

divisive issue for workers. How striking is framed by the workers—what it means to them to strike—can have a powerful influence on whether the tactic is supported. Striking can be seen as “getting revenge” or striking can be seen as “principled behavior” (Donnellon, Gray, & Bougon, 1986). Reframing the meaning of striking during the process can influence the degree of support for adopting the tactic.

There is, then, a “dance” of framing in which each party advances its own interpretations of the issues and acts on them, the other party responds, and the parties move toward development of a shared frame, on the one hand, or toward divergent framings, on the other. When parties eventually converge on a shared framing, there is greater possibility for working together toward an integrative solution than if parties remain in their own worlds and operate out of different frames (See Case 3.4 on page 90).

CASE STUDY 3.4

Issue Framing and the Parking Lot Scuffle

In turn 1 Tim framed the conflict by raising the issue of Jay’s fault in the damage done to his bike. If Jay had gone along with this framing, the conflict would have taken a very different turn, with Jay possibly apologizing and agreeing to pay for the damage. Instead Jay offered a “counter-frame” by placing the blame on Tim.

The two frames are developed independently of one another in turns 1 through 7. Notice that Tim was pressing a case consistent with his framing, while Jay was responding with questions and statements that develop his own framing. In a real sense, Tim and Jay were talking past each other, because each has framed the conflict differently. There was a lack of engagement of the other party’s issues by both Jay and Tim. The first engagement occurred in turns 8 and 9. In turn 9, Tim challenged the implicit assumption in turns 2 and 8 that Jay’s parking space is his territory and that Tim had trespassed, instead insisting on being compensated. Tim tried to establish the issue as damage to his bike, not whether Tim had any right to park in the space in the first place.

Jay’s response in turn 10, asking Tim if he worked in the building, suggested that he is still focusing on the “rights” issue. If Tim did not work in the building, he certainly had no right to be in a parking space reserved for employees. Jay’s response that Tim “has a problem” also attempted to turn Tim’s accusation back on him. By charging that Tim is acting irrationally, Jay expanded

the range of issues in the conflict. Adding the issue of Tim’s problematic attitude, of course, was only likely to make Tim more angry and adamant.

Tim’s response in turn 11 reasserted fault for the damage as the primary issue. Jay then tried to walk away. Not being willing to buy in to Tim’s definition of the issues, Jay probably believed further talk was counterproductive. It is also possible that he was beginning to be fearful of Tim’s “problem.” Sometimes the issues we introduce reflect our fears as much as our thought about the situation, and Jay’s statement at the beginning of turn 10 may have been stimulated by unease with Tim, rather than an attempt to “one up” Tim.

This case represents an abortive attempt at issue framing. Tim and Jay were never able to converge on a common issue or issues during their conversation. Their ability to confront the conflict and come to a resolution was hampered by this lack of common grounding. ■

Discussion Questions

- Can you think of other conflicts you have been in when you and the other party “talked past” each other by advancing different issues?
- Could issue framing have been done in a more productive way in this conflict? If you were in this conflict, how could you use framing to move the conflict in a more productive direction?