

## John Sturrock Podcast

(transcript)

### Session 16: Reframing – a critical tool in mediation, negotiation and life

I was describing to my daughter the other day how even senior people are worried and uncertain about the future, with the pandemic, Brexit, and climate change. I must have painted a rather bleak picture. *“But dad,”* she said, *“you need to reframe this into a message of hope. Otherwise, we might as well all give up.”* Indeed, she added, if we reframe things, we can change our way of thinking, rewire our neural pathways (“neuro plasticity” I think it’s called) and influence outcomes. The power of more positive ways of thinking. If we do so, we can actually shape our future.

Out of the mouths of babes...! My daughter is correct of course. We can reframe how we see things and our reaction to them. The outcome will then, inevitably, be different. How I react to someone else’s words for example will, in turn, affect their further reaction to me. And like acorns, little things lead to larger outcomes. If I hit a golf ball from the tee with a very slight deviation from the line which I hope to take (a frequent occurrence I might add), the ball will end up very substantially off line when it lands (often in what we call deep rough). If I can strike it true, the outcome will be very different.

How can reframing help us to avoid getting into deep rough in our conversations and life’s difficult situations? Take an example: a good friend of mine came to me recently in some distress having received what she interpreted as a bullying email from a neighbour. Certainly, the wording was hurtful and aggressive. Many of us would choose to respond in a like manner; with anger and rebuttal. But where would that take us – and her? Probably into the deep rough.

Instead, I suggested, let’s reframe the neighbour’s words. What lies beneath the words? What is causing him to be so angry? How can that be addressed? And then let’s reframe the response to one which is more constructive. Funnily enough that took us back to AARREE, the ideas I explored in podcasts 1 to 3, itself a tool to reframe a difficult conversation.

As a mediator, I have to make choices about messages I take from room to room when playing the role of “good faith go-between”, as someone once described the role. If a party asks me to say to the other room that they wholly reject an offer made and are going to walk out unless the other party treats this seriously, what will happen if I do just that? We’ll be back into the deep rough. Instead, I need to work with the first party to find a form of words which is true to the sentiment (“we are not happy”) but also continues to build some sort of bridge towards a resolution. I am not a mere messenger as I often tell people in mediation. Try this: *“So, you want me to convey that you are not happy with what is proposed and really need to hear something significantly more than that to have confidence in these negotiations?”*

In practice, a mediator can take it upon herself to formulate the reframe. Or she can work on it with a party. Or she can suggest that the party reframes for themselves and then takes

responsibility for conveying the reframed message. The possibilities are many once the idea is adopted. In negotiation, a negotiator can reframe a situation, how they see it, the words they choose to use and so on. And in everyday communication we can all do the same.

Reframing can be as simple as turning an accusatory remark (“*you can’t be serious*”) into something which makes the point in a less inflammatory way (“*I am really struggling to understand how you reached that view*”) or as nuanced as modifying a “*take it or leave it*” money offer and delivering it in a way which seeks to address the needs identified by the other party. It can be as simple as using the conjunction “and” rather than “but”. Compare “*Harry offered to meet Mike but expressed concern about the quality of his work.*” with “*Harry offered to meet Mike and expressed concern about the quality of his work.*” Subtle indeed but, or should I say *and*, could make all the difference. Try it!

Reframing, as I mentioned earlier, can be about what and how we think. I am reminded of what I understand from those who know about neurolinguistic programming about what they call “presuppositions”. These are helpful ways to view the world or a difficult situation. One idea is that “*The meaning of any communication is the response it gets.*” That resonates with an earlier point in this podcast.



## Some useful ideas

- The meaning of any communication is the response it gets
- The map is not the territory
- The identity of a person is different from the behaviour they demonstrate
- It is possible to find a positive intention behind all behaviour
- People make the best choices available to them at the time
- The person with the greatest flexibility of thinking and behaviour is likely to have the greatest influence
- Change is always possible.....people have all they need to do it

Take another example, “*The identity of a person is different from the behaviour they demonstrate.*” So, we can choose to react to how someone behaves towards us on the surface or we can understand that underneath something else is going on: as my good



friend Ken Cloke comments in **Mediating Dangerously**: The angrier the mask, the more likely it is that the person beneath feels bad about themselves or what they have done.

Finally, returning to the pandemic, Brexit, and climate change, what challenges these present and what opportunities to reconsider the way we all live our lives as individuals and in our communities. We can't change what has happened so far: let's look forward with hope and all do the best we can with what we've got. How is that for a reframe?