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Framing the Issue to Solve Problems

When a difficult problem involves too much complexity, simplifying the problem statement helps us move forward to a solution. This simplification reduces the number of perspectives we must simultaneously consider and allows concentration on the essence of the problem.

Framing is a process of identifying and enunciating key issues which may be hidden, critical or fundamental. There are two types of framing: rational framing and emotional framing.

Rational framing distills a set of issues down to a few critical variables. This is an objective, analytical process that considers root causes, priority or sequence, and potential impact of action or inaction.

However, rational framing alone is not sufficient if emotional or personal issues are involved. **Emotional framing** is required to bring hidden or unspoken emotions to the surface. People are often reluctant to speak about unresolved personal issues which have continued for a long time. They may also avoid confronting an issue because of fear or embarrassment. An useful example is the fable about The Emperor's New Clothes. Although his nakedness was readily apparent to all, only a small child lacked the fear to state the obvious.

Articulating unsayable things feels risky (and may be), and is certainly uncomfortable. A three-step approach to begin the conversation follows.
1. Acknowledge the difficulty of raising the issue.
2. Accept responsibility for raising it.
3. Make a direct statement about the issue.
This approach avoids blaming others and deals with truth, at least as we perceive it.

Judicious use of caveats makes this process easier, and involves "me" (Step 2 above) and not "you." This "me" approach focuses on the problem, not the person. It is not accusatory and reduces others' defense reactions, thereby improving useful dialog. For example, in the case of the naked Emperor you could say: "I know we all look up to the Emperor, and it's probably just my poor eyesight, but I cannot see the Emperor's clothes. It's probably just me, but he looks naked."

When emotions underlie a thorny problem, they must be acknowledged before real progress can occur. Fortunately, the fear of raising a personal issue is usually greater than the consequences of addressing the situation in the open. Moreover, tension among those involved is reduced when the issue is openly discussed.

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