Book Review

Fairhurst, Gail T. & Sarr, Robert A. (1996). **THE ART OF FRAMING: MANAGING THE LANGUAGE OF LEADERSHIP.** San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Communication scholars and instructors often seem to be speaking with the voice of a discipline suffering from a serious split-personality disorder. One communication personality is quite fond of touting the powerful role of human interaction in the "real world" of the business and professional arena. Those playing out this personality role display research evidence that confirms the connection between effective message construction and delivery and the obtainment of desirable end goals such as enhanced sales, higher productivity, and other dividends inherently appealing to those who engage in various forms of commerce. They also trot out the anecdotes of successful public relations, advertising, and sales professionals who had their appetites for the promotion of products and ideas whetted by enrollment in a communication course. And when playing out this personality role they cozy up to business and industry in a way that might make some academics feel both disgust and jealousy—disgust for a discipline too close to those outside the academy and jealousy of a discipline that might profit from such a relationship.

The other communication personality is remarkably different. Those playing this role often acknowledge the value of the communication-workplace relationship, yet they do not want any element of that relationship to creep into the academy. They somehow fear that a communication professor who becomes a full-time consultant or writes a book that is initially targeted to a non-academic audience has "sold out" to the evil empire that so often crusades against those who reside in ivory and less ornamental towers. Some who play this role may well level such a charge against *The Art of Framing* by Gail Fairhurst and Robert Sarr. That, however, would be a most misplaced allegation.

The Art of Framing is explicitly constructed as a book for those in the business world who hope to be leaders and managers. Indeed, the subtitle of the book, *Managing the Language of Leadership*, makes that point very clearly. Fairhurst is an academic with an interest in the business and organizational community, but Sarr is a practitioner in that community. Despite these close ties to the business and professional world, Fairhurst and Sarr also offer unique ties to many in the academic discipline of communication. The book is rich with a wealth of information germane to both of these seemingly bifurcated worlds.

The organizational dynamics of the book are appealing, regardless of which perspective one uses as a lens to view the work. Chapter One is essentially an explication of the perspective that Fairhurst and Sarr employ in discussing framing, or the process of claiming

the superiority of one interpretation over others. Not only is this view of framing established, it also is situated in the context of everyday conversation in the workplace. Fairhurst and Sarr go on to offer an overview of the remainder of the book in Chapter One. Chapter Two, "From the Inside Out: How Your Own View of Reality Shapes Communication Goals" is an amazingly readable and concise explanation of the role that one's worldview plays in the development, construction, and delivery of messages from individual-to-individual. The linkage between one's "mental models" and the meaning process goes another step in laying the foundation for the understanding of the communication process in the workplace.

Both Chapter Three and Chapter Four address more squarely practical aspects of the framing process. Chapter Three gets to "the vision thing" and proclaims the wealth of possibilities that a leader may harvest who has mastered the art of defining her or his outlook of the future and who has engaged in the interactive process of connecting that outlook to the visions that others within an organizational context are developing. The chapter goes further to discuss tools of the mental model and framing effort with "marketable" labels such as "miracle questions" and "continuous benchmarking." The Fourth Chapter focuses upon the centrality of a communicator's environment with a well developed account of the role that context can play in the exchange of messages. Perhaps most notably, Chapter Four makes insensitivity to context its leading warning for anyone who may play a leadership role.

Chapter Five may well be the most valuable portion of *The Art of Framing*. This is the place where Fairhurst and Sarr define, explain, and illustrate the "tools for framing." They identify these tools as metaphor, jargon, contrast, spin, and stories. In each instance, they make it extremely clear that language is the most powerful of forces that a manager, a leader, or anyone else for that matter has available to influence decisions, others around them, and the construction of the reality in which they function. Examples that help to illuminate this chapter are drawn from significant political and corporate figures, as well as from the field research efforts that Fairhurst and Sarr so meticulously employ in producing the whole book.

Each of the final three chapters of the book provides a detailed account of a specific aspect of the many factors that contribute to effective framing in the workplace. Chapter Six stresses the importance of not only avoiding the use of mixed metaphors, but any mixed message that might unnecessarily confuse or distract any intended listener(s). The chapter does not stop there, rather it adds the important extra step of offering advice—grounded in communication theory and research and the practical experience of the authors—on how to maintain a consistency of message. Chapter Seven provides a thorough account of the need for spontaneity in the communicative situation; that framing is often more of an impromptu process in everyday conversation rather than a long-planned rhetorical effort. Indeed, Chapter Seven makes clear that a manager/leader may take advantage of opportunities that emerge in the organizational world to comingle goals and mental models into frames that promote a chosen interpretation of reality. The closing chapter of the book concludes the discussion of the framing process that Fairhurst and Sarr present with a lively and healthy treatment of credibility—its importance, development, and interconnection with the art of framing. By doing this, Chapter Eight makes clear what rhetorical scholars from Aristotle to present day thinkers have known: that one's message often depends upon how intended auditors "read" the rhetor—as believable, trustworthy, and worthy of viewing as a leader or not. So, your success at framing, note the authors, may well depend upon how others frame you.

Beyond the organization of the eight chapters, there are other content and structural features that help to make *The Art of Framing* very readable and engaging. Each chapter closes with a well-constructed summary titled "A Backward Glance at this Chapter." For those who feel their heuristic drive motivated by a read of the book, it is peppered with a healthy dose of references drawn from communication and business literature. The book

also offers excerpts of transcripts harvested from the fieldwork of the authors that provide real life episodes to help make explanations of the framing process more "visual" for the reader.

Many will note that my original claim about the book has not been proven yet, that it adds to the academic as well as the business perspective. That can be answered with an account of how *The Art of Framing* might be employed in the communication classroom. Those who teach both the undergraduate and graduate level course in organizational communication will, of course, find the book valuable. This is, indeed, the most obvious of connections. It is, however, much more than obvious. The book not only provides another collection of "stuff" about the workplace, it also provides a solid grounding in business and communication research, a unified perspective, and a wealth of practical evidence. The book supports the claims that are presented by the authors in a manner that is often lacking, even in textbooks. The concept of framing a message provides a consistent framework for investigation of the organizational world. The transcripts, case study accounts, and other materials drawn from the extensive practical experience comprised by Fairhurst and Sarr illuminate the real world of the workplace in a most robust manner.

Instructors who teach courses with an emphasis upon the role of language will also find *The Art of Framing* a valuable addition to their battery of course readings. Framing itself, is intrinsically derived from the construction of a vivid and believable interpretation of reality crafted through language. Particular components of language—metaphor and jargon, for example—are explicated and illustrated effectively. The use of transcripts provides "textual data" of sorts for examination and analysis by students of linguistic interaction. The discussion of the organizational structure of business and the professions reveals much about the interplay of language and content. And the illustrations of successful framing vividly dramatize the immense power of language.

The teachers of leadership courses and seminars should naturally be drawn to *The Art of Framing*. The explicit treatment of managers as leaders in the business community renders a healthy repertoire of illustrations, examples, and situations to supplement academic literature and to spur discussion. If one were to look beyond the explicit business emphasis of the book it would be possible to uncover suggestions, research, objectives, and more germane to any situation where one individual must confront the challenge of compelling others to follow her or his vision.

Communication administration of any sort is certainly one of those situations where an individual must confront the challenge of compelling others to follow her or his vision of a department, program, or similar academic unit. *The Art of Framing* offers general advice regarding communication and leadership skills that most of those in communication administration are most likely aware of, yet it presents the material in a clearly packaged collection of suggestions for the applied functions associated with discourse and leadership. The book may not become required reading for graduate students who may somewhere down the line become a communication administrator, but it should be recognized as a handy reference book that can serve as a convenient reminder to those who must "manage meaning" in order to facilitate operation of their particular academic unit.

Every instructor who teaches in the communication classroom would do well to invest in the fruits of Fairhurst and Sarr's effort. *The Art of Framing* can serve as a reference book, collection of samples, and thought-provoking materials for any communication expert. Political communication courses could do worse than to glean practical illustrations from the book. Teachers of public speaking courses can harvest valuable examples of the use of metaphor and other presentational advice. Personally, my work in rhetorical studies and argumentation, has been spurred by pieces of information and ideas taken from the treasure chest of materials available in this book. *The Art of Framing* was written explicitly for the business community, but it would be a terrible mistake to pooh-pooh it from an academic

perspective. In this case, both communication discipline personalities can reside in the same frame.   Review by Michael W. Shelton

REFERENCES AND NOTES

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