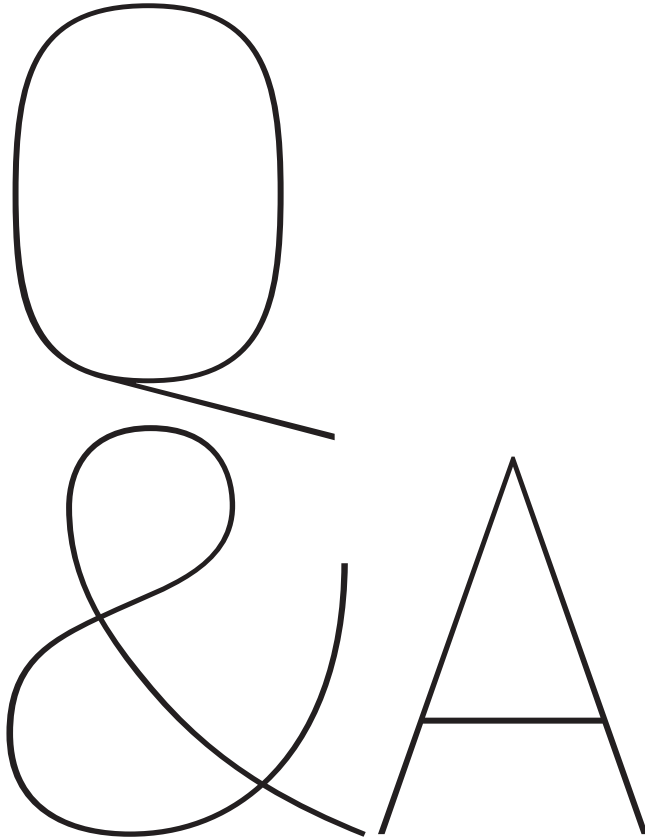


//// Questions for:
Sarah Kaplan



The Wharton professor discusses **the origin of our cognitive frames**, and what to do when they conflict with others.'

Interview by Karen Christensen

In our current environment, the basic meaning of a given situation is often up for grabs. What are the repercussions of all this ambiguity?

In many situations, people look around and realize that it's not clear what to do next. When so many changes are taking place, some important signals are visible, while others are not. The implication is that it will take some work to figure out what is truly going on. To complicate matters, not everyone in an organization or industry will make the same interpretations of the situation, because there isn't necessarily one right answer when attempting to understand the environment. There will always be multiple takes on what's happening.

What is a 'cognitive frame'?

It is basically a lens through which people see the world. That lens comes from a combination of our background, our education, the kind of companies we have worked for, the people we have met, the projects we have worked on – all of these experiences contribute to a repertoire of knowledge that influences how we see things. Individually, we tend to not be aware of the fact that we see the world through a particular lens. We believe that we see things the way they really are. If someone has a different sense of what is going on, we view them as being somehow biased or as being influenced by their personal beliefs.

How should we approach scenarios where our frames conflict with those of our colleagues?

This happens all the time, of course, and it goes back to the issue of being aware of our own cognitive frames. People often get into arguments or disagreements or complain about conflicts within their organization without under-

standing that, very often, the origin of these conflicts is the fact that different people are interpreting a situation differently. They don't understand that one of the fundamental reasons that people might be opposing each other is that they see the world in very different ways. Once we acknowledge the possibility of different interpretations, these differences can be put on the negotiating table, and we can then explore how to bring the diverging views together in some way. Or, we can try to establish the legitimacy of our own frame in order to influence others. Being aware of the fact that many conflicts originate from different interpretations can then lead to more productive ways of engaging in the negotiation of a joint understanding.

Are we 'stuck' with the frames we have amassed, or is there a way to develop better 'frame repertoires'?

The first step is to realize that we all have a particular set of frames through which we see the world. Without that realization, we are basically stuck, because we don't recognize that alternative views are possible. There are many ways to expand our frames. It can happen through individual learning, in classrooms or through reading; but I've found in my own work with executives that the best thing to do is to get people out into the world, having new experiences. Yes, we can gain a lot by reading. We can see different examples that way. But the best way to learn is to actually go out, listen to people, visit organizations, talk to customers, etc. Experiential learning allows us to expand our frame repertoires. The other means of expanding the repertoire is by assuring organizational or team diversity. It's not just that diversity is good in-and-of-itself; it's good because when we have access to diverse backgrounds, training and experience, and we bring people together with all these different frames, we can profit from multiple different views at the organizational or team level.

You began your research by focusing on cognition, but you were surprised by the "overwhelming presence of political action" that you encountered. Please discuss.

Academic research typically talks about either the role of cognition or of political processes in strategy making, but until now, the two have not been tied together. As individuals working in organizations, we probably recognize that both of these dynamics are present, but there hasn't been any real theory that allows us to think about their joint effects in a systematic way. People often say, "this is a very political situation," without seeing that the underlying root of the political behaviour is the very fact that people are seeing things in different ways. The 'politics' are not about *me fighting you because I have different interests*, but *me fighting you because I see the world very differently*,

and the way I see the world shapes how I understand my own interests. What I have found in my research is that it is impossible to talk about interpretive processes separately from the political pursuit of interests. These two dynamics are intimately intertwined in organizations.

Describe your Framing Contests Model.

The Framing Contests Model is my attempt to tie together the understanding that 'interpretations matter' with the understanding that 'politics matter'. In situations of high uncertainty, strategic problems arise regularly: should we go in this direction or that one? Should we invest in this new technology or the other one? Should we cut investment in this area or expand it? Different people in an organization are bound to come at these issues with different viewpoints or frames. To the extent that there are differences in frames that can't be immediately resolved, people engage in what I call 'framing practices'. These are efforts to establish their own legitimacy or the legitimacy of their viewpoint while simultaneously trying to undermine the legitimacy of the other viewpoint or individual. This leads to a lot of back and forth, and to a polarization of viewpoints.

One of the things my Framing Contests Model shows is that resolutions are reached because an individual or a group of individuals has found a way to realign their frame so that they either 'neutralize' the opposition or bring the opposition on board. It's a little like what social movements do in our own society to influence the policies of businesses or governments. The challenge is to get at least some stability around a particular view that allows a decision to go forward.

The Framing Contests Model finds a middle ground between cognitive and political models of strategy making, one in which frames are both constraints and resources, and outcomes are shaped by purposeful action and interaction. Making strategy under uncertainty can therefore be comprehended as a product of contests over which frame should guide the understanding of an ambiguous environment and of choices about how to respond to it.

Research suggests that quick decision making leads to better performance. Do you believe that framing contests - and the resulting longer decision processes - lead to better performance?

What I'm suggesting is that there is a more contingent view of whether or not 'speed is good'. In certain situations, it is true that quick decision making makes sense. When for example, there's a crisis in the marketplace, we can't spend months having debates about what should be done; speed really is of the essence. On the other hand, the viewpoint that 'speed is

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always good’ is problematic, because in situations of great uncertainty like the ones I’ve studied (which are typically periods of rapid technological change) it is often the case that if we don’t take the time to fight it out, we may miss the boat. So at certain moments in time, creating a space for those debates makes sense. One of the executives in an organization that I studied put it well: “If there was an easy decision and no push back, I would be worried. The fact that there is such emotion and such a variety of opinion is a clear and positive indicator that this is an absolutely critical deliverable for the company.” Fast decision making is not always good decision making. We really have to be careful that we don’t miss out on different viewpoints just because we’re trying to be speedy. And, going slow up front may actually help us go faster later on.

You have noted the importance of ‘realigning’ frames. Describe how this is done.

I have elucidated four ways to realign our frames: by bridging, amplifying, extending and transforming them. Each of these approaches aims to modify the frame such that it resonates more broadly with others in the organization. The goal is to generate collective action in favor of a particular strategic choice or neutralize any opposition to it.

As an example, transforming frames entails literally taking one way that I have viewed something and describing it in a way that resonates with others’ views and interests. For example, for a particular technology strategy project, one executive suggested that, “up until now I’ve been describing this project as being all about ‘cool technology’, but now I’m reframing it as being about ‘satisfying the needs of a business unit’”. The project itself remains the same, but the way it is framed and therefore the ways it fits into how other people see the project changes. I completely transform the frame while the underlying activity remains similar. I describe these activities as political ways of shaping the frames of others. But it is essential to understand that it’s not purely political, because the way that people realign frames hinges on how they individually see the world. That’s the tie between individual cognition and the social process of instrumentally framing things for others.

What advice do you have for managers who are eager to improve the collective effort of ‘meaning making’ in their organization?

My recommendation would be to provoke framing contests. Most of us are uncomfortable when there are debates, disagreements, fights, lack of alignment, etc. These sound like things we should want to avoid, right? What I’m saying is that, maybe we shouldn’t avoid them – maybe we should actually create more of them. Further, I would argue that the most successful companies – the heroic firms and CEOs we read about on the covers of business magazines every day – are precisely the ones who should spend the most time provoking these framing contests. They likely have achieved their success based on one way of thinking about the world and have aligned their organization to function extremely well along those lines. The only thing this guarantees is that something is going to come along and blindside them: a new technology, a new competitor, a change in the environment. And if they haven’t been engaging all along in some kind of framing contests that allow alternative viewpoints to come out and debates to happen, they will be guaranteed to be surprised.

The classic example is IBM. In the early 1980’s, it would have been difficult for IBM to figure out that personal computers were going to become powerful computing alternatives to mainframes because top managers considered PCs to be ‘toys’ or ‘peripherals’ to mainframe computing. As a result, there was no space created by senior management to talk about the scenario under which PCs were something to be taken seriously. My recommendation – particularly for companies that are doing well – is to invest time in making framing contests happen as often as possible at the senior level and throughout the organization. **R**

Sarah Kaplan is an assistant professor of Management at the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania. She is the co-author of the *New York Times* business best-seller *Creative Destruction: Why Companies that are Built to Last Underperform the Market – And How to Successfully Transform Them* (Doubleday, 2001).