack of volunteers. One of the playgrounds facing closure is the popular playground on Church Street, despite the fact that there are seven people who are unemployed and receiving benefits living on this street.

And this is not the only example. Many of our local services rely on volunteers. And although there are many unemployed people who receive benefits, there never seem to be enough volunteers. Never.'

What just happened? The right-wing politician is also talking about benefits, but the roles have been reversed. The playgrounds and the families using them are now the victims. The villains are the people who refuse to volunteer to keep these playgrounds open, even though they are receiving government benefits. The hero is the right-wing politician who dares to raise this issue. This is an emotional topic for anyone who knows the playground on Church Street. Other people might also consider it an outrage that playgrounds have to be closed because people on government benefits refuse to volunteer for a few hours a week.

The victim/villain/hero model is the first model in the game of framing and reframing. Many frames are based on this model.

In conclusion, you should never step into a frame in which you are the villain. If your opponent is framing you as the villain, your best option is to reframe the debate by presenting a different version of the same reality and changing the roles so that you become the hero.

Will you win if you do this? Not necessarily, whether you win or lose depends upon the opinion of the listeners. But at least you have made clear that there are different perspectives on this problem, and that there are no unambiguous victims, villains and heroes.