A FrameWorks Institute eZine
Taking Tone Seriously as a Frame Cue

In the last few years, FrameWorks has added "tone" to its list of key frame elements. We have become increasingly convinced that the tone of the communications can provide powerful cues capable of effectively and efficiently communicating (or hijacking) a frame. Choosing and controlling tone, then, is as important as deploying more obvious frame elements such as messengers. We felt an eZine on tone alone was in order.

When we talk about frame elements, we are really trying to illuminate a process that people go through in searching for the meaning of a particular communication like a news report, interview, brochure, billboard or public address. Assuming that the topic is not one with which the audience is extremely familiar, most people will look for cues in the communications itself, which connect to "the pictures in their heads." Research from the cognitive sciences suggests that the efficient thinker will consider the cues in order, looking for the first salient feature that stands out and allows them to make the critical cognitive connection. Importantly, no additional cues will be considered, once the cognitive connection is made. Since we can't readily predict which element of the frame is likely to strike the audience first, we need to control all elements. If the visuals, messengers, metaphors, and tone of the communications have all been carefully constructed to work together, the odds increase that the communications will connect to the desired existing internalized frame.

So what exactly is tone and how does it qualify as a frame element?

Tone refers to the style, mood, manners or philosophical outlook of a communication: shrill, liberal, moderate, abrasive, etc. We owe this observation to our colleagues at Cultural Logic, who first brought this element to our attention. On social issues, we identify two categories of tone: reasonable and rhetorical.

As Cultural Logic points out,

> People can be both reasonable and opinionated on any given topic.

> When they are in "reasonable mode," they are more likely to be open to new information and to problem-solving.

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Rhetorical mode is more overtly political or ideological. It reminds people of their hardened positions and political identities, if they have them, and turns many people off.

Experts and advocates lose credibility when they talk in rhetorical mode, as this violates the "disinterested" requirement for effective messengers.

Recent FrameWorks research - including cognitive elicitations, focus groups and the priming survey - was consistent in showing that when communications about the environment becomes too extreme, too dire, or too partisan, large segments of the public are likely to tune out and dismiss the message, and few new converts are likely to be made. A subsequent survey tested the impact of tone explicitly. The results were stunning. When we framed environmental issues by reminding people that the Administration was full of oil company executives or that Congress was in the pocket of the auto lobby, we lost on average 9 points over the same critique, but framed more neutrally to emphasize the need for long-term, not short-term, planning and incentives for innovation. The lesson is simple: on those issues where many people already see themselves as falling on one side or the other, and when they get cues that the dialogue is about that divide, they stop thinking about the issue itself, and start thinking more generally - and usually less productively - in terms of their own political or factional identities. Even potential supporters may be turned off by overtly political discussions and made skeptical by melodramatic warnings of toddlers who become mobsters because they lacked quality day care.

When people are presented with a reasonable discussion of the problem, its causes and the potential solutions, they are much better at listening to and using new information. Their "Decent Person" instincts kick in and they begin thinking about how to solve the problem rather than how to identify the hidden agendas of the messengers. Engaging Americans in "can do" thinking is especially effective. Strongly worded or overtly partisan rhetoric may energize the partisan base and get the attention of policymakers, but it is ineffective as a tool for moving most Americans towards solutions-based thinking on specific issues like child and family policy.

Why does tone work this way?

We owe to our colleague Pamela Morgan an explanation of this phenomenon. Put simply, rhetorical tone communicates the frame "politics." What do we know about the internalized frames people hold about politics? For most people, there are very few positive frames associated with politics. Politics is a cynical, manipulative game. It's a horse race where people will say (or do) anything to win. To say that something is "just politics," for example, is to undermine the reality of the issue or the position. In effect, by using the rhetorical tone, you communicate to your audience that the specific issue position you espouse is largely a pawn in the old political game of them vs. us. In order

for your audience to decide how to process your communication, then, all they have to do is decide whether you are one of us or one of them. Cognitive connection made. End of opportunity for political learning.

How does this play out in practice?

Communicators fall into the trap of using rhetorical tone when they say things like:

> We accuse the Administration of breaking its promise to invest in education.

> The President has betrayed our trust by revoking his commitment to early education.

> The legislature is squandering the taxpayers' resources on the military instead of investing in our long-term homeland needs.

> The governor is raiding the tobacco settlement piggybank to fund his agribusiness friends, not poor families.

These statements strongly infer a motive on the speaker's part, as well as on those attacked. The motive appears to be "politics as usual" and is more likely to communicate that frame than the ones the speaker had intended: corruption, betrayal and dishonesty.

How, then, can you critique positions with which you disagree and still win adherents? We suggest you first try to appeal to people in their roles as reasonable people trying to do the right thing. This dictates a "problem-solving tone" of respect and engagement:

> Investing in education requires long-term planning, not short-term fixes. You wouldn't plan for your own child's college education the way the Administration is proposing to finance education reform. We need to send our elected representatives back to do their homework.

> The truth is that this plan for early education offers too little, too late. This plan is not going to get our children what they need to succeed.

Criticize the plan, not the people. Demonstrate its inadequacy. Question a proposal's competence, its efficacy, its limited perspective and/or its values. But don't question motive, unless you have very, very good reason to do so. Go for the incompetence of the proposal, not its intent. Don't demonize. Demonstrate inconsistency, illogic, not hypocrisy. Don't fall into the trap of inferring a vast conspiracy. Show how the proposal violates fundamental values that people already hold.

Your chances of framing tone effectively are greatly enhanced if you first use a Level One value, thereby establishing the criteria against which any subsequent argument should be measured. And if your Level One value is embedded in other frame elements

(messengers, visuals, metaphors), you stand a good chance of making the cognitive connection with at least one of these elements. For example:

> We are responsible for the world we leave our children. Is this new plan really responsible to them? I think every parent should question that. The legislature has not addressed such critical areas as ⋯.

> Parents want their child to have an opportunity to do better than they did. This proposal does little to make that possible. By refusing to address⋯..it closes off opportunities for kids.

These are strong statements. But they do not signal to the listener that partisanship or ideology are the motivations.

Let's take a look at a specific example. I recently received a news release from an organization that wished to raise public awareness about proposed limits on training within the Administration's welfare proposal - an issue with which I am relatively unfamiliar. This news release purports to convey local private sector companies' disapproval of the Bush plan. Good choice of messenger to question whether the proposals will be effective in helping people leave public assistance. So far so good.

As an efficient thinker, I am searching this communication for cues about its meaning, so I can move on to my next email. Here are the first few quotes:

> "Everybody we talk to outside Washington tells us this welfare plan makes no sense." Translation: our side doesn't like it. Question: who is their side?

> "President Bush is giving repeated speeches about the importance of education and training to help people on welfare get the skills they need to succeed. But get beyond the speeches, and you find that the substance of this welfare proposal drastically reduces the number of low-income parents who could enroll in school." Translation: Bush doesn't mean what he says, it's all posturing. Connection: They are anti-Bush. Question: Am I anti-Bush? End of cognitive engagement.

This news release couldn't resist the temptation to play partisan politics. If it had done so, it might have secured more interest from the reader in learning whether the Administration's proposals on training are any good or not. Is it just remotely possible that one might a) be supportive of President Bush, and b) think his proposals on TANF are ill conceived? Given the President's high approval rating, these advocates need to win over a good portion of that constituency to their way of thinking. Isn't that one of the reasons they used business spokespersons in the first place?

In fact, many of the quotes in the news release try to move in this more reasonable direction. The statement "The President's proposal puts the states in an impossible

situation," predicts effects without questioning motivation. That's a good strategy.

But there's also a game of "gotcha" going on here - and that's problematic. Bush says he's for local control, but he really wants to take over. He says he is for flexibility, but he really wants to dictate down and control. Again, the direction of the frame is toward motivation.

Proving *the plan* is ineffective, inconsistent or ill-considered is different than showing the *President* (or other public official) is disingenuous and inconsistent. It would have taken little editing to move this news release in that direction - avoiding the partisan cues that now bedevil it.

We strongly urge Kids Count communicators to add a section to their framing checklist to check for tone:

> Assuming you knew nothing about the issue or the issuing body, could you pick up partisan or political cues quickly?

> Have you established a reasonable tone, and set up problem-solving and "American can-do" to prime the audience?

> Have you used a strong Level One value to provide a universal, not a narrow partisan cue, as the standard by which the issue should be evaluated?

> Is tone reinforced by the other frame elements, or do you have a frame clash?

Don't undermine your frame by giving away any one of the elements to chance!

About FrameWorks Institute: The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit organization founded in 1999 to advance science-based communications research and practice. The Institute conducts original, multi-method research to identify the communications strategies that will advance public understanding of social problems and improve public support for remedial policies. The Institute's work also includes teaching the nonprofit sector how to apply these science-based communications strategies in their work for social change. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations, as well as toolkits and other products for the nonprofit sector at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

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