

Issue Framing and the Parking Lot Scuffle

In turn 1 Tim framed the conflict by raising the issue of Jay's fault in the damage done to his bike. If Jay had gone along with this framing, the conflict would have taken a very different turn, with Jay possibly apologizing and agreeing to pay for the damage. Instead Jay offered a "counter-frame" by placing the blame on Tim.

The two frames are developed independently of one another in turns 1 through 7. Notice that Tim was pressing a case consistent with his framing, while Jay was responding with questions and statements that develop his own framing. In a real sense, Tim and Jay were talking past each other, because each has framed the conflict differently. There was a lack of engagement of the other party's issues by both Jay and Tim. The first engagement occurred in turns 8 and 9. In turn 9, Tim challenged the implicit assumption in turns 2 and 8 that Jay's parking space is his territory and that Tim had trespassed, instead insisting on being compensated. Tim tried to establish the issue as damage to his bike, not whether Tim had any right to park in the space in the first place.

Jay's response in turn 10, asking Tim if he worked in the building, suggested that he is still focusing on the "rights" issue. If Tim did not work in the building, he certainly had no right to be in a parking space reserved for employees. Jay's response that Tim "has a problem" also attempted to turn Tim's accusation back on him. By charging that Tim is acting irrationally, Jay expanded

the range of issues in the conflict. Adding the issue of Tim's problematic attitude, of course, was only likely to make Tim more angry and adamant.

Tim's response in turn 11 reasserted fault for the damage as the primary issue. Jay then tried to walk away. Not being willing to buy in to Tim's definition of the issues, Jay probably believed further talk was counterproductive. It is also possible that he was beginning to be fearful of Tim's "problem." Sometimes the issues we introduce reflect our fears as much as our thought about the situation, and Jay's statement at the beginning of turn 10 may have been stimulated by unease with Tim, rather than an attempt to "one up" Tim.

This case represents an abortive attempt at issue framing. Tim and Jay were never able to converge on a common issue or issues during their conversation. Their ability to confront the conflict and come to a resolution was hampered by this lack of common grounding. ■

Discussion Questions

- Can you think of other conflicts you have been in when you and the other party "talked past" each other by advancing different issues?
- Could issue framing have been done in a more productive way in this conflict? If you were in this conflict, how could you use framing to move the conflict in a more productive direction?

Reframing of issues and problems is unavoidable as the parties discuss them. In many instances, people frame and reframe issues without fully realizing it. Reframing can redirect conflict interaction in either constructive or destructive directions. If parties want to control conflict interaction and direct it constructively, they need to be able to reframe issues and problems so that a wide array of alternative solutions can be considered.

Several moves that may influence framing of conflict issues have been identified. *Umbrellas* are issues one party introduces to legitimize grievances when the original issue is one that others would not normally accept as valid (Walton, 1969). For example, David may be angry at Brian because Brian received a promotion to a position David wanted. For David to express anger toward Brian because of Brian's promotion would seem petty. However, if Brian persistently comes to meetings late, David can legitimately chide him for that. David can then transfer his anger related to the promotion into an attack on Brian for always being late. The lateness issue serves as an umbrella for the anger generated by the real issue. People often do this in everyday conflicts: They are angry at someone and use the first legitimate issue that arises as an excuse to vent anger.

In *issue expansion* extra issues are attached to the conflict in order to increase the apparent distance between the parties' positions (Walton, 1969). As more and more issues are added, people see their interests as more and more incompatible. For example, assume David has lashed out at Brian for Brian's lateness. Brian could respond with a remark, such as, "Well, you're not perfect yourself—your reports are always late!" David might then comment on Brian's sloppiness and Brian on David's jealousy, and so on, as the conflict develops into a real "everything but the kitchen sink" fight. In legal arenas, disputes may also be broadened by adding issues (Mather & Yngvesson, 1980–1981; Menkel-Meadow, 1985). For example, a dispute between a doctor and patient may be broadened into a complaint of discrimination against an entire group of people. In such instances, a single conflict is used as a test case for addressing a much broader social injustice or for protecting a group's rights.

Issue expansion may allow parties to save face by shifting attention to others' shortcomings, and enable them to point out that others share the responsibility for the conflict. However, issue expansion can also accelerate the conflict and create a perception that it is hopeless to try to work out a reasonable resolution because there are just too many issues to untangle.

Some moves redefine issues in ways that narrow and refocus the conflict. *Negative inquiry* involves asking the other party what he or she means by ambiguous statements in order to pin down the issues (Wilmot & Wilmot, 1978). The simple process of questioning can often encourage people to think through vague and judgmental statements and to reduce them to more objective terms that specify their needs. For example, in response to negative inquiry, the statement "You are sloppy" may change to "I want you to stop leaving the car such a mess."

Fogging also focuses issues but is more manipulative than negative inquiry (Wilmot & Wilmot, 1978). On hearing another's complaint, the party acknowledges only part of it, thus narrowing the "live" issues to those one party is ready or willing to address. For example, A might say to B, "This car is a mess. You are so sloppy!" B then fogs by replying, "It is a mess. I'm so sorry," shunting the sloppiness issue aside. Fogging focuses the issues, which may be useful for problem solving and compromising. It can also be used in an avoiding style.

divisive issue for workers. How striking is framed by the workers—what it means to them to strike—can have a powerful influence on whether the tactic is supported. Striking can be seen as “getting revenge” or striking can be seen as “principled behavior” (Donnellon, Gray, & Bougon, 1986). Reframing the meaning of striking during the process can influence the degree of support for adopting the tactic.

There is, then, a “dance” of framing in which each party advances its own interpretations of the issues and acts on them, the other party responds, and the parties move toward development of a shared frame, on the one hand, or toward divergent framings, on the other. When parties eventually converge on a shared framing, there is greater possibility for working together toward an integrative solution than if parties remain in their own worlds and operate out of different frames (See Case 3.4 on page 90).