

Jim's Profit Accelerator 18: The Art of Framing

As a leader, you have the broad perspective, the vision to see your organization and its goals in a way that others don't. That viewpoint powers the secret tool of winning leaders in most organizations: That tool is framing, and it's about what's going on (or not) in your organization. Framing is the second-most effective way to fire up the success potential that's built into every organization (the first is listening, by the way).

Juan, a production team leader at a company where I worked, delivered consistently superior results from his team of 12: they had the best throughput, efficiency, quality, and morale. He figured out that instead of pitching in and "helping," he could frame expectations like these for his people: "We'll have one process improvement every day. Always." And just like the Little Engine That Could, they did.

The "work" going on in organizations can be a barely contained tumult at times. Unfocused blasts of energy sear away desire and commitment, leaving a compliant, weak organization. Framing is a container that channels the blasts of energy to great results, providing a roadmap that's concrete enough to enable people to act. Their journey is often called problem solving.

What jams progress is often not a lack of problem-solving skills, but a lack of clarity about first questions, such as these:

- Why this?
- What's the context?
- Are there limits?
- Why now?
- Is it safe to do this and drop that?
- How will I know when I'm done?

Standard delegation advice counsels: "Spell out the end, but leave the means up to the team." That's a recipe for failure and frustration, because it ignores the frame, letting folks wander in the desert until they run out of gas.

Framing is the hidden detail that enables successful delegation. "Success" means that a desirable result happens quickly, satisfying most folks involved. Framing helps folks risk trying; it provides a playground with equipment that they figure they can navigate.

For example, framing is an essential tool for scientists doing basic research, since basic research means “look into whatever you want.” With those parameters, how do such scientists decide what to work on?

The historic search for life on another planet took a jump forward with Drake’s equation:

- $N = R \times f_p \times n_e \times f_l \times f_i \times f_c \times L$

Devised by astronomer Frank Drake in 1961, the equation has framed the search for interplanetary life for the past 53 years. It lists the questions that must be answered, and their relationship, to learn the number (N) of alien civilizations that we could detect. Here are the parts of the equation:

- Formation rate of sun-like stars in the Milky Way
- Fraction of those stars having a planetary system
- Number of earth-like planets (life-friendly) in those systems
- Fraction of those planets where life arises
- Fraction of those where life evolves intelligence
- Fraction of those that might develop technology to emit signals that we could detect
- Average time they’re likely to keep broadcasting, or survive*

Each of these factors has become the target for massive research—in other words, frames. Notice that this simple tool has successfully organized thousands of scientists worldwide on the same mission, each with their own small part of the puzzle. It brilliantly solves the question, “What will you work on today that fits our overall objectives?”

When it’s done right, strategy is the granddaddy of framing tools. Strategy answers the question “What is our business?” It’s not Vision (“What will we look like?”) or Mission (“Why are we here?”). Instead, strategy frames the essential Driving Force of the business, providing a guide for decisions about products, services, and customers.

A tactical plan frames “How” the organization will implement its “What.” Its most effective time horizons are one year (OTY) and then one quarter, except for complex decisions that take two to three years to sort and implement.

Sadly, these plans often move quietly to the shelf to die, unused. It happens when silence follows the quarterly plan. In that space, the crush of daily work buries hope of acting on the plan. Resuscitation requires individuals to answer this action question: *What will I complete this week that will move my team toward my part of that specific quarterly goal?*

Check this in your organization: Where’s the movement? People often work on the wrong task (it’s safer to work than be seen idle). Doing their best, they avoid the task with the high payoff either because it’s invisible or it seems too risky.

Bringing the quarterly plan to life with individual actions “this week” is the second-biggest performance weakness that I see in companies where I’ve worked. Those “this week” actions should be the bridge that guides your folks to their part in realizing the gains that the plan promises.

This disconnect between the yearly and quarterly plans and the work that gets done is a result of the fact that leaders look through a different porthole than their people or their teams. Always. Their broader perspective, deeper experience, and commitment to the entire organization's success twist their vision. They literally see things that their people don't see, and they either assume a bridge isn't needed, or they build the wrong bridge.

The chasm between leadership and action is the gap in understanding what to do about the plan. The steps to the bridge aren't obvious, and without them (framing) wheel spinning is likely.

Here's the leadership question to help folks move forward: *What will you do this week to bring the OTP (one-year tactical plan) to life?*

Venerable jet engine maker Pratt & Whitney just blew past GE and the rest of the airplane industry with its new Geared Turbofan (GTF) engine. Its revolutionary gearbox between the fan and turbine delivers stunning results: 16 percent better fuel efficiency and 50 percent reduction in noise. Other jet engines have direct drive between turbine and fan (no gearbox). President Guy Hachey of Canadian plane-maker Bombardier reported that most spectators at a test-flight missed the takeoff because the plane was so quiet! Today Pratt & Whitney expects about 30 percent of the market for new-generation single-aisle-jet engine orders, worth about \$5 billion annually by 2020.

What ignited the breakthrough? United Technologies CEO Louis Chenevert lit up his organization with relentless 20-year focus on making the gearbox work.

A gearbox, when everyone knows that jet engines don't have a gearbox. Talk about a frame!

The frame was more than a gearbox, of course. While we don't know all that happened in the 20-year development period, we know that Chenevert applied two fundamentals of framing:

- **Why is it worth it?** The acceleration of airplane building and engine maintenance for single-aisle planes painted a huge target for any engine maker who could successfully win a piece of GE's dominance in the category.
- **What is our progress update and adjustment plan?** Twenty-year momentum demanded both updates and adjustments deep in the organization, to guide the individuals doing the detailed work.

And most of all, the top man made it clear for 20 years that he intended for his team to go there, period.

To maintain white-hot focus, CEO's Chenevert's leaders likely applied these elements of successful framing:

- What will a successful outcome look like?
- What are the solution limits?
- When do we need an answer?
- What is the priority vs. other tasks?

Success calls for both a throbbing clear target and a path lit up like runway lights at an airport. Sadly, there's more often a target than a path that can take the entire team over the bridge to success. Once you see the target, devote yourself relentlessly to helping your team see their path and the steppingstones right in front of them. Remember Louis Chenevert's gearbox.

Call me.

**Want to learn more? See National Geographic Magazine, July 2014, p. 31.*

***Want to learn more? See Fortune, June 2, 2014 <http://fortune.com/2014/06/02/fortune-500-united-technologies/>*

For more information, visit www.grewco.com.

Jim Grew is an expert in CEO-level strategy and executive leadership whose clients refer to him as the Business Defogger and Accelerator. Jim helps leaders swiftly discover the hidden opportunities within their businesses and exploit them for dramatic results. Nearly three decades of success as a COO and CEO coupled with his experience running nine thriving businesses provide the foundation for his consulting work as president of the Grew Company. He presents regularly to industry groups, mentors business leaders, and shares insights on his blog, BizBursts.com: <http://bizbursts.com/>. He holds BA and MBA degrees from Stanford University.

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