Framing with Explanatory Metaphors

An Explanatory Metaphor is a simple, concrete, and memorable comparison that quickly and effectively explains an abstract or complex topic. Explanatory Metaphors developed by FrameWorks have been tested extensively to ensure that they build public understanding about how a problem, process, or issue works, and that they reliably lead to stronger support for research-based policy positions.

Checklist for framing effectively with Explanatory Metaphors:

- Use an Explanatory Metaphor if one is available. Language is built on metaphor. If you are talking about a complex, abstract topic for which a tested Explanatory Metaphor exists, then use it – if even briefly – every time it's called for. It is important to pack more (and more powerful) explanation into communications on complex issues. Otherwise, the public will fill in the blanks with habitual but unproductive ways of thinking about the issue.

- Rely on Explanatory Metaphors that have been thoroughly tested for their frame effects. Metaphors powerful: they shape understanding and opinions. Don’t leave this to chance when you don’t have to. Whenever possible, use Explanatory Metaphors that have been carefully developed to faithfully represent the major concept you're trying to explain, and rigorously tested to ensure that they reliably direct public understanding in a productive way. If a tested metaphor is not available, FrameWorks recommends that framing explanations with a well-crafted Explanatory Chain, rather than taking a risk with a novel metaphor that might have unintended effects.

- Introduce the relevant Explanatory Metaphor before moving into details and data on impacts. Oftentimes, communicators rely on deeply ingrained habits of persuasion, such as appealing to impacts, before detailing or describing how the problem works. (For scientists, this manifests in appealing to previous research before talking about their own findings.) A more effective Order involves establishing why this matters (with Values) and how this works (with Explanatory Metaphors) before introducing more specific information. When communicators proactively establish a productive frame for the general public, the impact of the communication that follows is enhanced. When these framing strategies are modeled in communications aimed at peers and colleagues, the impact of the frames is amplified through dissemination.

- Embed Explanatory Metaphors into a variety of communications. Explanatory Metaphors are effective across a variety of communications contexts. You can help more audiences to understand how the issue works by embedding explanatory metaphors into multiple contexts from oral presentations, to teaching materials, interpretive signs, publications, activities, and films.

- Extend your Explanatory Metaphor through other frame elements, especially Tone and Visuals. Maintain a reasonable, explanatory Tone; using metaphors to frame an issue is usually an exercise in translating science or social science. Use Visuals that extend the metaphor; they are concrete images to begin with, so this is often a relatively easy way to add to the impact of the overall framing.

- Use Explanatory Metaphors consistently, as the cornerstone of an explanatory approach and a long-term issue-evolution strategy. When communicators use effective metaphors to teach underlying mechanisms, they can increase support and decrease polarization. Consistent and regular use of the metaphor by many communicators within the field can lead to a long-term shift in public thinking about the issue.