Creating Organizational Learning and Change Using Bolman's and Deal's Four Frames of Organizations
Essentials Board

Collegiate chapters of fraternities and sororities can be exciting and challenging places where undergraduates have opportunities to build relationships, develop leadership and life skills, and be exposed to a community that offers opportunities for campus and community service and networking. Advisors and professionals who work with these organizations are often confronted with the challenges of aiding chapter members in enhancing these experiences to include the intentional development of skills that can further enhance their lives and leadership skills. Advisors are also constantly challenged with the expectations and requests from their campuses and communities as well as from their peer professional networks to lead fraternity and sorority leaders and the chapters they represent to a constantly increasing level of progress in chapter productivity and behavioral accountability.

Some common expectations of chapter productivity include the fraternity/sorority community's or campus fraternity/sorority advisor's and/or administrators' expectations regarding academic performance, community service, membership recruitment and chapter growth. Expectations may also include suggestions about the number and type of educational programs attended, etc. Campus, community and inter/national organization expectations regarding behavioral accountability are also consistently increasing. Not only are chapters expected to just follow a set of rules, they are expected to understand and provide training on crisis management, risk management and related legal concepts of negligence and liability to name a few. Few would disagree that as fraternities and sororities are seemingly under increasing scrutiny, our roles as advisors, alumni, and university allies are also constantly changing. Whether external or internal, an expectation to effectively respond to and provide training on a vast majority of issues exists.

This article aims to begin a thought process that can lead to creating organizational learning and change using Bolman's and Deal's (1997) four frames of organizational structure. It examines the chapter of the undergraduate fraternity and sorority through the four organizational frames presented by Bolman and Deal in *Reframing Organizations* (1997) and provides suggestions for real practices and examples for implementation that are based on a methodological approach, rather than the classic student and leadership development approach. It is with this idea in mind: if undergraduate fraternal leaders are increasingly being expected to approach their leadership positions from a professional, adult, and accountable standpoint, why not try teaching them to look at their leadership and at their organizations in a parallel manner?

The Four Frames

The Structural Frame

Bolman and Deal (1997) have sorted insights drawn from both research and practice into four major perspectives, or frames, to make sense of organizations, each having their own image of reality. The first frame, the Structural Frame, highlights the structural aspects of organizations and assumes the following:

- organizations exist to achieve goals and objectives;
- things work best when rationality prevails over human needs;
- it is most effective and efficient to assign roles using specialization and division of labor; effective coordination and control is needed for individuals to work together to meet the organization's goals;
- problems are a result of poor structure (1997)

Some common practices of fraternities and sororities that fall within the Structural Frame are annual chapter goal setting and consistent goal assessment as well as the practice of dividing responsibilities through the use of multiple roles and chapter "offices" where each person is responsible for executing a very narrowly focused array of tasks and outcomes. Organizational structure is not be confused with the Structural Frame. Although, many would argue that the way fraternities and sororities are structured is a reflection of the Structural Frame's philosophy, they are not the same. In other words, fraternities and sororities are structured hierarchically where it is evident that the person on "top" has more power than the person on the "bottom." This can be illustrated through office title (president vs. song chair) or through another type of membership rank (senior vs. new member/pledge).

Bolman and Deal (1997) identified several tensions and downfalls of the Structural Frame. One that is especially striking is their criticism of specialization of roles and division of labor. They state, "creating different roles and units provides the benefits of specialization but inevitably creates problems on coordination and control" (p. 41). They stated that under these circumstances, "each operation tends to focus [too narrowly] on its own priorities and go on its own way" (p. 41), which results in *suboptimization*, an emphasis on achieving unit goals rather than the overall mission. Examples of losing sight of the vision can be easily noted within individual chapters as well. It can also be seen in and amongst governing councils who are trying to work together for the sake of the fraternity/sorority community as a whole. Incorporating themes from the other three frames is the best way to find a remedy for problems such as these.

The Human Resource Frame

The Human Resource Frame "regards people's skills, attitudes, energy, and commitment as vital resources capable of either making or breaking an enterprise" (p. 101). This frame also gets the credit for championing the possibility that "organizations can be energizing, productive, and mutually rewarding" experiences (p. 102) that can fully engage people's

talents and energy, rather than putting them into narrowly assigned role like the Structural Frame is known to do. The Human Resource Frame assumes the following things:

- organizations exist to serve human needs, rather than humans existing to serve the organization's needs;
- people and organizations need each other: organizations need ideas, talent, and energy and people need jobs, salaries, and opportunities;
- when the fit between the individual and the organization is poor, both suffer and become victims; and a good fit benefits both. Individuals are able to find meaning and contentedness, and organizations succeed and progress (1997).

Most fraternities and sororities are intentionally set up to incorporate some of these ideals, especially in member selection and retention. In recruitment, a very common piece of advice is for chapters and well as potential new members to 'look for a good fit' in one another; this concept is not only an assumed and shared value, it is often a written communication for both parties whether it is found in the "recruitment tips" portion of the fraternity/sorority recruitment publication, or within the membership selection criteria for chapters. The Human Resource Frame identifies five human needs that effective organizations meet: physiological, safety, belongingness and love, esteem, and self-actualization. One real life example: most chapters that we work with or relate to are in constant conversation of providing incentives, trying to brainstorm things that the organization can do to make membership (and sometimes simply attendance) more exciting and valuable to its members. These conversations can be interpreted as members consciously or subconsciously looking for ways to address human needs and make their members feel valued.

The Human Resource Frame also has deficiencies. For one, its concepts are more likely to benefit "smaller, more flexible" environments (p. 114), and therefore can be tough to manage in a formally structured chapter with more than one hundred members and more than fifty of which hold an official leadership position. Another common criticism is that due to its commitment and interest in the organization's members, it can be said to have a lack of focus on the organization's vision and overall responsibilities. In other words, we cannot tend to people's needs all the time, sometimes the job just needs to be done.

The Political Frame

The Political Frame focuses heavily on what it views as the reality of conflict and power in organizations and views organizations "as alive and screaming political arenas that host a complex web of individual and group interests" (p. 163). The Political Frame assumes the following perspectives:

- organizations are coalitions of individuals and interest groups;
- there are lasting differences among coalition members' values, beliefs, information, interests and perceptions of reality;
- important decisions involve the allocation of scare resources; scarce resources make conflict a central role in the organization, power then becoming the most important and coveted resource;

- goals and decisions emerge from bargaining, negotiation, and jockeying for position among different stakeholders(1997).

It is easy to identify aspects of fraternity and sorority organizational structure that fall within the political frame; the presence of scarce resources, conflict and power, all come easily to mind. Oftentimes, money is seen as being the primary, or most essential resource for the functioning of any organization, but it is important that student leaders are aware of all of the resources that are available to them in order to access more of them more often: people (chapter members, the campus fraternity/sorority advisor, chapter advisors, alumni, university administrators), time, cooperation and recognition from campus personnel, and access to various services are all resources regularly used by collegiate fraternities and sororities. Conflict is also continually present whether it is outside or inside of the chapter, within the chapter between members or between the chapter and another force or organization. According to Bolman and Deal (1997), from the perspective of the Political Frame, "conflict is not necessarily a problem… [and] the focus is not on the resolution of conflict (as is often the case from the Structural and Human Resources Frame standpoints) but on strategy and tactics" (p. 172). Power is another aspect of the political frame that is often prevalent in the arena of fraternity and sorority life and who has the power often depends on who is asked. One example of a frequent struggle for power that many fraternity and sorority communities have to deal with is regarding campus policies for fraternal organizations; the question of who has the ultimate power in any situation regarding policy making, enforcement, and chapter recognition is constantly debated: does either the hosting university or the inter/national organization have more responsibility? How do the two recognizing bodies effectively work together?

Again, the Political Frame illustrates several organizational downfalls when keeping fraternity and sorority chapters and councils in mind. One problem that student affairs professionals may note as being the most prevalent is the fact that this frame does not incorporate enough room for the personal development that is so essential for adolescent college students to experience. The Political Frame also does not seem to allow for a great deal of flexibility and honest communication. Although some would argue, perhaps justifiably, that the Political Frame is best to prepare students for life in the 'real world,' it is also easy to see that by using this frame, many adolescent students simply do not have the maturity and experience necessary to utilize a political arena effectively.

The Symbolic Frame

The Symbolic Frame "seeks to interpret and illuminate basic issues of meaning and belief that make symbols so powerful" (p. 216) and sees life as being fluid rather than linear in fashion. It distills the following assumptions:

- what is most important about any event is not what happened, but what it means;
- events have multiple meanings because everyone interprets experiences differently;
- most of life is ambiguous or uncertain and high levels of uncertainty undercut rational analysis, problem solving, and decision making;

- in the face of uncertainty, people create symbols to resolve confusion and provide direction and anchor hope and faith;
- many events are more important for what is expressed than what is produced (rituals, myths, or ceremonies that help people find meaning, purpose, and passion) (1997).

In the fraternity and sorority worlds, there is an enormous amount of symbolism: from ritual and other formal ceremonies to the process in which "Greek Week" teams are chosen, chapter members often analyze the processes and events that create their fraternal world to be [sometimes overly] symbolic. To many, the symbolic aspects of our fraternal organizations are the most important because they are the sole things that differentiate our organizations from other student clubs and groups; these symbols embody and express an organization's culture – the "interwoven pattern of beliefs, values, practices, and artifacts that define for members who they are and how they are to do things" (p. 217). The Symbolic Frame provides organizations with metaphors, humor, and play as "indirect ways to grapple with issues that are too complex, mysterious, or threatening to approach head-on" (p. 229).

Some downfalls, however, of operating too heavily under the Symbolic Frame are the drama and over-emphasized meaning that can sometimes result. Although the fact that our organizations have bonds and other secret aspects is attractive to many, it is this same secrecy that can alienate fraternal organizations from other students or campus groups, and in a day when involvement and collaboration with non-affiliated campus groups is encouraged and rewarded this can be problematic.

Frame Comparisons

It is essential that an organization's members are able to see the similarities and differences of the four frames if they desire to create learning and lead organizational change within their groups. Like the commonly discussed topic of leadership styles, each of the four frames are theorized to all exist in each organization at one level or another, but one is predominantly prevalent. Leaders and members have the ability to learn about the frames and discover which they believe their organization fits best. When this is learned, they will have the ability to reframe their organizations and learn the skills and reorganization of structure that will allow their organization to more equally represent all four frames in a way that is most productive to the members and the organization's mission and/or vision. It is also important to note the difference between the four organizational frames and leadership styles; leaders must fully grasp the idea that their personal leadership styles do not solely define which frame their organization falls into, doing this gives too much power to the individual leader and negates the importance of the organization's structure, members' influence, campus and inter/national organizations' expectations, and the chapter's constitution and bylaws, all other important aspects that form the organization's frame structure.

Overview of the Four-Frame Model*

	Frame			
	Structural	*Human Resource*	*Political*	*Symbolic*
Metaphor for Organization	Factory or machine	Family	Jungle	Carnival, temple, theater
Central Concepts	Rules, roles, goals, policies, technology, environment	Needs, skills, relationships	Power, conflict, competition, organizational politics	Culture, meaning, metaphor, ritual, ceremony, stories, heroes
Image of Leadership	Social architecture	Empowerment	Advocacy	Inspiration
Basic Leadership Challenge	Attune structure to task, technology, environment	Align organizational and human needs	Develop agenda and power base	Create faith, beauty, meaning

* Taken from Bolman and Deal, 1997, pg. 15

Organizational Learning

Do organizations have the capacity to learn or is learning something that only individuals can do? Fraternities and sororities have the reputation of providing positive developmental opportunities as well as snake pits that encourage poor personal wellness and decision making; assuming they are one or the other only distorts reality. Bolman and Deal state that organizational leaders need to be mindful of "several characteristics that provide opportunities for the wise as well as traps for the unwary" (p. 22). They indicated that organizations are complex, surprising, deceptive, and ambiguous. Involvement in an environment with these characteristics would seem that it would be easier to go crazy than to learn; on the other hand, an "increasingly high turbulent, rapidly changing environment requires contemporary organizations to learn better and faster in order to survive" (p. 24). Therefore, it would seem that embracing these realities, rather than trying to make them go away, can better help our organizations flourish and progress.

As the stakes get higher and higher, organizational learning that leads to effective organizational change has become a topic of urgency in fraternity/sorority communities across the United States. With this in mind, it is becoming more and more essential that, as advisors and mentors in the lives of fraternity and sorority undergraduate leaders, we are able to provide these students with tools that will enable them to not only encounter a new level of self awareness and teach other individual members that same awareness, but to move beyond the level of individual learning and be able to analyze their organization's level of productivity, assess ways to enhance it, and lead a process of organization learning to positive organizational change.

The opportunities for individual leadership overhaul and the rediscovering of personal and organizational integrity are abundant: LeaderShape, regional conferences (MGCA, etc), NIC

programs such as UIFI, IMPACT, Future's Quest, and the endless number of inter/national organizations' similar programs and institutes. Our fraternity and sorority worlds are packed full of individual leadership opportunities, leaving a sizeable imbalance in the opportunities that are available for organizational learning and change that include all chapter members. As advisors in the fraternity and sorority world, we have long since noted that aiding in these reformations of individual leaders on our campuses is overwhelmingly helpful, but the action that is needed from that one (or small group of) reformed leader(s) after this overhaul occurs (once they return to campus realities) is often lacking. The key is having the skills to provide our organizations and their reformed leaders with the knowledge to create organizational learning that leads to more permanent change initiatives.

Ideas for Action

Incorporating the Four Frames into Campus Leadership Training

One easy way to introduce the four frames to a fraternal community is to incorporate them into an annual leadership training or retreat. It may be helpful to discuss each frame and create a list of activities, beliefs, and practices in our chapters that embody each frame. "Multiframe thinking requires movement beyond narrow and mechanical thinking" (p. 16), Thus, each frame describes the same person, action, or symbol very differently. For example, within the Structural Frame, the chapter president may be seen as mechanical, simply working to complete a task; the Human Resource frame sees him or her as a leader who is responsive to members' needs; the Political Frame sees the president as a politician who is constantly developing agendas and a power base; in the Symbolic Frame, chapter members may see their president as a brother or sister who brings faith and meaning to their fraternal experience.

Incorporating the four frames into leadership training may be most helpful if presidents and community leaders, after learning about the four frames, are asked to identify the frame that is most present in their chapters and/or councils. Remember, this thought process is not a leadership inventory where students identify which leadership style they identify most with, it is an examination of their organization's structure and expectations of leaders within that structure. After evaluating their current chapter functions, it will be easy to create lists of organizational strengths and weaknesses and decide which strengths and weaknesses fall into which frame's structure; this will give each chapter a good idea of which frame they naturally operate under and which frames are underrepresented. These analyses, compared to chapter and community goals, values and missions, can allow for a true assessment of where each chapter is and where the community stands. It is important to note that each organization should not strive for equal frame representation but an organizational structure that represents all four frames in a way that is realistic to their organization. It would be wise to steer participants clear of creating strong identification with one frame or another as leadership inventory workshops often do; it is important to

discourage participants creating 'frame alliances,' like often happens in leadership style discovery activities, if even for fun of the activity. It is more important to create a discussion that allows for conversation on how groups can diversify their approaches.

How can we find a balance between all four frames? Have a conversation with chapter and council leaders using examples that are real to their groups and to their particular fraternal community. What do we do with dead weight members: remove them from our organizations because they are inhibiting the organization in its progress toward the goal (Structural standpoint); or delay the organization's progress to devote time to helping the individual improve and reconnect with the organization (Human Resource standpoint)? Most of us can think of a number of classic struggles such as this example that we encounter year after year and probably would agree on the answer: it depends. Knowing this, how can we enable our students to begin a Human Resource Frame practice when their organization is quite heavily structured on the Political Frame? What about decision making? In the Structural Frame, decisions are made using rationality and according to a previously determined process while keeping the organization's goals in mind at all times. The Human Resource Frame would encourage empowerment, mutuality, and collaboration. Those thinking with the Political Frame in mind would argue that the person in authority makes the decision while someone coming from a Symbolic Frame standpoint may suggest that how the decision is made is not as important as what the end results mean to the group.

Encouraging Multiframe Usage in Community Practices

Evaluating the governing councils' operations is another way to encourage multiframe usage through leading by example. For example, if the governing councils are highly political and one must lobby and negotiate to get elected, create a program, or require attendance, it is difficult to sincerely encourage member chapters to operate differently.

Fraternity/sorority advisors know that one common way to implement a new and progressive chapter practice is to implement the practice into a community awards criterion. Whether effective or ineffective in creating true organizational change, if the campus's fraternity/sorority community awards are highly coveted, this is a practice that produces results. It may also behoove a community in their annual awards criteria assessment to check whether or not the awards are conducive to multiframe operation or if they rely heavily on one frame more than others. Are chapters only expected to turn in photocopies of various policies or are they also required to provide written statements about how these policies impact their daily practice or are reflective of their mission or values?

Finally, modeling and advising with true integrity is a key way to encourage multiframe thinking. When leading a training or discussion about the four frames, advisors should consider participating in an active way. Getting feedback from students regarding your advising style, the way in which the office of fraternity/sorority life is structured and

arranged, and how the judicial system operates are a few ways to reflect on the way you are operating as a mentor and model to these students. After all, the fraternity and sorority community includes the fraternity/sorority advisor, right? This same process can be implemented in thinking about other campus administrators who are key resources and components of the fraternity/sorority community. It is important to note, however, that conversations regarding the fraternity/sorority advisor and other university personnel should be maintained as secondary to the conversations about individual chapters, discouraging students from moving accountability and ownership away from themselves.

Conclusion

The ability to assess one's environment and create strategies for progress and change is a life skill that students will use in their future leadership roles, careers, and relationships. Personal development is a key area in traditional college-aged students today, but taking that development to the next level is something that can also have lasting effects on students. Bolman and Deal (1997) indicate that the purpose of introducing the four frames to organizations is to help "leaders enrich the ideas and approaches they bring their work" (p. 5). The ability for an individual to take a backseat to the organization's needs is not only most effective for most groups' journeys of organizational learning, but also a great lesson in humility for many individual leaders. "The ability to reframe an experience enriches and broadens a leader's repertoire… [leaders] are imprisoned only to the extent that their palette of ideas is impoverished" (p. 6).

Reference

Bolman, L. G. & Deal, T. E. (1997). *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice and leadership.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers.