



# ATTRACT OR REPEL?

## The power of Framing



### Attraction and followership

In this Insights paper you are invited to think less about leaders and more about followers. After all, without them there is no leadership.

Understanding followership is crucial. A failure to understand this might mean that you waste your career *trying* to 'get people to do things', *trying* to 'convince people' or 'sell' them an idea. Such efforts are unlikely to bring about any real followership.

Our aim is to offer you some insights into what people become attracted to, what they want to follow and therefore what you might need to do in order to mobilise their energies.

### People do what they are attracted to

In your experience of life, do people do what they are told to do? Do they even do what they know themselves is sensible to do (eat less, exercise more)? At this point in your career, you will have already been frustrated many times by the answer that, no, people don't always behave in logical ways. Instead, they do what they are attracted to – even if sometimes this isn't always good for them.

So if we know this to be true; how come when we want to make changes in our organisations we act as if we've forgotten it? This is especially true when people think about cultural changes. Organisations have got into the habit of 'planning' such changes using logical engineering principles as if human beings were rational.

Richard Dawkins makes this point well using an interesting metaphor. When thinking about cultural change, he asks us to consider whether we are 'throwing a rock or a bird?'

If our aim is to throw a rock from point A to point B, then following a set of logical planning principles certainly helps. We would weigh the rock, measure the distance from A to B and then calculate the amount of energy needed to catapult the rock in a clear trajectory. Provided we had done the measuring and planning correctly, this way of thinking would prove successful time and time again.

People in organisations often use the same type of thinking when 'planning' changes that involve sentient, human beings. We look at a problem, conduct a gap analysis, use project planning software to 'roll-out' a communications plan.

The point here is not that planning per se is wrong or bad – but what if change that involves people was more like throwing a bird?

We could still weigh the bird, we could still measure the distance from A to B and calculate the energy needed. But what happens when we throw the bird? Rather than flying from A to B, it's going to go wherever it wants – it will go to where it is attracted to. It might be attracted to a dark corner for safety, a high place to see what's going on – or to see if it can find other birds like itself to have safety in numbers.

Using this analogy, we think about what the bird is *attracted* to. Food! The way to attract the bird is to put down some bird food at point B.

When I use this story in workshops people very often recognise methods that their organisations use when 'throwing birds'. For example you could bind the birds wings with red tape so that you don't give it a choice about where it goes, you could numb the bird first by making things so dull that people lose the will to live and then they are more likely to behave like rocks!

**Lesson one. People do what they are attracted to.**

## Framing

Given the above, the implication for achieving followership is to think sensitively about how you can attract people to a way forward. 'Framing' is a powerful technique to use.

Here is an example you might have heard from one of your friends or colleagues.

"Hey - I've got a joke for you. It's a bit long winded, but I'll give it a go. Wait a moment, how does the end bit go. Sorry, I'm not very good at telling jokes...."

By which stage the likelihood is that you are not going to find this joke at all funny. The person has just 'framed' what they are about to say in such a way that your brain is now primed and ready to look for all the faults in the delivery of the joke.

By framing a photograph or piece of art, you draw the viewer's attention to where you want them to focus. You attract them into the picture. What is framed becomes looked at. And we frame things all the time verbally. Here are some classic negative frames you hear at meetings and conferences

"Good morning everyone, thanks for coming. Well, hopefully I'm not going to bore you too much with all this ...."

"OK everybody. Right, well we've got a lot to plough through, so we'd better make a start ...."

Framing has a powerful effect on what we focus on. They can attract or repel. They can be draining or energising.

## Real life case studies

Kieran was in his late twenties when he was given a real break. How would he like to lead a team of 80 engineers? It wouldn't be easy, they were a difficult, sometimes awkward bunch. So, Kieran took on the challenge with gusto. Keen and excited to be given such an opportunity he knew he had to get this team aligned to deliver the synergies of the latest re-organisation in order to deliver local KPIs and meet key strategic aims.

Let's just stop there. We have some powerful examples of framing already. In his mind he has a negative frame about the team 'they are awkward and difficult' and he had framed his job as having to 'get *them*' aligned.

Unfortunately for Kieran this mental framing drove his behaviour in a more bullish way than was useful. Moreover, he used the language of 'synergies', 'alignment', 'KPIs' 'strategic aims'. It's not that there is anything wrong with these words but that, for this particular audience, they were unattractive. This was a team who were cynical of the organisation, still coming to terms with their new owners.

Kieran then did an incredibly effective thing. He started to re-frame all the corporate messages in such a way that the team found more attractive. Here's some examples:

Strategic aims = where we are heading

KPIs = what we need to achieve to secure long term future

Alignment = good, old-fashioned talking to each other

Behavioural Charter = making sure that common sense prevails, avoiding stress and not tolerating managers with an aggressive style

Performance & Development Reviews = a way to ensure fairness in the way managers treat you and that you get the development that some of you really want

Team briefs = a way to ensure you aren't kept in the dark

He got rid of the awful 'motivational posters' that previously covered the walls. In their place he put up pictures of great engineering achievements. He started to understand what this group were attracted to: pride, engineering, fairness, secure futures – and used these not to manipulate them or 'spin' things but to engage with them so that they started to move with him. This is very different mental frame from 'getting' them to do things.

Two groups of GPs were given a questionnaire before a conference.

Group a: Ministers are increasingly demanding more flexible working hours from GPs – are you in favour of this idea?

Group b: Patients are increasingly demanding more flexible working hours from GPs – are you in favour of this idea?

Which group voted more in favour? Group b – by a long way. Same proposition but a different frame. The latter being based on patients – and therefore tapping into the values of the audience. This becomes a key part of a powerful frame – when it is based on what the audience are *attracted to*.

## Re-Framing

Original frame (this email came out of the NHS a couple of years ago and was the 1<sup>st</sup> all-employee email sent by a new Chief Exec).

Dear all,

It has been brought to my attention that the last time the World Cup and Wimbledon coincided a number of people took unauthorised leave. I will be taking a dim view of this happening again and anyone caught doing so will be dealt with according to HR policy.

This had a real dent in morale. However, one of the people who received this used her anger to re-write it – she sent it back to the Chief Exec as follows.

Dear all,

I'm sure many of you are excited by the prospect of the World Cup and Wimbledon – fingers crossed that GB does well!

Regrettably I know that many of you won't be able to take the annual leave you'd like over this period and I just wanted to say a special thank you for coming in during this time.

A few years ago, I've been told that a small number of people took unauthorised leave. I don't think that's fair on those of you who make the effort to come in and so rest assured that any similar unfairness this year will be firmly dealt with.

### **Lesson Two: You need to re-frame to attract new audiences**

In the 1980s, the overtly left wing language of the Labour party was unattractive to many voters. Whatever we may think about the politics, Tony Blair's New Labour re-framed things to draw people's attention to the centre ground. Jeremy Corbyn has attracted large numbers of followers but is accused of not being able to attract millions. Trump and Clinton attract and repel in equal measure. In Brexit, the Vote Leave campaign's 'let's take back control' proved to be a very resonant frame.

Most human behaviour is automatic. We get stuck in our ways, we get used to things and this applies to the way we use language. If we need to mobilise large groups of people there some real risks with this. Change efforts often fail because they lose momentum. The original framing might have attracted the first wave of followers but that's the very time to stop and re-frame things to attract the next wave. By definition these people may be harder to reach – and the challenge is to ask yourself the following question: *what have you failed to understand about these people?* How come they are not attracted to things? What values and beliefs are attractive to them - are these different to your own? Are they turned off by how you are presenting things? Where is the common ground? If you are only ever talking to the same people then it is likely your change effort has reached a plateau and it's time to re-frame things.

The nurse writing a business case can't just rely on the emotional hook of patient care to attract the Finance Director to back their case.

The engineer can't just rely on the power of logic to hook the marketing team.