

KARIM BENAMMAR

Reframing

The art of thinking differently

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Contents

- Introduction 9

- Part I Technique* 15

- 1. Reframing in four steps 17
 - 1.1. Step 1: Determine a core belief 17
 - 1.2. Step 2: Find supporting beliefs 18
 - 1.3. Step 3: Construct opposites 20
 - 1.4. Step 4: Determine a reframed core belief 22
 - 1.5. The terminology of reframing 24

- 2. Why do we think what we think? 27
 - 2.1. Step 1: Determine a core belief 28
 - 2.2. Step 2: Mapping our supporting beliefs 31
 - 2.3. The four pillars of our current frame 34

- 3. How can we think differently? 37
 - 3.1. The power of opposites 37
 - 3.2. Step 3a: Construct simple grammatical and linguistic opposites 39
 - 3.3. Step 3b: Try different variations of these opposites 41
 - 3.4. Step 3c: Make these opposites extreme 42
 - 3.5. Step 4: Determine the reframed core belief 44

3.6. How reframing works	46
3.7. Getting better at reframing	48
3.8. Instructions and practical advice	49
<i>Part II Applications</i>	53
4. Reframing personal situations	55
4.1. Reframing our perspective	56
4.2. Reframing our patterns	60
4.3. Reframing change	62
5. Reframing in organisations	67
5.1. The Semco way	67
5.2. Reframing business models	70
5.3. Proactive reframing	72
5.4. The price of resisting change	75
<i>Part III Philosophy</i>	79
6. Paradigms and the web of belief	81
6.1. Quine's web of belief	82
6.2. Reframing the web of belief	83
6.3. Kuhn's paradigm shifts	85
7. The revaluation of all values	91
7.1. Nietzsche and the foundations of morality	92
7.2. Reframing moral values	95
7.3. Asserting our own values	98
7.4. Fundamental human values	99

- 8. Reframing large-scale paradigms 103
 - 8.1. Reframing production methods 104
 - 8.2. Reframing the way we use objects 106
 - 8.3. Reframing from scarcity to abundance 108
 - 8.4. Reframing from taking to giving 112

- 9. Reframing the twenty-first century 115
 - 9.1. Michel Serres' six profound changes 115
 - 9.2. Radical changes 118
 - 9.3. Human flourishing 120

- Acknowledgments 123
- Bibliography 125

Introduction

In 1968, during the Mexico City Olympics, the crowds witnessed a remarkable spectacle. The American high-jumper Dick Fosbury approached the bar from the side, and manoeuvred himself over it backwards, shoulders first, landing on the cushion with an elegant flop. The audience did not take him seriously at first, but Fosbury kept clearing the increasing heights, and ended up winning the gold medal with his new method. Within a few years, all high-jumpers would make use of the ‘Fosbury flop’, as it came to be called.

I’ve always been fascinated by new approaches which question and change the way we do things. My starting point consists of two simple questions:

- Why do we do the things that we do?
- How can we do things differently?

We tend to do things out of habit or custom. We do things the way we have always done them. We learn structures as a child and never question them when we grow up. We try to solve problems by approaching them with the same mind-set that created them in the first place.

Why do we believe what we believe? Is it possible for us to change our mind about the way society is organised, about our interactions with other people, or about the way we approach a situation? What would it take to change these convictions? While everyone can see the point of sticking to what works, there are many things that we are not unreservedly satisfied about doing. Why do we keep doing these things – is it really for lack of a different approach?

The companion question is: how can we do things differently? In this book, I propose reframing as a technique for thinking differently. In reframing, we make our assumptions explicit in order to question and change them. Reframing makes us think deeply about the assumptions

we have. Why do we believe what we believe? Why do we think what we think? And, as a consequence, why do we act in the way that we do? What would it take for us to act differently? Reframing opens up new spaces, new possibilities, new ways of feeling and new ways of acting. Reframing is a simple four-step method that we can put to use in our own life.

My aim in this book is threefold: that readers learn how to apply the technique of reframing to their own situation; that they discover some exciting examples of reframing in personal life and in organisations; and that they get some insight into the philosophical roots of the technique and its potential to help with a large-scale rethinking of our society and our future.

10

Dealing with change

Why do we need to change? The world is changing continuously, and before we know it the structures we use no longer make sense. Time flows – the Ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus already observed that you cannot step into the same river twice. Things move and things move on. Technology has made life more comfortable for us and has changed the way we work and communicate with each other. The world today needs new approaches and new strategies. Henry Ford famously said that if he had given people what they wanted, he would have had to come up with faster horses. And as everyone clamours for bigger SUVs these days, what we really need is... well, how do we reframe mobility? How can we rethink our sacred cow?

We also change. Imperceptibly perhaps, and reluctantly, for sure, but change we do. It may seem that it is everyone around us is getting younger, but it is really our train that is moving. Our frames and beliefs represent stability in this ever-changing world, they constitute something to hold on to. At some point, though, these frames need to change with the times. The trigger for change can be internal: we want to change something in our situation, discover new things, or move on. The trigger can also be external, forced upon us, requiring our response. Change happens suddenly: we experience the loss of our job, of a loved one, of our health. Sudden change can also be positive: we get promoted, become a parent or come into some money. By reframing our situation, we periodically overhaul our lives and put ourselves in synch with time again.

In reframing, we question the most fundamental assumptions about our behaviour and perceptions, the very assumptions that usually remain unquestioned because they seem so obvious. Imagine being able to reframe things in your life. What if you considered people who make loud private calls on public transport not as a nuisance, but as members of your community? What if being stuck in traffic in your car was not the worst moment of the day, but a ‘mini-sabbatical’ for yourself in which you had time to listen to the music you enjoy, and sing along as loud as you want? These are examples of reframes people have made about strong convictions they had in their life. Imagine what it would be like to think differently about the world around you. Things that you find difficult or problematic can be seen in a new light. By understanding how you view the world through a frame, you are free to try something new. Imagine changing the long-standing habits you have acquired.

11

The method of reframing

When we reframe, we ask our two questions:

- Why do we do the things that we do?
- How can we do things differently?

These two philosophical questions have always fascinated me, and I strongly believe we should ask them more often. Developing the technique of reframing is a way to codify these questions into a four-step tool that is easy to learn and can be applied in a wide variety of situations.

Reframing is particularly useful when we are stuck in our current frame. Our structure of beliefs causes us to think in a certain way and to formulate problems in a certain way. The problems we identify are related to the structure of beliefs that underlies them. Usually, we hope to find a solution to the problem within this structure. Sometimes, though, we find that problems prove to be intractable. No matter how hard we try, there seems to be no way out. Perhaps this has to do with the structure in which we have posed the problem. Reframing is a way to question this structure. Problems are not ‘solved’ in the usual sense, but rather ‘dissolved’ or ‘side-stepped’. We realise that the formulation of the problem itself should be changed. If we start from a different perspective, we can formulate new questions and new problems.

Is reframing difficult? Is it only for creative geniuses, artists or innovators? Actually, we all reframe several times a day, unless we lead a sad and humourless existence. Every time we ‘get’ a joke, we readjust our assumptions and expectations: we reframe. Reframing is not about the joke itself – although reframing can be very funny. It’s about the moment we ‘get’ the joke, the moment the penny drops. At that moment, a new frame of meaning replaces the old one. A joke works because our initial assumptions about the situation are suddenly confounded, which leads to laughter, a physical reaction. A joke is a radical reframing of the situation that we thought was taking place. Jokes give us pleasure; perhaps we are even hardwired to enjoy questioning our assumptions and thinking differently. According to George Orwell, ‘a thing is funny when it upsets the established order. Every joke is a tiny revolution.’¹

Doesn’t reframing already exist? The term ‘reframing’ is used in Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), where it means taking a different psychological stance about your situation. Therapist Katie Byron uses a form of reversal in her self-analysis method called ‘The Work’: she asks us to ‘turn around’ our assumptions. Reengineering, a popular method to restructure businesses developed by Michael Hammer, is a form of reframing. The term ‘framing’ means coining a value-laden term to describe something: politicians frame each other’s’ positions. Reframing is then akin to ‘spinning’, that is changing the frame from negative to positive.

The four-step method of reframing in this book is different from all of these. First, we need to find out why we think what we think. We determine the main beliefs that support our current position, and we find opposites for these beliefs. There are thus two levels and four distinct steps to the method. This leads us not only to a more complex and robust understanding of our own thinking, but also to changes that can surprise us because they occur at a level outside of our explicit thinking.

This book has three distinct parts. The first deals with the technique of reframing, outlining the four-step method in chapter 1 and going into more detail in chapters 2 and 3. The second part presents a number of applications of reframing. Chapter 4 deals with reframing issues in our personal lives, ranging from the small to the momentous. Chapter 5 showcases some reframes in business and in organisations. The third part presents philosophical issues. Chapter 6 delves into aspects of the philosophy of sci-

¹ George Orwell, ‘Funny but not Vulgar’, 1945.

ence and the work of Quine and Kuhn. Chapter 7 is an analysis of major aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy conceived as a reframe. Chapter 8 looks at large reframes in our production methods and concerning the notions of scarcity and abundance. Chapter 9 looks at fundamental changes in what it means to be human and at future reframes.