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## ***Critical Leadership Skill: Multi-Frame Thinking***

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A line officer, new to her post and faced with complaints about constant squabbling among the support staff, reorganizes the administrative personnel to look more like her previous unit. The bickering continues and the shining star in the office, citing a stressful work environment, jumps-ship for another agency.

Following a particularly tense after-action-review, a crew boss decides to reconfigure the squads to redistribute experience. When he announces his decision at morning briefing, one squad boss just grins, the others look shocked, and crewmembers are heard to grumble “what a bone-head.”

A fire chief, hoping to improve morale, adopts a more casual and comfortable department uniform requiring less care. The Department has to force both firefighters and officers to stop wearing their old uniforms, amid accusations that the Chief is destroying the Department’s traditions. Morale declines and the Chief’s credibility suffers.

A program manager confronts the agency administrator, stating that her program is under-funded and under-staffed; and that her people are overworked while another program has it easy. The agency administrator implies that the real problem is a personality conflict between the program manager and a co-worker, and suggests that they work it out. At year-end, critical targets are missed in all but one program.

Sound familiar? I suspect so, because people assigned to positions requiring leadership face decisions like these every day, and despite our best intentions, we all screw one up now and again. So how does a person avoid the pit-falls that trapped these leaders and become the most effective leader possible?

First, we must understand that, fundamentally, each person lacked adequate situational awareness in the leadership environment. They simply misunderstood the situation they faced. They did not see what was truly there, tackled the wrong problem, or pursued a bad strategy.

Why? Because, in each case, the would-be leader tried to diagnose a problem from a single perspective while ignoring other vantage points on their organization, like sizing-up a fire while standing at the engine. As is

common, a too-narrow view of the situation led them to an oversimplified, one-size-fits-all approach to leadership. Unfortunately, when leaders lack situation awareness and do not know what to do, they fall back on what has worked for them before, even when that course of action is inappropriate for the circumstance at hand.

In the first two cases, prospective leaders tried to restructure their way out of problems caused by internal politics and human resources issues. Unlike the line officer and the crew boss, the fire chief and the agency administrator addressed what they perceived as human resource problems, only to be surprised by negative response from their people. The fire chief failed to account for the importance of symbols in the organization; and the line officer pursued a human resource solution to a structural problem involving distribution of work and critical resources.

The organizational learning research literature suggests that our ability to make sense of our complex and ambiguous work world depends on the mental models or “frames” we apply to the task. It is widely known that any situation can be interpreted in a variety of ways, and that our point of view largely determines what we see and how we see it.

Consequently, to truly understand and influence events in their organizations, leaders should observe those events from as many angles as possible. When faced with a decision, effective leaders engage in “multi-frame thinking” or the ability to re-frame the situation. They re-frame to see and understand more and more until they fully comprehend the circumstances at hand. The ability to re-frame experience broadens and improves the leader’s situational awareness. The foundation of re-framing is examining the same situation from multiple vantage points, a process I liken to a good fire size-up.

For any given situation, one perspective may prove more helpful than others. However, I suggest that to understand their organizations; leaders evaluate their issues, problems, decisions, and organizational effectiveness using four frames described by Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal in their book *Reframing Organizations*. These are:

*The Structural Frame* that includes the rules, policies, procedures, formal relationships, and the organization chart of your outfit. Problems arise in this frame when the structure does not fit the organization’s needs.

*The Human Resources Frame* that includes people’s skills, attitudes, energy, commitment, and relationships as the fundamental resource of organizations. How we adapt organizations to people so that people get the job done while feeling good about what they are doing, and how, lies at the core of the human resources frame. Problems arise in the human

resources frame when the fit between the people and the organization is poor. When this happens, both the people and the organization suffer.

*The Political Frame*, that describes how different interests within organizations compete for power and resources, bargain, negotiate, compromise, and handle conflict. By acknowledging the political frame we recognize that organizations are networks of coalitions made up of various individuals and interest groups. Most important decisions in this frame involve the distribution and exercise of power and the allocation of scarce resources. Problems arise in this frame when politics become distracting, unproductive, or destructive and when organizations concentrate power in the wrong places.

*The Symbolic Frame* describes the organizational culture, rituals, ceremonies, symbols and heroes that help us make meaning of organizational events and activities. In the symbolic frame, people judge organizations primarily by their appearance. It is in this frame that organizations create the image that is expected of them, reassure their constituencies, and generate support for their missions. Symbols, rituals, ceremonies and other elements of organizational culture are critically important in the symbolic frame, even when they do not directly contribute to the activity of the organization. Problems arise in the symbolic frame, when the organization's culture is not well aligned with the challenges the organization faces or the organizations symbols and customs lose meaning.

A practical approach to re-framing is to examine the situation or the organization's effectiveness from each of these four frames, one frame at a time. For each frame the leader should ask themselves two questions:

1. From this perspective, what is going on?
2. What options does this viewpoint suggest?

By taking this approach, leaders in organizations can learn to use the four frames systematically and together as part of a comprehensive approach to improving their situation awareness in the leadership environment.

## ***Biography***

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