

The Effect of Evocative Frames on Strategic Decisions

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Abstract

We employ the frame perspective and data from a natural experiment conducted over a period of 22 years to investigate framing effects and how they can influence strategic decision-making in a total of 205 teams of participants in an organization theory course. We find that frames can have substantial effects on strategic decisions, through evoking implicit storylines which invite moral considerations and emotions into the decision process. The finding that frames can implicitly impact decisions through their selectivity, salience and emotive effects extends our understanding of strategic decision making as well as of how frames shape decisions. We contribute to understanding of frames and framing effects by highlighting the pervasive role of emotion; and offer an expanded perspective that goes beyond frames as interpretive schemes, to view them as situated symbolic actions. We conclude by discussing practical implications for executives and organizations.

Keywords

frames, storylines, emotion, strategic decision making

The linguistic turn in the social sciences (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000) and in strategic management (Vaara, 2010) has sensitized us to the import of discourse for organizational interpretation and action. Discourse, including narrative, not only influences agents' actions (Phillips & Hardy, 2002; van Hulst & Ybema, 2020), but can also

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itself be seen as action (Gibson, 2020; Heracleous & Marshak, 2004). Elements of discourse such as talk, text and tropes can shape organizational processes including strategic decisions (Hendry, 2000), sensemaking (Cornelissen, 2012; Taylor & Robichaud, 2004) and strategic change (Hardy, Palmer & Phillips, 2000; Heracleous & Barrett, 2001). In this paper we seek to extend this line of research on the potency and effects of discourse by employing a frame perspective, where frames are discursively evoked (Bateson, 1972; Lee et al., 2018; Semino et al., 2018; Snow & Benford, 1992). We consider how something as simple as a turn of phrase or an evocative comment can implicitly and unintentionally re-frame, evoke emotions, and thereby shape, the outcome of a decision-making process.

Strategic decisions are influenced by cognitive biases that may lead to stereotyping and use of heuristics (Mezias & Starbuck, 2003; Walsh, 1988). They are also shaped by discursive frames, or interpretive schemes that invite particular interpretations and assumptions, and point towards solutions consistent with these meanings (Kim, 2021; Vaara, 2010). However, if we simply view frames as distortive of otherwise “objective” analysis, or as types of cognitive biases, we miss important elements of how frames can influence strategic decisions, including the role of connotations, storylines associated with frames, as well as emotions evoked by these frames (Brundin et al., 2015; Daniels, 2003; Treffers et al., 2020). In this paper we aim to contribute to such an understanding.

We first outline the frame perspective and present our thesis, namely that unintentional words and phrases subconsciously linked by participants to particular frames and associated implicit storylines can evoke strong emotional reactions that in turn shape strategic decisions. We next present a natural experiment conducted over two decades, which consisted of an original and an adjusted case analysis scenario, offering data to suggest how framing effects occur and their potential impacts on strategic decision-making. We conclude with a discussion of the findings and their theoretical as well as practical implications.

Frames and Framing Effects

One of the ways through which discursive elements such as narratives, stories, conversations and metaphors influence interpretation and action is by providing a frame through which situations are interpreted, and that leads actors to take decisions and act in ways that are consistent with these frames. Bateson (1972) pointed towards the importance of frames, initially inspired by his studies of animal communication. He noticed that monkeys in play made moves that would normally be interpreted as hostile in their group, but these moves nevertheless were not interpreted as hostile since the meta-communicative frame in operation was that these actions were part of play rather than part of an altercation. Bateson suggested that frames are selective, by including certain messages and excluding others, and due to their meta-communicative nature they offer directions for understanding and evaluating the messages included within the frame. Bateson (1972) noted that a frame may be consciously or unconsciously recognized and represented through words; also recognized by Scheff (2005), who noted that a frame can be represented by a word, phrase or proposition (p. 381).

Snow and Benford (1992: 137) defined a frame as “an interpretive schema that simplifies and condenses the world out there by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions.” Entman (1993:, p. 52) further noted that “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.” Frames are thus “schemas of interpretation” that shape attention, assumptions and meanings about situations that actors encounter, and guide actions on the basis of these meanings (Kim, 2021, p. 757). Frames have multi-dimensional effects including shaping prognosis of a situation, generation of potential solutions, and particular actions taken (Lee et al., 2018; Snow & Benford, 1988). Semino et al. (2018) suggest that we should study frames at different levels of analysis and from multiple perspectives that can capture their cognitive, social and action-related dimensions. These scholars highlight that frames are interpretive schemes that can be represented and evoked linguistically, that then influence how agents make sense of situations, and their decisions and actions with respect to these situations. The powerful influence on subsequent decisions shaped by the way alternative options are framed has been demonstrated experimentally (e.g. Maule & Villejoubert, 2007; Rothman & Salovey, 1997; Tversky & Kahneman, 1986).

There is now a significant body of literature on frames and framing effects, much of it associated with the intentional manipulation of frames by social movements for political purposes (e.g. Benford, 1997; Benford & Snow, 2000; Lakoff, 2004; Lee et al., 2018; Schön & Rein, 1994). In addition to the political approach which is primarily focused on intentional framing, there is Goffman’s sociological treatment of frames which builds on Bateson’s earlier work. Goffman considers frames to be social phenomena which could be implicitly present, intentionally created to deceive others, or even employed as a form of play (Goffman, 1974). When frames are naturally occurring, they are embedded within, and partly a product of, larger social and cultural contexts which are subconsciously recognized and followed by members of that culture. Thus, for example, the meaning of the same behavior, for example a bow when meeting or coming across someone varies based on the specific cultural context, but members of the same culture would understand the specific meaning given the implicit frame that is followed. Whether the bow was offered ironically, or to acknowledge applause from an appreciative audience, as a show of deference to royalty, or the way people habitually greet each other instead of shaking hands, would be readily understood by the members of that social-cultural group, based on the contextual frame which derives both from broader cultural contexts as well as specific situational contexts.

Evocative Phrases and Framing Effects

Our specific interest in the framing effects of evocative phrases is somewhat related to, but importantly different from the explicit and intentional phenomena such as “fighting

words” (Klein, 2019) and “code words.” (Åkerlund, 2021). Fighting words are words and phrases that are so insulting or inciting that when spoken they provoke immediate and intense emotional reactions, for example use of the “N-word”. These emotional reactions occur because the words spoken invoke frames which the groups referred to find extremely disagreeable or insulting. The emotional impact of fighting words has been recognized by the United States Supreme Court as one of the very few exceptions to the right of free speech in that country. Legally this is known as the fighting words doctrine (*Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire*, 1942). What qualifies legally as “fighting words,” however, has shifted over time. Nonetheless, whether considered as a legal doctrine or egregious violation of a social group’s acceptable speech, fighting words are generally recognized as explicitly and intentionally evoking an intense and immediate emotional response.

Further, “code words” are words and phrases that are intentionally employed and take on a meaning different from their literal definition to those in the know in a particular context, and can reframe how a person or situation is perceived (Åkerlund, 2021; Safire, 2008, p. 133). In essence, the true meaning of the code word or phrase is explicitly known to like-minded members of a social group whereas outsiders are not seen as “in-the-know.” For example, depending on the social group and context, saying “Oh, he is from the provinces” could mean in code: “He’s an uneducated, unmannered, simpleton.” Another example is how places like hospitals and airports use announcements that seem innocuous to the casual listener, but signal some type of an emergency to those in the know: “Will Mr. Smith please report to the Information Desk.” What qualifies them as a type of code, then, is their explicit and intentional use based on a pre-arranged understanding, which evokes a frame shared by a social group.

In this discussion we follow the Bateson-Goffman tradition of considering the impact of framing effects that are implicitly derived from the social-cultural context and not necessarily intentionally created, as would be the case for example in political “spinning,” use of inflammatory fighting words, or in-the-know use of code words and phrases. Of course we recognize that the distinction between intentional and naturally occurring frames is not as clear-cut as it might appear, since both types gain their potency from the existing ideational world of a group, and as such, both rely on similar interpretive mechanisms for their effects on agents’ interpretations, decisions and actions.

We propose that an implicit frame, triggered and represented by a few unintentional words or phrases (often metaphorical), can evoke powerful emotional reactions when sub-consciously linked to a storyline (a fuller representation of the frame). This implicit framing then guides further strategic reasoning and decision-making. Metaphors, for example, have been recognized as pervasive discursive elements that can be influential in framing situations, evoking potent emotions (Brundin et al., 2015; Treffers et al., 2020) associated with these frames, and influencing action based on these emotions and frames (e.g. Cornelissen, 2012; Kim, 2021; Marshak, 1993).

Further, we suggest that framing effects can occur during an episode such that their impacts can “retroactively” influence interpretations of the entire episode; they do not

have to occur at the start in order to shape how people will subsequently interpret a set of data points. These emotional framings can override more dispassionate interpretations of facts and analyses and influence strategic outcomes. In this discussion, we aim to shed light on how discursive frames and their interpretive consequences can be as, or more, influential in strategic organizational decision-making as objective data and analysis. We conclude with thoughts about the practical implications of our findings.

Setting and Case Scenario

The data to help illustrate our contention come from a classroom exercise involving 925 early and mid-career graduate students participating in organization strategy, design, and change courses, carried out over a 22 year period (1988–2009). During the 20-year period (1988–2007), the original case scenario was used with 190 decision teams, and during the two year period 2008–9 the case scenario with a single sentence removed, was used with 15 decision teams. We employ this case study as a natural experiment (Leatherdale, 2019; Lee, 1989). All participants were presented with the same case scenario over 20 years and required to make a decision. The decision patterns were stable over this time, but then changed distinctly in 2008–9 when a specific phrase from the case study was removed. This was the phrase we suggest had supplied the framing effects in the initial version of the case. We were able to observe the decision patterns with both the initial and revised versions of the cases, and make attributions about how the participants' decisions were affected by the two case scenarios. In this sense, the method was what is referred to as a “natural trajectory experiment” (Diamond, 1986, p. 4), involving the comparison of features, decisions or actions of a community over time (in this instance the case decision), as opposed to a “natural snapshot experiment” (ibid.), the comparison of different communities with different features at the same point in time.

The case scenario (see Appendix 1 for extracts from the case) involved an adapted version by the lead author of Atlas Electronics Corporation (Lockridge, 1973), a company faced with making a strategic choice about how to configure its organization structure to respond to emerging market demands in the form of a new contract called “Spyeye”. The participants analyzed the case in small teams of four to six people and presented their recommended options. The participants came from a variety of backgrounds and age groups. Most were studying for master's degrees in organizational development, human resources, or business administration; had fulltime jobs; were between 30–50 years in age; and about 60% were female.

Case Study Results

Over the twenty year time period, 190 four to six person teams analyzed the case and presented recommendations. The consistency of results across backgrounds, settings and time is astonishing. In exactly no cases (0%) did any team recommend any form of the functional structure option advocated by the Datson character. Nor, was the responsibility for leading the fulfillment of the contract ever assigned to Datson in any other organizational configuration. In virtually all the cases the recommendation

was to assign it to the Saunderson character in a Project Management Staff Office (75 cases: 39.5%) or to Saunderson as head of a new Spyeeye self-contained product unit (71 cases: 37.4%). In the rest of the cases it was assigned to Saunderson in a hybrid option or to an unspecified person (24 cases: 12.6%). In addition, 20 groups (10.5%) were unable to reach a decision in the allotted time.

Given that each of the options had data to support or reject it, as well as structural and strategic pros and cons, it became curious why the Datson option was never selected. In debriefing the case exercise with the participants additional information pertaining to the selection was revealed. This information, along with the overwhelming consistency of choice, suggests the potential impact of something at work in making the choice that went beyond the information provided, colored the interpretation of the information, and even led to the invention of information that was not presented in the case. One pattern observed consistently was that teams created data that did not exist. This was particularly true for their descriptions of the two main protagonists. Specifically, personality characteristics were assigned to the two principles that were not included in the case, and these descriptions seemed to materially impact their choices. Datson, who is described in the case simply as 55 years old and Head of the Receivers Department was overwhelmingly attributed to be, for example, 55 or older; a white male; stocky with eyeglasses, a short sleeve shirt and pocket protector; arrogant and a turf protector; who will sabotage Spyeeye unless he gets his way; and probably should be fired. These descriptions were usually offered with a great deal of conviction and even outright animosity towards the Datson character. For example, people asserted that "He's a turf protector and should not be rewarded!" explaining that: "He slammed his fist on the table, turned red, and demanded his way. That can't be allowed!" And, suggested, "The president should fire him!"

Saunderson on the other hand, who is described as 45 years old and formerly a Section Head in the Antenna Department and also Project Manager for the expired "Moonglow" project, took on more favorable attributes. Saunderson was attributed to be 45 or younger; mostly a white male but also sometimes a woman or person of color; attractive, athletic and trim; collegial and a good manager/leader; who is confident and a rising star; and probably should be promoted.

Another pattern was that financial data pertaining to the strategic choice was consistently ignored, even by people with financial backgrounds. That information included:

- A penalty of up to 20% of the fee if Atlas fails to meet the technical specifications (\$40 M x 20% = \$8 M at risk).
- A penalty of \$20 K for each day of late delivery (400 days x \$20 K = \$8 M at risk).

Thus, the bigger financial risk would seem to be failure to meet the technical specifications versus late delivery given the overall timeframe of the project. Presumably, this analysis might then lead to consideration as to which option(s) is best for meeting technical specifications versus on-time delivery. The literature on organization design

suggests that functional forms of organization may be more effective in terms of technical depth whereas product (or matrix forms) might be better at handling the cross-functional interfaces and time schedules (e.g. Duncan, 1979; Walker & Lorsch, 1968). This literature had been assigned to the students prior to working on the case and covered in a prior class. In fact the case had been selected and assigned as a way to explore strategic and structural choices.

When failure to use this information was raised, most of the teams acknowledged they did not do the financial analyses, but didn't see how that was relevant to the choice. The fact that the case states, "*Saunderson and the Project Management Staff Office had delivered the other project on time, and the performance was satisfactory to the customer, although the equipment deviated slightly from the specifications*" was often countered with comments that, "But there were no penalties." The possibility that Datson's advocacy of the functional option and concerns about maintaining "*the technical capability and quality performance of Atlas's functional departments*" might be related to Saunderson's prior project not fully meeting technical specifications was generally dismissed as "speculation."

What Might be Going On?

During the debriefing discussions one piece of data from the case seemed to overwhelm all other information and could have led to why some data and analyses were consistently ignored and other information invented. Time after time, the statement in the case that: "*One thing I want to make particularly clear,*" Datson continued, "*nobody's going to come into my department and tell my people how they must do their work. They report to me and my supervisors and we're the ones who call the shots*" came up as one of the most important pieces of data in the team's decision-making.

When teams were asked how what Datson said compared to official corporate policy about reporting relationships they either looked blank or said it was not presented in the case. They were then asked to review the footnote about corporate policy that appeared in the case stating that Project Management Staff Office "work guidance" should not include how to accomplish a task, but only the task to be accomplished. The What and not the How.

After reviewing this footnote, some realized that Datson not wanting other people telling his/her people *how* to do their work was consistent with corporate policy. Others professed to not understand the distinction. Almost all still insisted that Datson was wrong because "Datson had the wrong attitude." When the possibility that Datson's strong feelings expressed in the case might have resulted from experiences in the prior project where perhaps people in the Receiver Department had been told *how* to do their work and where there were also some questions about the technical specifications on the final equipment, this was again usually dismissed as speculation unsupported by data in the case.

The overall results combined with missed data, invented personality information, and possibly exaggerated or distorted perceptions eventually led to the obvious question of what would happen if the offending statement was removed from the case.

A Slightly Revised Story

During 2008–9, the offending statement by Datson about “*One thing I want to make perfectly clear...*” was deleted from the case for 15 teams. Everything else in the case and class setting remained exactly the same. The teams were also similar in backgrounds to the prior teams. The results now in terms of recommendations by the groups were quite different.

With only the one statement removed, five teams (one third of the total that experienced a revised scenario) thought the functional option advocated by Datson might be the best way to go. Their logic included the very short delivery timeframes and the costs of starting up new or unclear reporting relationships. Datson’s status as running the largest department was noted in a favorable way along with convictions that Datson would know how to manage the interfaces. Saunderson’s failure to fully meet the technical specifications on the prior project was also mentioned by those teams as an area of concern. The rest of the teams selected one of the other two options for reasons primarily associated with control of people and resources, although most people thought Datson as a seasoned executive would cooperate. There were no teams that could not reach a decision or who suggested an alternative or hybrid option. When asked to describe the main characters the representations of Datson and Saunderson were more neutral, and there were some descriptions of Saunderson that included attributions of being power hungry.

These results strongly suggest that one statement or subset of words in the case attributed to Datson took on a disproportionate emphasis and ultimately shaped the strategic decisions made by the teams. When the statement was included in the case it evoked strong reactions that may have framed the situation such that data were ignored, selectively used, or invented to fit the implicit storyline of the framing. When the offending statement was removed so too apparently was that particular framing, and the same data were now seen and interpreted differently. Now, the Datson option was chosen a third of the time rather than never.

Discussion

Evocative Framing Through Implicit Storylines

In reviewing this set of data we suggest that an exercise in analyzing a strategy-structure choice, which should have occurred on the basis of objective data and dispassionate analysis, became instead a morality drama pitting the “good Saunderson” against the “bad Datson.” This was accomplished through an implicit framing process that evoked a storyline containing elements of how turf protecting bullies behave in organizations, as well as elements of the archetypal contest between good and evil, often reflected in organizational politics. This then cast the teams in the role of rewarding or punishing “bad” managerial behavior versus providing an objective business analysis and recommendations based on all the facts and figures provided in the case.

We see here an example of how implicit framing dynamics attributable to the powerful effects of an evocative phrase invoked a storyline that then selectively framed how people viewed the data, their task, and their recommendations. The dynamic of ascribing salience to some parts of the story and imbuing the process with moral evaluations illustrates Entman's (1993) definition of the process of framing. We further see an illustration of how alternative frames on the same data lead to different decisions (Kim, 2021). The new frame, following Bateson (1972), Goffman (1974) and Scheff (2005) was triggered by Datson's statement: "*One thing I want to make particularly clear, nobody's going to come into my department and tell my people how they must do their work. They report to me and my supervisors and we're the ones who call the shots.*" When the phrase was present, the resulting framing led to various negative labels being attributed to Datson consistent with that of a villain in a management morality story. Decision making was shaped by the frame, as well as participants' emotions evoked by the framing rather than dispassionate analysis (Treffers et al., 2020). This in turn led to the universal rejection of Datson as a person as well as the option of allocating the project to Datson's functional department.

The Subjective Analysis of Business Data

The data suggest that the explicit strategy-structure analysis frame of the exercise may have been implicitly *re-keyed* by the Datson phrase. For Goffman a key and re-keying is the set of circumstances in a social group that signal how behaviors should be enacted and interpreted. "I refer here to the set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else" (Goffman, 1974, pp. 43–44). In this case the apparent re-keying was tied to Datson's words and phrases interpreted as territoriality (*no one is coming into my department*), hoarding of resources (*they report to me and my supervisors*), and an autocratic or authoritarian style (*we're the ones who call the shots*). This apparently was powerful enough to implicitly cast Datson as a bad person who needed to lose or be punished in a showdown with the now heroic Saunderson.

In essence, then, we are suggesting that the frame of what began as an exercise to analyze data and provide a strategy-structure recommendation was implicitly re-keyed or re-framed by the evocative phrase about "nobody's going to come into my department..." This then tacitly invoked a different storyline, leading to a re-framing of the situation and a new purpose for the teams. The case scenario that entailed a strategic choice about the appropriate structural configuration, and implied the need for rational analysis of the situation involving customers, deliverables, strategy, structure, corporate culture, financial data, and historical performance, was now transformed into a drama where different characters were cast as hero and villain and the teams into a role of judge and jury.

Furthermore, the data also suggest that all this happened implicitly and covertly (Marshak, 2006) as the teams read and discussed the case. That is, there were no reports in the debriefings to suggest that anyone explicitly changed the purpose or

focus of the exercise. Instead, an evocative phrase seems to have implicitly re-keyed or re-framed the assignment such that data were distorted, invented and ignored in ways to further the new implicit storyline. “Given then understanding of what it is that is going on, individuals fit their actions to this understanding and ordinarily find that the ongoing world supports this finding” (Goffman, 1974, p. 247). Instead of a strategy-structure recommendation primarily tied to a set of business variables and intended to advance the competitive position of the company, the recommendation of a particular strategy-structure option is implicitly re-framed as a morality story where the decision becomes the vehicle to reward good management behavior and punish a bad manager.

Implicit Storylines and Filling in the Information Gaps

In this case, the evocative phrase seems to have evoked an implicit storyline involving perceptions about how good leaders versus bullies behave and about the proper response to either case. The results in terms of recommendations and invented personality attributions suggest that Datson was interpreted as on the wrong side of that good/bad divide, and that participants’ decisions were informed by the guiding principle implicit in the storyline, that bad behavior should not be rewarded. This becomes obvious when the recommendations of participants are compared with the analyses of the business case that did not contain the evocative phrase. There the implicit storyline changes significantly; from a morality play it now becomes more of an analytic exercise where more “objective” judgment and analysis of the different structural options is needed, as well as displayed by participants.

Given that the participant population consisted primarily of mid-career graduate students studying leadership, organization development, and human resources in schools of business and public administration, the existence of shared, but implicit, storylines about what constitutes good versus bad management/leadership practices might be safely assumed. According to various storylines found in the workplace and in official texts, characteristics associated with good managers/leaders usually include: unselfish or servant leadership, team-oriented or collaborative behavior, and use of rational reasoning in disputes to achieve their aims, among other characteristics. Bad managers/leaders, on the other hand, are often portrayed as turf protectors selfishly interested in their own objectives, unwilling to cooperate or be team players, and who adopt threatening or bullying behaviors to get their way. Implicitly recasting the Spyeeye case as a morality play the teams were now in a situation to reward or punish the leading characters who became representatives of good versus evil leadership.

The characters are also provided with personalities and costumes to better fit their roles even if that information is not in the original data. Datson becomes, as previously noted, “an older white male; stocky with eyeglasses, a short sleeve shirt and pocket protector; arrogant and a turf protector; and who will sabotage Spyeeye unless he gets his way.” Saunderson in contrast is described as “younger; mostly a white male but also sometimes a woman or ‘person of color’; attractive, athletic and trim; collegial

and a good manager/leader; who is confident and a rising star.” Because good must triumph over evil the framing almost scripts each team’s verdicts about the characters. Datson is evil and should be punished. “He’s a turf protector and should not be rewarded!” “He slammed his fist on the table, turned red, and demanded his way. That can’t be allowed!” “The president should fire him!” Saunderson, instead, is good and “probably should be promoted.” And, within the parameters of the case, one way to render these judgments is to recommend the strategy-structure option advanced by Saunderson and not the one proposed by Datson, or to otherwise place Saunderson as head of the new project. Interpreted in this way the actual results, including the invention or distortion of data and the overwhelming consistency of not supporting Datson’s functional recommendation, make more sense than if the results were assumed to be based solely on an objective business analysis frame. The fact that these types of results were diminished or did not occur when the evocative phrase was removed adds further credence to this analysis.

Limitations of This Study

First, the data are based on a naturally occurring quasi-experiment and not on a formally conducted research protocol using control groups and more systematic data collection. Even though natural experiments are prevalent in fields where variables cannot be easily manipulated (for example in ecology, public policy and macro-economics), they have not been extensively employed in organization studies.

Further, the participants were all graduate students in a classroom setting and not managers making a real decision where there would be real consequences to their actions. Their reactions and responses may also reflect more of what they thought they should do to show they were good students (still another implicit frame) versus what they would do in a business situation. They also were making their decisions based on a short case scenario and not the richer texture of organizational settings. Thus, in real life they would have more information about the situation, as well as both Datson and Saunderson.

Implications for Theory and Practice

The findings reported here help us better understand strategic decisions, and also provide a cautionary tale for organizational executives seeking to advance strategic initiatives. While a great deal of advice stresses the importance of communicating the facts, figures, and “business case” for any strategic initiative, unintended evocative framing effects can potentially undermine “rational”, factual presentations and shape the direction of the decision. We will first discuss two implications for theory and then two implications for practice for organizational and strategic communications.

Theoretical Implications

Frames May Evoke Emotions that Shape the Approach to Data and Strategic Decisions.

The case results confirm that frame effects are not necessarily limited to impacting

purely “objective” interpretations of information, but are deeply connected with affect and “non-rational” factors. From a psychological perspective, selective perception (Hwang, 2010; Walsh, 1988) was evident in the way participants dealt with the data offered in the case. Whereas there was no selective exposure (everyone had the same information), there was selective interpretation and varying salience attributed to different pieces of information, influenced by the frame that was adopted and the associated emotions. Information in agreement with the cognitive schemas adopted (Rumelhart, 1984) was taken seriously, but inconsistent information was discounted or ignored.

Following calls to explore the role of emotions in strategic decisions (Brundin et al., 2015; Daniels, 2003), we show here that the spirited reactions of participants when discussing the case and dismissing Datson with colorful labels and invented information attest to this emotional link. Furthermore, pertinent information given in the case (financial, structural, and strategic) was downplayed, selectively interpreted, or ignored. This raises concerns that strategic decisions that purportedly should be taken on the basis of a rational business analysis may instead be subconsciously driven by evocative frames.

Previous research has shown that specific frames provide particular interpretations, assumptions and meanings with respect to pertinent situations (Hirsch, 1986; Kim, 2021; Logemann et al., 2019). Our analysis shows that in addition to these effects, emotions may be evoked that play a powerful role on how existing data is approached, or even invented, to support the frame adopted. We therefore extend our understanding of framing processes by noting the powerful role of emotion.

Studies of emotion in strategic management have noted that particular emotional states can influence the generation of solutions and the strategic choices made (Treffers et al., 2020). Positive emotions aid collaborative, generative strategizing in management groups, whereas “emotional tugs of war” lead to “unreconciled strategizing” where little agreement is reached (Liu and Maitlis, 2014, p. 214). Further, managers can regulate their emotions on an ongoing basis and reach different decisions over time aided by this emotional regulation (Vuori & Huy, 2022). We contribute to the understanding of emotions in strategic decision making by suggesting that unintentional words and phrases may be subconsciously linked by participants to particular frames and associated implicit storylines, which can evoke strong emotional reactions that in turn shape strategic decisions.

Frames as Situated Symbolic Actions. The dominant view of frames is that they are interpretive schemes that provide assumptions, meanings and indications for action (e.g. Goffman, 1974; Kim, 2021; Lee et al., 2018). While this approach is helpful, we follow Semino et al. (2018) in pursuing a richer view of frames. Based on our study we suggest an expanded perspective that brings the context, symbolism and pragmatic dimensions to the fore, by viewing frames as situated symbolic actions (Heracleous & Marshak, 2004). Building on established research on frames, a better understanding of the situation and the symbolic aspects of framing can shed light on the decisions and actions taken within these contexts. These decisions and actions are not simply based

on dispassionate analysis but to a large extent on particular frames and the emotions evoked by those frames.

The words, phrases and fragments of texts that constitute executive communications are *symbolic* where the meanings evoked by them can be linked with other concepts and representations (Kim, 2021); in this case a storyline or narrative (Logemann et al., 2019; van Hulst & Ybema, 2020) with archetypal characters who should be treated as they deserve in the eyes of the participants. The level of *actions* related to the meanings (Gibson, 2020) derived from the symbolic representation is evident both in the storyline presented in the case, and in the debates and recommendations that are prompted in the classroom situation. For example, Datson's statement was presumably not intended to present him or her as an archetypal bad character who should be punished, but this was nevertheless the strong effect on those who debated the situation and made strategic recommendations on it. At least for the data and dynamics reported here therefore, analyzing what is going on in a decision-making process would be further illuminated by considering the discussions as symbolic action rather than as literal exchanges of objective information or explicit and intentional uses of rhetorical devices.

Framing effects are further influenced by the context or *situation* (Stephan & Walter, 2020) in this case not only the organizational context but a yet broader contextual element, the implicit storylines and archetypal perceptions derived from personal, professional, or socio-cultural sources that cut across any particular organizational discourse. Framings keyed by evocative phrases, depending on the content of the phrase and frame evoked, therefore, can be seen as a manifestation of more elemental, archetypal storylines. As such, implicit frames can subconsciously re-affirm, challenge, or alter dominant discourses, while at the same time influencing the decision situations within which the frames occur.

Implications for Practice

Anticipate Framing Effects in Organizational Communications. Given the potential for an evocative phrase to implicitly invoke in a group a new storyline that can then subconsciously change how group members frame their task, what data they will notice, what information they will distort or even create to fit the new storyline, and ultimately what decisions they make and then implement, it becomes crucial for executives to anticipate framing effects in organizational communications.

These effects can occur subconsciously. As in the case example, framing effects did not occur by someone intentionally trying to re-frame or "spin" the situation to rhetorically advance their preferred outcome. Instead, the reframing occurred implicitly, apparently drawing on a subconscious storyline consistent with the context and the experiences of group members. The fact that a single ill-chosen phrase or two could invoke an unintended storyline and thereby completely change a strategic outcome is sobering.

Anticipating framing effects means firstly to appreciate that they occur, often unintentionally, and secondly to be alert to when it is happening by actively paying attention to

the language employed. For example, implicit storylines might be evoked by “hot button” or objectionable, but unintended “code words”. For example, a manager who consistently refers to a demographic group as “those people” might be construed by others as using a code word to stereotype by implying “they are not like us.” If those present thought they knew the meaning of the code, but did not agree with its implications, an implicit and unintended (at least by the speaker) storyline about narrow-minded or bigoted people might be invoked. Similarly, a manager who suggests something along the lines of “we didn’t do it that way in the good old days” during a discussion of the need for a new strategy might invoke a storyline about resistance and be construed to be a “dinosaur.” These types of implicit storylines, if invoked within the decision-making group, could then sway whether an outcome decision resulted more on the basis of emotion and a subconscious framework or on a rational analysis of all the facts.

Proactively Shape the Frames of Your Own Communications. Executives and others involved in strategic decision-making processes need to do more than worry about marshalling a persuasive business case of objective facts, figures and analyses. They should also consider the orchestration of all aspects of communications related to the initiative including proactively shaping the frames involved. In order to do this effectively they should consider who is delivering the message, where the decisions are being discussed, broader organizational and societal contexts, how might the strategic communication be symbolically framed by various audiences, and what is the desired framing? Such a consideration involves knowing the values and potential storylines of those whose agreement is needed to implement a strategic initiative.

For example, if the initiative is being advanced by Department X and/or Executive Y, in Context Z, how might that be symbolically framed in other parts of the organization? Could it be framed as a power play? A desperate proposal? As ignoring important values, etiquette, or ethics? In order to anticipate potentially deleterious framing effects it will be helpful to have a sense for the most salient values and storylines of impacted or involved audiences. The risk that an implicit storyline advanced by one group based on its values could be offensive to another group is ever present. One real life example is a high-tech organization whose executives wanted to move client engagement to lower levels in the organization to allow first line engineers the opportunity to work more closely with customers. This was considered by the executives, consistent with their values and beliefs, to be career enhancing and a benevolent shift from a more hierarchical to a flatter organizational structure. The engineers, however, framed it differently and heard a very different message. For them working on advanced technical problems was career enhancing not meetings with customers. As one engineer put it, “I came here to work on cutting edge technical problems, not to be a salesman.” Furthermore, the suggestion that the initiative was also intended to help flatten the organization was derided as an attempt by senior management to pass the buck since they were not doing a good job with sales, and besides, if they were serious why had the first line engineers not been involved in developing the initiative?

While it is wise to be sensitive to what not to say or do, it is also important to consider how to take more affirmative actions. In short, to never assume that the facts and figures

will speak for themselves, but instead are always being framed by the speaker, based on the situation, code words, storylines, and so on. Some may find the implication that communications related to strategic decisions may need to be “orchestrated” distasteful, but given the dramatic impact only a few words and phrases had in the case example, to do otherwise is to allow alternative framings and storylines to undermine your intentions.

A related practical consideration is to reflect on and reinforce the importance of one’s reputation and presentation of self in all organizational and strategic communications, since this is a key element that influences how audiences frame one’s communications. This is not just in terms of what is said and done at the time of the messaging, but also regarding one’s longer-term reputation and identity. Is the main messenger considered to be “a straight shooter;” “advancing her own agenda,” “power hungry;” or what? For example, the Datson character may or may not have been a power hungry, autocratic, turf protector, but spoke a few evocative phrases that the readers of the case picked up on and implicitly used to frame the character and the outcome, while ignoring other objective “business” data. The message here is clear. Someone’s identity and reputation are two of the most important factors in determining how communications will be received and interpreted and is therefore a strategic resource to be cultivated and protected.

In conclusion, this research highlights the potential effects of implicit frames and framing effects on strategic decision making, where the selectivity, salience and emotive aspects of frames are shown in operation. This study can be seen as a step towards understanding the nature and operations of implicit frames in organizational situations such as strategic decision making, where frames move beyond cognitive biases to the realm of social construction. Finally, the study offers insights and practical implications for executives to consider when planning organizational initiatives.


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Note

1. “Work guidance” – definition of the goals, specifications and constraints (budget, schedule, etc.) for a technical task, as distinguished from detailed supervision of the work to perform it. The “what to do,” not the “how to do it.”

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Appendix I: Extracts from the Atlas Electronics Corporation Case

Atlas Electronics Corporation is an engineering company organized along functional lines. From time to time, Atlas sets up a Project Management Staff Office to handle a large R&D contract. The Project Management Staff Office then assigns technical tasks to each supporting functional department and provides work guidance¹.

The government has awarded Atlas a contract for a reconnaissance system called “Spyeye” requiring support from functional areas throughout the company. Company management has to decide how to organize Spyeye. The three choices are: 1) Assign Spyeye to a functional department, 2) Set up a (matrix) Project Management Staff Office, or 3) Establish a (product) self-contained, dedicated Spyeye organizational unit.

The contract specifies that Atlas is to produce a prototype model in 9 months and if acceptable to produce 5 operational systems within another 6 months. In return Atlas will receive \$600 million, of which \$40 million is the Atlas fee. The government will assess Atlas \$20,000 for every day of late delivery and up to 20% of the fee for failure to meet technical specifications.

H. Datson, 55, is Head of the Receiver Department. S/He has been with company for 25 years and has built the department to the largest in the company. B.Saunderson, 45, is a Section Head in the Antenna Department and has been with the company 12 years. A year ago Saunderson was appointed Project Manager for a Project Management Staff Office created for another R&D project. Saunderson had delivered the other project on time, and the performance was satisfactory to the customer, although the equipment deviated slightly from the specifications.

Datson put in a strong plea to President Skillton of Atlas, to let the Receiver Department manage Spyeye as a project within its functional organization. "My department has been in existence since this company started," Datson said. "We're a well-trained staff with a lot of managerial and technical know-how. We'll have to do the bulk of the development anyhow. And I'm sure we can handle the interfaces with the other departments without any trouble."

Datson went on to express some personal feelings about the alternative of setting up a Project Management Staff Office. "You must recognize that we've built the reputation of this company on the technical capability and quality performance of its functional departments. I personally dislike becoming a 'service' organization to a group who will be here today and gone tomorrow. Also, it'll probably be managed by someone who is not as technically oriented as any of our department heads." "One thing I want to make particularly clear," Datson continued, "nobody's going to come into my department and tell my people how they must do their work. They report to me and my supervisors and we're the ones who call the shots."

Saunderson sent a memorandum to the President as follows:

1. The project involves four of the company's operating organizations. If management is established in any one of these, the company would have the awkward situation of one functional department directing the activities of others who are on a parallel with itself in the company organization structure.
2. The project involves more than mere technical development. Cost, schedule and technical performance all must be evaluated and balanced to produce the optimum overall result.
3. The project does not involve pure research. It requires some innovation in the technical area, which can be done by the supporting functional departments. But someone will have to develop the overall system, which can best be done by a Project Management Staff Office.

President Skillton wondered if another alternative might be to create a self-contained, 'product unit' with a dedicated staff to accomplish Spyeye.