

# Extending *Frame of Reference*: A Key Tool in Enabling Growth & Change<sup>1</sup>

## What is Our *Frame of Reference*?

We all operate within the limits of our experience ... our *frame of reference*.

Our *Frame of Reference* includes our:

- Knowledge
  - Skills
  - Values
- View of Self
- View of Others
- View of the World

## The Context for Extending *Frame of Reference*

If we were limited to living within our existing frame of reference, we would run the risk of being *prisoners* to the limits of our experience. On the other hand, we know from experience that someone else's *easy solution* rarely works for us! **Extending** frame of reference is not about proposing suggestions **from our frame of reference**, and expecting others to find them useful. It is about **stretching their frame of reference**; *value adding* to their experience; extending their options by *just one step*.

Extending someone's frame of reference can be critical to them being able to learn, grow and make choices and changes that will improve their lives. It can happen through exposing them to new experiences and ideas. In a helping situation, this happens, particularly through:

- **Offering insights into themselves**, through constructive confrontation/challenge, or,
- **Offering insights from outside themselves**, through exposure to new ideas, information or experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> © Copyright Suzi Quixley 1998 & 2008 (revised). It is based in material variously © 1988-1997. For further ideas on helping people explore their choices and challenges see:

- Quixley, Suzi (1995) **Some Notes on a Model for a 'Power With' Approach to Short Term Helping** (Revised Edition), ESSQ, Adelaide.

**Change is scary ... and usually difficult!** What is the last time you *vowed and declared* that you would make a **minor** change in your life - get up 15 mins earlier? drink 6 glasses of water a day? pay your bills on time? Yet often, when we are in a conscious helping role, we act as though it is easy for people to make **major** life changes - get a job, give up smoking or leave home. We expect others around us to be kind and supportive when we are trying to make changes ... do we genuinely offer the same to our clients?

This handout is predicated on the assumption that our clients deserve the same caution and support in relation to change as we would like ourselves ... on a **commitment to working *alongside* them, rather than from a *power over* position.**

**Extending frame of reference should occur in the context of helping someone:**

*Identify where they are at ...  
and  
Where they want to be ...  
given  
As many options, consistent with their thinking, as possible.*

Fundamentally, this process is about moving the focus of a helping conversation from seeing a difficult situation as external (ie. *all these things are 'happening' to me*) to an internal one (ie. *I can do something constructive about my situation ... if only I could work out what's best to do!*) Carkhuff called this process **personalising**<sup>2</sup>. It is really important that personalising is not undertaken at the expense of acknowledgment of the impact of outside forces on the person's life/options. On the other hand, there's no guarantee that anything will improve for the person unless they take some sort of action to improve their situation. So ... you are walking a tightrope! **Your aim should be to give person maximum possible opportunity to act on, and improve, their situation.**

## **The Criteria for Constructively Extending Frame of Reference**

The following are some key criteria for ensuring that extension of frame of reference is constructive:

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<sup>2</sup> Carkhuff, R.R. (1987) **The Art of Helping**, 6th Edition, Human Resource Development Press, Amherst, Massachusetts. pg 29

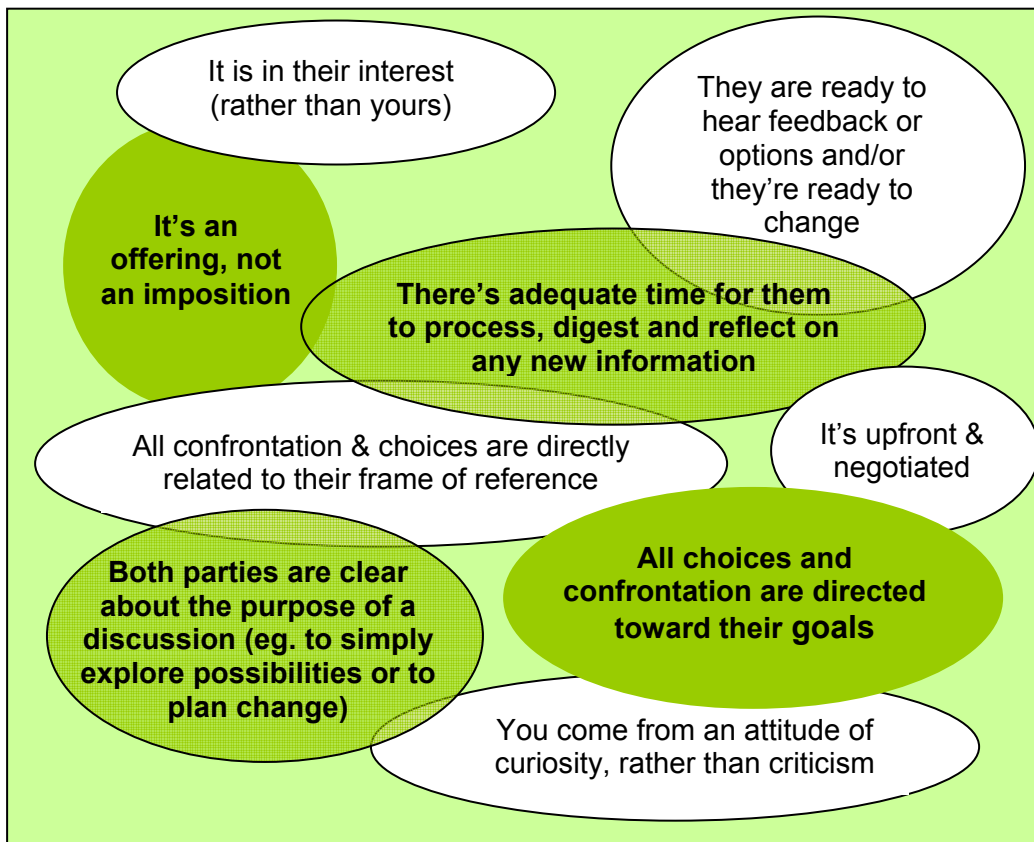


Figure 1: Criteria for Constructive Extension of Frame of Reference

## What is *Constructive Confrontation*?

There is no significant difference between *Constructive Confrontation* and *Constructive Challenge*. People tend to associate the former with an aggressive unwelcome intrusion; the latter with a softly or kindly delivered criticism. **In fact, neither of these approaches have a place in a helping relationship!** I've chosen to use the term *confrontation*, rather than *challenge*, throughout this handout. I believe this makes it more likely that we will be conscious of the risks, every time we *challenge* someone to explore their issues.

Constructive confrontation is an **invitation** to explore your defenses! A whole session can lose its value if the person is inappropriately confronted, even once. Confrontation should grow naturally from the process of conversation, and should be delivered with the same care and respect for the person as the rest of the helping process.

**Constructive confrontations are not punitive accusations.** They are opportunities to explore the possible discrepancies in the person's life/behaviour. They are invitations to employ unused strengths and resources. They are not shameful exposures of (perceived) inadequacy.

**Constructive confrontation is more related to curiosity than attack.** Overall, constructive confrontation is a worker's tool for encouraging someone to extend their self-understanding and move toward effective change.

**Constructive confrontation can include:**

- Responsible unmasking of discrepancies, distortions and games, of which the person may or may not be aware.
- Challenge of underdeveloped or undeveloped potentials, skills and resources.
- Encouragement to acknowledge/use potentials, skills and resources.

In other words, confrontation can take the form of well-supported positives, as well as negatives. **Affirmation can be a form of confrontation.** Therefore, giving positives has some of the same risks as giving negatives ... watch out for adverse reactions!

## Your Responsibilities when Extending Frame of Reference

There is a possibility that the person will interpret a challenge, or new information, as blaming them for their situation. Therefore, it is critical that you approach any confrontation, or information provision, with a great deal of tentativeness, a non-accusatory manner and care.

**This is not your opportunity to tell the person everything you always wanted to. It is not an appropriate time to *off-load* your ideas on their weaknesses! It is not an appropriate time to give answers:**

- Any choices you suggest should be given very cautiously (even *discountingly*) to ensure that it is their thinking that ends up being the basis of their solution. A successful adoption of any ideas you have suggested is generally indicated by the way they talk about them - as if they were their own idea. If the person keeps referring to your idea, as though they feel obliged to follow it, this indicates that you have not used sufficient caution in presenting the idea.
- Any confrontations you offer should be equally cautious and non-imposing. They should be presented as a *side-thought*, rather than the answer. Language such as *I wonder if...* or, *a friend of mine in a similar situation found ...* or, *I don't know if this is useful, but ...*, can be helpful. Be very ready to back off, if the person is not ready to hear your challenge.

For example:

Unconstructive Confrontation	Responsible/Constructive Confrontation
<i>Why don't you start being honest? You feel so damn sorry for yourself most of the time, and it's messing up your whole life. You keep moping around, but you never really face any of your problems. No wonder you're always down in the dumps ... you cause most of your own misery!</i>	<i>Let me check something out with you. You're depressed, because as you put it, you 'don't do anything'. It seems that sometimes you get to feeling pretty sorry for yourself. I can understand why. But then, this makes you feel even more passive and depressed. Perhaps you're in a vicious circle? Does this make sense?</i>
<i>How on earth can you expect to get a job if you didn't do maths and sciences at school? Everyone knows that 63% of jobs require at least some maths. Why on earth did you drop out of maths? You're going to have to do something about that if you want a job!</i>	<i>It's a real bummer you didn't finish Year 11 maths. Did you know that a recent study found that the majority of jobs require maths? It's rough, because I know that girls aren't encouraged to do maths. If you really want a job in computing, then this might be one area worth thinking about.</i>

**Table 1:** Examples of Constructive & Unconstructive Confrontation

**Extending Frame of Reference can provide a useful opportunity for clients to:**

- Explore new opportunities/options.
- Equalise power relationships.
- Stimulate their thinking and widen their knowledge.
- Become aware of other perspectives.
- Make informed decisions.
- Break a limiting cycle or pattern.
- Break away from socio-political controls.
- Question and establish their own thinking/framework.
- Remember and re-use existing skills/strengths.
- Grow/change/participate/learn.

**Conversely**, it can be used by helpers as a means to de-power, control, *put down*, criticise, impose or *off-load* on another human being.

This is why it is very important to examine your own motives for engaging in confrontation or information provision.

**Some of the Challenges in Challenging Others!**

**What is your investment in offering new perspectives to the person?** Be very aware of potentially dangerous motivations, such as:

- You aim to *fix it*, and believe you've got *the answer*.
- You believe the person needs to hear some particular feedback.

- You've never been able to deal with a similar situation, and are looking for ideas to meet your personal needs.
- You need reassurance of your own relative *togetherness*!

### Some keys to *Getting Your Attitude Right*, include:

- Value the process (eg. exploration of possibilities) equally with the outcome/*answers* (eg. developing a strategy or planning a change).
- Be fallible - not knowing answers, not having relevant ideas, and/or not pretending you have options when you don't!
- Remember how difficult you find it to make tiny/minor changes.
- Focus on the issues; not engaging in personal criticism.
- *Own your own stuff* (eg. *I Statements*)
- Don't retreat to couching feedback you find difficult to give, in *false*/general affirmations.
- Be willing to be *straight* ... to *say what you mean; mean what you say*.
- Be willing to talk in plain, peer, non-patronising language.
- See yourself as offering a resource - with absolutely no pressure on them to act or take up your suggestions.
- Do not take their decisions personally - particularly if they choose not to use your ideas or resources.
- Maintain a relaxed, non-accusatory attitude - with some humour *thrown in for good measure*, where possible and appropriate.
- Be supportive and show a genuine concern for their best interests as they perceive them.
- Commit to *seeing the situation through*, if this is what they want.

### Engaging in constructive confrontation may demand that you deal with some of your issues:

- Dealing with them making/exploring options that you don't agree with.
- Dealing with your feelings - avoiding confronting others, or being over-enthusiastic about using a challenging approach.
- Dealing with your agency/external pressure for outcomes.
- Dealing with your need for the person to end up *fixed*.

### Warning Signs - Indications that Feedback May Not be in the Client's Interest

Clients may say or do things that indicate that they are not ready or willing to be confronted:

Things They May Say ...	Things They May Do ...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>You're not listening to me.</i></li> <li>▪ Change the subject.</li> <li>▪ Argue about every possible action/change/solution/strategy.</li> <li>▪ <i>Broken record</i> (question or sentence).</li> <li>▪ Agree without debate/discussion.</li> <li>▪ Take their original position more strongly.</li> <li>▪ <b>Nothing!</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Disconnect (eg. fold arms, look away, walk out, glaze over, nod and smile or turn up music).</li> <li>▪ Physically attack people or property.</li> <li>▪ Withdraw.</li> <li>▪ Do the opposite of what's sought.</li> <li>▪ Avoid helper (eg. not show up next session).</li> <li>▪ Become self-conscious (eg. fidget).</li> </ul>

**Table 2:** Behaviours which Indicate Confrontation is Inappropriate

Because a commitment to change is hard, people frequently get into *avoidance behaviour* when responding to confrontation. Even seemingly innocuous information provision can be experienced as a judgment or intrusion. Engaging in avoidance behaviour is generally an indication that:

- They didn't really want to change anything ... maybe they just said this because it sounded good or responsible. You can quickly negotiate moving away from inappropriate confrontation or information provision (eg. by saying *I'm not sure that I completely understand the problem ... would you be willing to run through it for me!?! or I wonder if this is the real problem?*), or,
- They thought they were ready to start looking toward change, but didn't realise how threatening it would feel. (In this instance, they may very well need to spend some time working out whether they really want to tackle this ... and whether they want to do it with you ... and if so, whether they need to know you a bit better first!)

**If you pressure someone to *hear* a confrontation or accept new information, when they don't want to, you can do a lot of damage.** They are unlikely to make any use of the feedback... so you won't get anywhere anyway! They may well go away feeling angry, blamed, lectured at and/or intruded on.

## Some Approaches to Extending Frame of Reference<sup>3</sup>

Many of the following ideas apply equally to giving constructive confrontation, or offering feedback consistent with a person's frame of reference.

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to participants in the following workshops for many of these ideas:

- *A 'Power With' Approach to Short Term Counselling*, Brisbane, May 1996.
- *Short Term Counselling*, Queensland University of Technology, October 1996.
- *Peer Development Skills*, Darwin, June 1998.

## Ensure the Context is Appropriate

- Ensure there's sufficient privacy for them to feel safe.
- Ensure that they are ready and willing to work on the issue; it's at a time they can *hear* it (eg. they're not unduly vulnerable)
- Ensure there's adequate time to fully work through any issues that arise ... not just *dump and run*.
- Allow plenty of time for any exploratory process ... they may need to test a new idea/skill.

## Be Extremely (!) Cautious

- Ask permission to confront or explore.
- Be tentative (even diminishing) about any ideas you offer.
- Back off **immediately** when their behaviour changes.
- Work with their priorities (rather than what you think is important for them).
- Test their values and willingness to engage through giving impersonal (before personal) feedback.
- *Suspend disbelief* about any options, until they've been fully evaluated.
- Make sure they feel strong enough to *return the challenge* if you begin to impose.

## Negotiate Clear Boundaries

- Make it clear that they have a right not to be challenged.
- Disclose personal values of yours that may impact on your feedback.
- Explain any aspects of your organisation's values which might impact on your feedback in a clear, accessible way (including what this might mean in practice for them).
- See negotiation as an ongoing process ... continue to check how they feel about feedback throughout the process ... they may have thought they wanted challenge, but change their mind.

## Address Your Power

- Be very suspicious of your potential abuse of power, when they agree unquestioningly with your feedback. (Unquestioning acceptance of confrontation might also be an indication of low self-esteem.)
- Do not impose your own personal agenda on them (eg. withholding information about another organisation because you disagree with their approach, where they may be able to meet the person's values/needs).
- Take an approach of curious questioning (rather than nasty challenge).
- Put yourself in their shoes.
- Confront discrepancies/contradictions/myths in a manner that is consistent with a *power with* approach.
- Explain your values if these are impacting on the process.

## Empower Them

- Acknowledge things they've tried or efforts they've made already.

- Maximise/value/prioritise working from their strengths/ideas/resources ... draw on their existing competencies (eg. learning from how they successfully dealt with similar situation in the past).
- Allow, or even encourage, (what you perceive as) mistakes.
- Use lateral thinking exercises/skills to *stretch* their thinking about possibilities (eg. De Bono's *hats*, *Photolanguage*).
- Encourage them to *value add* one step to what they do already (rather than telling them how you'd do it!).
- Overcome the risk of weighting choices by your values/*easy answers* (eg. through tentatively/*discountingly* giving another point of view; *overvaluing* their ideas, and *undervaluing* yours).
- Talking about other possible sources of ideas.
- Let them control how much/quickly they get new information.
- Introduce new ideas cautiously (eg. as being *silly* or *crazy*).
- Illustrate with examples of your own actions which demonstrate your imperfections ... how you behave/react in a situation (eg. dealing with emotions or *failure*).
- Share/exchange information (ensuring that your own experiences/ideas are selected to meet their needs, rather than yours).
- Name your own learning from the situation/discussion (ie. affirming the mutual benefit of the relationship).

### **Balance Realism & Client-Responsiveness**

- Distinguish between aspects of a situation they can and can't control or change.
- Avoiding *setting them up for failure*, whilst still enabling them to control the process/outcomes.
- Encourage them to assess their capacity/power to make change in this situation.
- Only offer tangible possibilities which they can control.
- Aim for incremental change/knowledge/resourcing ... don't overpower them with too much information at once.
- Summarise/list ideas developed to date, so they don't get lost.
- Help them explore priorities, rather than trying to address everything at once.
- Help them establish short term and long term goals.

### **Understand Their Current Frame of Reference**

- Find out *where they're at* so you can work in relation to that.
- Make sure you understand their frame of reference before trying to 'extend' it ... actively listen and check your comprehension of their views.
- Don't make assumptions about their values/views.
- Ensure that you have a thorough understanding of what they are asking for.
- If relevant to the problem, explore what has shaped their present frame of reference ... are these firm values, or have they followed beliefs (unprocessed assumptions)?

### **Use Questioning Focused on Their Agenda**

- Challenge assumptions about how the world works and their place in it, particularly where these might be limiting their options/power.

- Ask strategic questions in a way that doesn't demand that they justify their opinions - but leads to questioning of themselves or their beliefs.
- Facilitate self-questioning (eg. ask *why* in reference to statements, beliefs, attitudes, or, use *Some people think ...*)
- Use their emotions (eg. anger) as a catalyst for questioning and/or expanding their thinking.
- Encourage questioning (eg. *I wonder why the shopkeeper was angry?*)

### **Offer Options Consistent with their Values**

- Give an overview of possibilities, particularly options outside their knowledge/experience.
- Only offer options consistent with their values.
- Where you can't give all the information (there's too much), tell them how you've selected and why ... give them the option to challenge your criteria.
- Ensure they set the agenda (ie. any new options are based on their needs/priorities).
- Be clear about the values base of any organisation to which you are making a referral.

### **Encourage Critique of Options**

- Offer perceptions of their situation from different vantage points (eg. imagine how different protagonists in their story might respond).
- Use *Web Charts* to explore the possible causes or consequences of a decision.
- Encourage thinking about possible results/consequences of actions.
- Process *pro's and con's* of various ways of dealing with a situation.
- Explore possible negatives and positives of a tentative decision - exploring negatives is particularly important when the idea was yours.
- Relate back to past outcomes (ie. what they've already learned from experience).
- Be willing to offer perspectives other than your own (even, play *devils advocate* in an open, non-gamey, way).

### **Use Creative Learning Tools**

- Encourage visioning/dreaming ... how they'd like it to be.
- Introduce new ideas/thinking in a positive and safe way (eg. classes, movies).
- Demonstrate ideas you're offering in a practical way (eg. use examples, stories or analogies).
- Provide *take away* resources - reading, videos, pamphlets, Internet sites.
- Encourage them to participate in group discussions/support groups (or talk with/meet others) to gain new perspectives.
- Offer to try to find a mentor or peer support person.

### **Enable Ongoing Problem Solving**

- Identify skills and processes used to reach this point (eg. by working through how they made a decision, step-by-step).
- Explain the lateral thinking tools used, so they can use them again.