

Reframing to Resolve Conflict

Last updated: 5/12/26

Description

Reframing is a key skill involved in resolving conflicts and is often used in negotiation and mediation. When people make toxic or extreme statements in a conflict, tempers can flare and it can be difficult to develop solutions. Reframing allows everyone to hear the important values, interests, and meaning underneath escalated language.

Reframing is just one tool of many in your conflict resolution toolbox. It can be useful but is not right for all situations. If a conversation is escalating and language is turning toxic, you may need to take a break or refocus the conversation. And it is very difficult to practice reframing if your own hot buttons are pushed. Practicing reframing in calmer settings helps you gain confidence with the skill and get a sense of when to, and not to, use it.

Definition

- Restating another person's statement to make them less provocative and more productive. Re-frame positions, or statements about what people say they want, in terms of their interests, which are the deeper needs people are trying to fulfill. – *Based on the 30-Hour General Mediation Skills Manual*, Mediation Center (2022)

Process

1. Start by listening well using OCDR's three-step model. (See OCDR Listening to Resolve Conflict handout)
2. Identify the other person's interests, needs, and concerns before trying to reframe.
3. Identify words and phrases that are extreme and polarizing.
4. Paraphrase what they said by removing the extreme language and replacing it with more constructive language, while staying true to the person's needs and interests.
5. Stick with it! Keep trying to reframe in different ways until the other person says you got it right.

Reframing examples

Original statement	Reframed statement
I can't believe what Amy and Juan are getting away with. I follow the rules to a "t." Apparently, they don't even know what the rules are, let alone follow them!	<i>It sounds like you are concerned that a few employees aren't following the rules. Following the rules sounds really important to you. That's understandable. I am also guessing that this a fairness issue...Am I getting it right?</i>

Original statement	Reframed statement
How come Frankie gets to have a say in every decision? I work just as hard as she does. She gets kudos from management and even got a promotion. What's going on!?	<i>I'm hearing a few things. Having a say is really important to you and being praised for good work also matters. And it sounds like this particular situation feels unfair. I want to hear about these different concerns. Is that accurate? If so, where should we start?</i>
Our organization totally lacks direction. Everyone's complaining about it, but no one wants to do anything. Leadership at the top is seriously lackluster.	<i>I hear you saying that having clear direction about where the organization is headed is important to you. It also sounds like other people may share your concern. Am I hearing you correctly? If so, tell me more about your concerns.</i>

Reframing tips

Keep these tips in mind as you prepare to reframe:

- Try to define the issue around common interests and the need for a common solution.
- Frame this statement in light of the future, not the past.
- State the issue in behavioral terms, rather than terms of character or personality.
- Move away from non-negotiables like values, attitudes, or feelings to negotiables, such as behaviors or systems.
- Identify the issue as an individual component of a larger system.

Note that reframing is NOT:

- Glossing over someone's real concerns.
- Trying to suppress someone's emotions.
- Changing the intent of what someone says to get a certain outcome.

Reflection questions

1. Think of a time recently when you were in or witnessed a verbal confrontation. What one statement from that confrontation could have been reframed to create a more productive dialogue?
2. In what situations could you practice the skill of reframing – e.g., with family or workers, watching a movie or the news, or in some other situation?
3. What kinds of statements would be hard for you to reframe? This is an important reflection because there may be some statements, especially emotional statements, that will be hard to reframe. You have to know your limits and sometimes you will need to set boundaries. (See OCDR's Boundary-Setting Phrases handout.)