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5. CREATING FRAMES

The chapters presented so far in this book have offered many examples of the different ways in which women leaders in universities and schools have sought to influence the situations in which they practise. Later chapters take up and explore the specific issues that engage them as they do their leadership work. This chapter takes a particular example of influential behaviour that is implicit in several striking descriptions these women provided of how they go about their leadership work. The influencing strategy they are using is that of re-framing the way issues, processes, information and experiences can be comprehended, engaged with emotionally, imaginatively and even spiritually.

To frame something, whether a picture or a view or an idea, is to put structure or context around it which significantly influences the way it is perceived and understood, or even whether it is noticed at all. A phenomenon tends not to stand out from the rest of our experience if it lacks a border or container that guides or claims our attention. Without frames, experiences are difficult to make sense of. On the one hand, this can make it easy to not engage with them at all, to let them slip by without disturbing in any way our dominant and unchallenged view of things. On the other hand, the absence of a frame or container can mean that we over-engage with aspects of our experience because they threaten to overwhelm us. They are all too much *present* and central in our lives, and they become the only thing we notice.



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As well as framing their own behaviour, leaders often frame the behaviour of others. And, the framing of the attention and energy of other people is a profound way through which to potentially influence what they do, how they think, what they feel, what they imagine, what they believe in and what they will commit to. While the activity of framing is not often acknowledged as such, it is fundamental to leadership work. It takes many forms and having a broad repertoire of framing behaviours means that a person has the potential to be influential in a range of ways, not just a few.

Some leaders are very aware of the effectiveness of particular kinds of framing and deliberately use them. Others use them spontaneously without much intellectual appreciation of what they are actually doing. The phrase re-framing was not specifically used by any of the women in our study during their interviews. Nonetheless, several of the stories they told about implicit re-framing are most instructive.

STORY ONE: SITTING IN THE MIDDLE

So I would do things like you know – everything was rotated around – so if I was chairing the meeting I would go and sit in the middle of the table and ... some of them (the people at the meeting) were so uncomfortable with it. You know, it was such a little thing.

(It's all) because you are supposed to be at the head of the table. And if you were in the middle of the table you were actually picking up different sorts of things. It is quite interesting but it made them profoundly uncomfortable. And we kept sort of having these peer reviews and they kept reading back to me, feeding back to me – could I stop doing it. They didn't like it, you know. Couldn't I chair a meeting? Couldn't I be a "proper" chair?

In some ways, this is the most striking illustration of re-framing appearing in any of the women's accounts. It did not begin by the academic offering to her colleagues a description or an explanation or an argument or a justification in words. She simply enacted a behaviour that seriously challenged the expectations and comfort of others. She changed where she sat as meeting chair, with the result that others (men in this case) had to declare their mind sets in ways that they normally didn't have to, and which sounded rigid and almost child-like when they did: could she not be a "proper" chair, they asked?

The story beautifully illustrates that disruption to current frames of what is allowable and appropriate does not require carefully crafted conceptual arguments, or meticulously designed processes, or consultative committees, but simply (in this case) a change in the seating. The power of seating is recognised in many other contexts, especially those that are sensitive to status and power hierarchies in political and corporate settings. But elsewhere, the importance of certain protocols

might be more implicit, less advertised and less overtly worried about – until someone decides to break the implicit rules.

The value of the intervention is that a new frame is brought to bear on the situation, one that reveals just how dependent we are on working out who is in charge by the seat they are occupying. And it reflects the extra effort that needs to be expended to catch the eye of that person or engage others sitting at the table. Instead of flowing along the usual easy lines of association and affiliation, intentions are expected to be declared differently, and negotiation of when the meeting's discussion is "over" might become clumsier than usual. Intervention might be differentially opened up to a range of people who might not usually be invited to join in or who might not usually find it easy to "get into" the conversation. We don't know what happened next in that particular story but it is not hard to imagine two very different outcomes: an insistence on the old ways and the enforcement of "the rules" about chairing meetings; or an enduring change in practice that created a more flexible and adaptive way of doing business.

STORY TWO: MAKING THE DATA CENTRAL

Where we have ... reports on various issues, firstly I tabled it as an agenda item and I gave them a very brief overview. And really in our management team meeting two weeks later, (I provided) just another update. And that really went on for a good ... month and a half, where I kept it fairly low key to start with. Because I wanted them to buy in (to the problem and its solution) but each time I sort of, I suppose, exposed a bit more of the issue, wanting their feedback. (And) ... wanting their observations, wanting their thoughts on it.

So that meant I was helping them to start thinking about the problem and I suppose after the first month and a half I was able to give them some more hard data on why it was an issue that we needed to address and (to give them) some comparative data on where we needed to go to or where, for this issue, we should be sitting, in the market place.

I probably spent a fair bit of time on it, because that was the time when I really got a bit of sort of push back, oh you know ... some of them wanting to buy into it because they could start to see the implications if they did buy into it. That it would mean some change and change that they would have to be involved in which wasn't necessarily pleasant change. So we actually spent a fair bit of time on that and I had to revisit it a few times; I had to present the information a couple of times in a different way to convince some people that it really was an issue and that was a time that I did meet with some people individually as part of a normal meeting structure about putting it on the agenda one to

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one. I had one of the members of my management team that really almost flatly refused to believe that this was an issue. And in the end I actually did meet with (that person) who ... did not want to accept that we had a problem. This was a key person in, I suppose communicating some of the change to other members of staff.

This story of re-framing illustrates the power of presenting new data to a group of people in order to influence their professional practice. Universities, of course, are places where data sets are constantly being refreshed, analysed, critiqued and argued over. However, the research processes through which this happens are explicitly understood as work that needs to be done. Indeed, there are many conventions and protocols through which that work is undertaken. But the use of data described in this story is a different kind of process: a managerial process. The people who were offered the data didn't feel obliged to examine it carefully, to analyse the implications, or to be open to the possibilities it might open up. Quite the reverse: they felt free to reject it outright because of the negative consequences it might have for them personally.

The women leader who tells the story says she had to persist, presenting the data in different ways and working with some people individually. This is the use of information and data to persuade, by drawing attention to aspects of the situation that would otherwise remain invisible and unattended to in the shadows. It is much more like the use of data sets in consulting, marketing and influencing change in community behaviour. In the hands of really skilled people, the selection, assembling and presentation of data becomes a mixture of art and science, which has as much to do with the cultivation – or manipulation – of feelings and mind sets as it has to do with the construction of logic. In the story told above, the academic is well aware of what she is doing, deliberately starting in a low key fashion without making a big issue of it, perhaps hoping that people would “get” it. She didn't rush into discussing the problem, but was persistent. She eventually decided to escalate the process, by increasing the depth and amount of data provided, thus declaring her intent to make this a key issue for discussion and heightening the intensity of the focus on a couple of the key players.

STORY THREE: SETTING THE RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

But you can't just come out with a blank piece of paper and say please design it, because then people don't have a starting point. So one of the first things that always makes you successful is for you to at least give people some information as well as exemplars of what you might seek, that gives a basis from which to work from and some options within that.

And then have them understand by the nature of the questions you ask of people, for their input into that.

Then you take that on board, and then you need to evaluate the merit of each of the positions that you hold and then redefine it (your proposal) in accordance with these. So the process of the next stage was in taking the feedback. We then convened a second group that looked at the merit of the different elements of feedback and how they might fit with a range of the options that came forward.

So after we had that and knew what it looked like, you then move into a steering group, and you move into a task-oriented implementation team, so you delegate tasks to other workforces and groups. Important to it all is the continued communication strategy. You communicate, you communicate, you communicate again when you think you've done enough.

You will also have received more information by that time so you will identify that something has a particular issue and it needs addressing. Now sometimes you might like it to be addressed today, and without going into detail. On Tuesday I was ready to go with something that I felt we were right to now follow through a process. On Wednesday, some information came to me that (meant) I then put a halt to that and I said, I don't think this will be positioned well until it actually is the right time.

So you know you can change the way things happen and how you influence things by saying OK that might be a priority today but in the scheme of things that's not necessarily going to be our highest priority. It may be better positioned after we've done this, this and this because that new information has come to my attention and in the context of that information I am now redefining how that will actually end up being successful.

So one of your challenges in this type of role that I'm in is being able to make sure that you've got a fuller picture. So sometimes you have to go out with haste and other times you actually have to say, well we're ready but I need to actually put you on pause.

This story reflects the practice of a very senior and skilled executive who creates an informal but coherent and structured social process that is her own managerial device. It operates in parallel with the formal consultative, decision making and communication processes through which strategic options are seen to be developed, presented, negotiated, revised and promulgated across the organisation. This "behind the scenes" process offers a flexible and trustworthy frame for handling the emergent, unpredictable, messy and contradictory dynamics of complex change processes. As described in her own words, her strategy presents as a frame that creates confidence in the people who work most directly with her, wherever they might be placed across the university. From experience, they know

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what her process is, that she will use it reliably to handle the conflicting needs and demands of different stakeholders, and that she will not hesitate to rapidly change the sequences of work and formal announcements if need be.

These are dimensions of change that most formal organisational processes labour with in clumsy and rigid ways. The public narratives that they can carry are, of necessity, incomplete, simplified and restricted to the headlines. By contrast, the frame that this executive has created allows for a much more calibrated sharing of information and flexible consideration of alternatives, involving only selected people at times which she can control. But her ongoing management of the informal framing is always anchored firmly to a set of strategic intentions that she will refer to as a strong rationale for what is being done and why. Sometimes labelled by the much more operational term “agenda management”, the establishment of robust alternative processes for analysing and deciding on significant options, is a highly strategic form of re-framing.

STORY FOUR: FORGING NEW CONNECTIONS

When I came here, I was working with two professors in our area who are like chalk and cheese. They really, on a whole bunch of different levels, are completely different. And I have really tried to bring that group more together. I co-supervise PhD students (with them) and the style of supervision with one of them ... who is a man, is a very paternalistic talk down mode.

And there were lots of issues around research that weren't particularly collaborative – and supervision that wasn't particularly collaborative and a very rigid way of going about doing things. Not necessarily a male way but this one person is very set in their ways and has a very particular way that they want all the PhD students (to work). I mean there are a lot of people who are actually afraid of him.

With junior staff or PhD students, what I have always tried to do is to make sure that everybody has input – not necessarily that everybody in the end gets their way, but to really consider the directions and where we are going in decisions. I have always worked with either an early career or new career researcher and I have always attempted to pair with them and to mentor them.

And I do that specifically by sharing with them, for example, mistakes I have made or failure. So (for instance) I can submit an article and it gets knocked back, one, two, three times, or you put a grant in and it doesn't get up. (I talk to them about doing) ... both what is good and what is bad. And we have kept that quite open, you know.

Now, that might seem like a really minor thing but it was an explicit strategy that I used in order to shift the dynamics.

The frame changing that is suggested in this story challenges paternalistic supervisory practices by putting in place relationships that work quite differently. This academic leader does not spend time explaining or preaching about her vision for a different kind of supervisory relationship. Rather she puts it in place, enacts and role models the change she is looking for. Elsewhere, she describes the ways in which, over time, students themselves came to set the expectations and standards for the ways in which they wanted to connect with their supervisors. Students spoke openly with each other and shared their experience of more adult working relationships.

One of the most challenging aspects of paternalistic practice is to find effective ways to actually demonstrate their restrictive and unhelpful dynamics. Merely talking about them can provoke denial or incomprehension because the frame that makes them acceptable also makes them invisible. In some cases, like the one described in this example, the situation is made worse because people are actually fearful of the way others behave. Rather than getting caught in unproductive and scary conversations, the frame chosen by the leader was enactment and empowerment.

The power of this approach is that it side steps the usual exchanges that take place when the subject is raised. In many organisations, including universities and schools there has been no shortage of attempts to describe, explain and argue against paternalistic practices. An alternative frame, brought to life through action, can literally speak more than a thousand words.

STORY FIVE: FEELING AND ARTICULATING PAIN

Because we understand the nature of the University has changed, it has become more corporate and people very often drop the ball as to why we are here. I would say that happens above my level I suppose, but we need to stay true to what we are as lecturers, and we need to ensure that the students keep being given the best education that we are aware of as the students need that education for future perspectives.

(Students) have that strange combination of understanding the freedom but not understanding the responsibility and the long term prospects. So the loan they accumulate, the time they spend on nothing – it just pains me.

The most precious thing one can have is time, and I feel that the students sometimes don't understand the value of time, until they reach the time when they are starting to apply for a job, and then they say, I have nothing (to offer) to get a job. And it pains me, it really pains me.

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If they are not made aware of the basic requirements of being a student, such as being attentive, then it plays a bigger role in their future career prospects. I am trying to get the University, our boss, the head of our Faculty and other people to give me a bit of money to run a pilot project where students who are sitting on the borderline, can do something before we put in the results to see if we can make them commit to something.

This story is perhaps more aspirational than the others, in the sense that it is not offered as an example of successful influence, resulting in the actual adjustment and development of professional practice. Rather it is an academic's account of something that really matters to her and which she offers in conversations with others in professional settings. It is included here because it clearly demonstrates someone doing two different things at once that have the potential to powerfully reframe the way that colleagues look at one aspect of their world.

She mostly presents an alternative intellectual frame for understanding the work that students need to do while they are still at university. This of course has consequences for what their teachers, her colleagues, need to do. She is trying to rally their support for something that she considers of great importance. What she suggests to her colleagues is that they confront students with the long term consequences of the choices they are making now. She nominates a number of things that she believes students need to pay attention to. The vignette omits the more detailed rationale that drives her arguments but her logic is that many students are creating – and limiting – their financial futures and professional identities without even realising it, until it is all a bit late. For very many academics, framing their responsibility to students as including this sort of territory is a very big shift indeed.

But the other thing she does, which is still apparent above, but was undoubtedly much more striking when talking with her, is that she puts her own emotional anguish into the framing she offers. She says several times that it pains her. Such a direct reference to personal anguish, coupled with a repeated intellectual argument, is a forceful way of re-directing attention to issues that are not usually spoken about at all. She makes life slightly uncomfortable for whoever she is talking with by re-shaping what she sees as their responsibility and raising the stakes by putting her own pain on display.

In some professional settings, the use of dual emotional and intellectual frames is common, and might be routinely responded to or just as routinely ignored. But in a university setting the sudden appearance of personal emotion in the midst of an intellectual discourse is relatively unpredictable in terms of impacts.

Skilled communicators in any setting, however, would not leave this to chance. Deliberately switching across intellectual, emotional, creative/imaginative and spiritual frames, and contrasting the perspectives of the past, present and future, are all ways of using multiple-framing to support effective leadership practice.

STORY SIX: MOVING Laterally

This sort of lateral or sideways (movement) ... (can work) in a multidisciplinary area, where another discipline perhaps didn't perceive a way forward for a funding proposal. (Yet there was) an avenue they could have gone down because they were unaware or, un-knowledgeable about a particular avenue that we could take as a result of my being, coming from a different background but seeing what they were trying to do.

And I suggested, well listen, you are doing this, I am doing that, why don't we do this together. And we did go in a very different direction as a result of my commenting about what could be done. So these people were unaware what could be done. And so we did move in a direction. This has happened in a few examples where we went in a completely different direction to which they would have gone.

I have been in a situation like this on more than one occasion.

I was comfortable about talking to these people because I had actually had an interest in the areas but the engineers hadn't thought that they could do things using a different disciplinary perspective. They were quite impressed.

Interviewer: You were successful because you had this different way of looking at solving problems and different knowledge.

Yes, so they looked at it from a black box perspective and I said well, let's go in and have a look at the box and discover what is in there. And they said, how do you do that, and I said well you can.

This is a very positive story of significant change in research strategy that was triggered by offering a new lens through which to see a familiar problem. As the story was told to us, it was ultimately a “both, and” use of lenses, rather than an “either, or” usage. This “both, and” approach to framing and understanding old issues and emergent ones is becoming increasingly common in the repertoires of complexity and paradoxical thinkers. However, it is not easy to persuade people who are used to categorical and contingent thinking strategies – which may well be most people who are the product of modern education in business and science – to try to sustain the tension of working with two or more fundamentally different perspectives.

Effective re-framing can look a little bit like magic: something that seemed quite impossible when seen from one perspective suddenly becomes entirely doable when seen from another. In this example, the tight frame of one disciplinary perspective placed some possibilities in the dark. The more stringently that perspective was applied, the less likely it was that any other light would be shone

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on the issue. A collective mindset held by a largish group of people would seem, on the face of it, to be impervious to the efforts of just one individual. So what was the other little bit of magic that was used by this academic woman, from a different discipline, to even give her the chance to demonstrate that a new frame could work wonders? What did she do to get them to listen to her at all?



She was clearly confident that her approach could make a difference and although it is not mentioned in the vignette presented above, she had a history of dialogue with this group that seems to have earned her respect. So this is not a random act of street magic that attracts the passing interest of strangers.

However there are occasions when that is exactly what happens. Something is demonstrated in a different context that captures the imagination or minds of others, and triggers the dialogue of “what if ...?” When re-framing is offered as a free public gift, or as a calculated bait in entrepreneurial activity, or in political and religious campaigning, it can attract the energy, the hopes and fears, and the significant resources of others.

STORY SEVEN: FLYING UNDER THE RADAR

I found the way the management structure was working, so, I am not the only one who says it, was quite problematic. You know, the culture in that organisation wasn't conducive to ... forging

good relationships, or encouraging leadership that was perhaps a bit innovative. So, yeah, I think I had a lot more struggles there in trying to bring about innovation and change because I found there were pressures from above, from sideways, from below, wherever it was, and, it was hard to get, to bring people along. But, while I was there, I was President of an organisation known as the Australian Council of Heads of Schools of (name deleted).

So I was head of that organisation and it had been floundering a lot up until that time I took it over and I can't say it was just me, but there were a group of us I think worked very hard to make sure it was a strong organisation.

Because what was important for them was not just looking at the micro stuff and how it is delivered in universities but trying to engender a sense of responsibility as a profession. So we took on a major role there, initiated a project which was huge and took three years. I did not know what I was in for.

Anyway ... I was able to do that and get it going. It was a bit of a subversive project at that stage because we just appointed ourselves as ... being able to run the enquiry and we raced around the countryside doing so. But a lot of people came on board and joined in that quest.

Oh, there was hardly any funding, but it gained a lot of credibility because it was through an academic institution. So we got bits and pieces of funding from Trust Funds and things, but it was small amounts of money. Enough for a bit of travel and to employ a research assistant.

This final story illustrates a very different form of reframing from the previous one. It describes a strategy of keeping things small in scale, at least initially, and not framing issues in such a way that people are asked to make big decisions, or commit significant resources, that will have to be justified to others. The approach is described as subversive by the academic who told the story.

While engaged at the same time in a national role that was high-profile for her profession, she re-framed a project process from one involving asking for things and gaining permission, to one of continuous inquiry. Without fan-fare, she started conversations that eventually attracted the attention of key players, so that they were drawn to approach her, rather than the other way around. The project snow-balled, drawing modest amounts of money from numbers of different sources. This was not highly visible, well publicised, conventional project management, with clear action plans, stages and key indicators. It was however, a carefully crafted alternative way of engaging with lots of people who were happy to contribute ideas and views, and whose commitment in turn attracted the commitment of others.

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To call something an inquiry rather than a project has great significance in the public space when particular people are authorised – even given legal power – to investigate things in which lots of people have an interest. It is quite a different frame to self-authorise an activity, run the process on one’s own terms and invite others to contribute as they wish. Yet a process that is framed as a generative one, taking shape as it goes, can produce a reputation for credibility, and credibility that takes its creator eventually into the public space, into things even she “didn’t know she was in for”.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored the range of ways in which women in this study used re-framing in their leadership work. As a process of influence, re-framing of perspectives opens up the possibility that groups of people will experience differently all sorts of situations, issues, events, encounters, problems and opportunities. Even their own behaviour and intentions might be experienced and understood in ways that make it possible that they will, at the very least, have new options as to how they feel, think and act as professionals.

The examples presented here are concrete representatives of different types of reframing, in use in situations ranging from the strategic and organisation-wide to the moving of chairs in a meeting; and from the public and explicit to the implicit, quiet, and even subversive. All of them have the potential to be generative and powerful in the aid of leadership work. The women did not call their efforts reframing, and it is unclear how they learned to do what they do. But they do it in diverse and effective ways, and their stories suggest that formal development processes for both women and men in leadership roles might well include explicit training in the practice of reframing.

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