



White Paper 2016-19

How the Project Leader can Break Out from Counter-Productive Frames of Mind

Coaching practitioners know there are 8 frames of mind in which people sometimes get stuck, to the point of having difficulties to escape by themselves. In this paper, based on Project Value Delivery's experience, we examine what are the symptoms of these 8 frames in project management context, and how Project Managers can break out.

What are the frames of mind?

Frames of mind are ways we frame situations. Frames can come from our past experience, which leads us to frame a situation in a particular way, or simply in the way we apprehended a particular situation when it started. Sometimes it can be difficult to escape a particular frame of mind if it reinforced over time. As coaches for project managers, our interventions often consist of helping project managers overcome a particular frame that impacts negatively the realization of the project, as well as the quality of life of the project manager himself.

Let us examine the 8 frames. In which one might you be stuck right now?

The most frequent frames of mind of project managers

Significance

In this frame we tend to place excessive significance to issues or events which should not warrant it. Sometimes it becomes overwhelming if everything that is happening looks like extremely important. In the workplace, at management level, this leads to overwork, busy-ness and all sorts of nervous and physical breakdowns. A good question is: what is the worst that could happen if this does not get done? Or, alternatively, ask for the outside view of a trusted person. Compensate this frame by the concept of Game. There are not so many things in our lives which are a life-and-death issue. Relativize the rest – let go - and lower your stress.

Delay

In this frame, we say we will do something, but we delay, and delay, and delay our action. We often use the poor excuse of busy-ness to cover for that.

This frame is very often observed in the workplace, and in particular in project managers. Project managers are at the meeting point of lots of solicitations, and can easily fall into a busy-ness problem. They exhaust themselves doing tasks that are not the most important and delay the important ones, even if they have been clearly identified. Separate the urgent from the important, and do the important first.

The remedy is proper prioritization of our time, so as to effectively act on what is the most important. Delay needs to be replaced by Action.

Doubt

The frame of Doubt is when we are doubting of our abilities or of the success of our endeavour. It can be a particularly destructive frame for the leader as the followers will be heavily impacted by the leader's doubt. Even if it is not expressed explicitly, any doubt will be felt by others through the body language. Doubt needs to be replaced by Trust. To achieve that, consider appreciatively your past successes and capabilities.

Reacting

Busy people are often in Reacting mode. They stay busy from morning to evening, reacting to all the events that are happening around them. Because they never take the time to stand by, reflect and possibly respond differently to all the stimuli that befall them, they are constantly driven by external events.

It is a very common frame in a project environment, where people are often overwhelmed by project activities. It is important to be able to sit back from time to time, contemplate what is happening, and choose the appropriate response. Instead of Reacting, Respond!

Invalidation

The invalidation frame is at play when we don't respect other individuals – in project environments, most often, our counterparts in other organizations. We then tend to dismiss anything they do or say because we have lost our respect to them. The antidote is to remember they are professionals that deserve a certain Respect even if we don't agree with their behaviour or if we don't condone their acts. Respect others in all cases.

Blame

The frame of Blame is when we tend to blame others for what happens to us (or what happens to our project). It is not a constructive frame of mind because it impedes looking into what we can do to resolve the situation. Very often people blocked in a Blame frame tend to be helpless, frustrated, sour and negative. The only remedy is Responsibility. Take Responsibility for what happens to you and your project. Stop blaming others.

In a project environment, frames expressed excessively can lead to largely dysfunctional leaders and teams, thus impeding project success.

Other frames of mind that occur sometimes

Trying

This frame is related to the frame of Delay. In this frame we say we will do something but in reality we do not commit the right level of effort to achieve it. There could be several causes for this: often we know rationally that we need to act, but some emotional component, sometimes deeply hidden, stops us from really acting. The remedy is to identify the discrepancy between what is said and done, clarify the urgency, and come to a clear, if possible public, Commitment – the remedy for Trying.

Fraud

In this last frame, we are not speaking about corporate fraud, but rather personal, internal fraud: we tend to lie to ourselves, independently of the facts. The only solution is to be true to ourselves, even if it may hurt our ego or identity.

In which frame of mind are you?

So, in which frame of mind could you be in?
 How important is what you consider crucial at the moment? What is the worst that could happen? [significance]
 How often do you use the excuse of being busy to postpone what is important that you do? [delay]
 What are you avoiding because you are doubting your abilities? What is your actual track record? [doubt]
 How frequently are you overwhelmed, purely reacting to the events, awaiting the end of the day with relief? What if you responded instead of reacting, taking to time to decide how you will respond? [reacting]

How often do you dismiss other people’s opinion on the ground that you don’t respect their opinion? They necessarily have some grounds for their behaviour. [invalidation]

How often are you blaming others? Instead of spending your energy blaming, why not rather spend more time taking responsibility for your own endeavours? [blame]

How actively are you pursuing what you have decided to do? How can you commit yourself to act? [trying]

How often do you lie to yourself, independently of the facts? How often do you avoid fact-checking? [fraud]

Examine the 8 frames. In which one might you be stuck right now?

- Significance**
- Delay**
- Doubt**
- Reacting**
- Invalidation**
- Blame**
- Trying**
- Fraud**

The art of breaking out from one’s mind frame

We always tend to understand a situation according to a frame.

Some frames are positive, some others are decidedly negative for ourselves and others. Being able to recognize the frame we are in, and decide to change our frame, is a skill that can be acquired. It requires knowing oneself well and taking time for introspection. The intervention of an external coach can help us exit our current frames and progressively recognize our frames and self-limiting beliefs.

Conclusion

In a project environment, frames expressed excessively can lead to largely dysfunctional leaders and teams, thus impeding project success. As project environments are often stressful, high stakes situations, we might tend to react subconsciously according to pre-defined frames. So, in a project, take care of your mind frames!



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