

George Lakoff. *Don't Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate—The Essential Guide for Progressives*. Chelsea Green Publishing Company. September 2004.

The Art of Framing for Political Advantage

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If you claim that you aren't an elephant, people will begin to see you as one. When Richard Nixon claimed that he "wasn't a crook," he simply reinforced his image as a lawbreaker. The use of language is a powerful force in strengthening or diminishing one's base of power. George Lakoff's book, *Don't Think of an Elephant*, is about the art and science of framing for political advantage and the process by which people are attracted to different candidates and positions. The art of politics deals with relations among people as they seek to rise in power and influence authoritative decisions. People engaged in political action and leadership bring different values and interests to the competitive arena and use a myriad of strategies to prevail in the competition. The playing out of political dynamics takes place at every level of society—national, state, and local elections; legislative governance; public, private, and nonprofit organizations; community associations; trade groups; and even in churches, synagogues, and mosques.

Lakoff's work provides guidance on how to exercise influence in adversarial circumstances. While the book is particularly focused on strengthening the capacity of progressive activists to compete against their conservative counterparts, the principles put forward can be utilized by anyone attempting to rise to power and influence policy or managerial decision making. He also prescribes rules of thumb for prevailing in a debate. And lastly, he discusses the ethical and unethical use of framing for political advantage. These subjects are as relevant to organizational leaders as they are to those seeking election to public office.

George Lakoff is the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Professor of Cognitive Science and Linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley. He has devoted much of his professional life to applying the discipline of cognitive linguistics to the domain of politics. He asserts that the success of the Republican Party in recent years can largely be explained by how they use language to “frame” issues. The phrase “tax relief,” for example, was carefully crafted by Republican strategists to evoke feelings of “affliction.” The word “relief” draws citizens into feeling resentful about the amount of tax dollars sent to Washington to sustain government operations. These resentful feelings then lead voters to view conservative politicians as gladiators fighting to alleviate this social condition. The choice of phraseology is based on an understanding of human nature in the context of the American political experience, a subject to which the author gives considerable attention.

Human Nature and the American Experience

Lakoff asserts that every human being has mental structures that shape the way he or she sees the world. These embedded values, beliefs, and images constitute the cognitive unconscious and form a “world view” about right and wrong. He presents the metaphor of two idealized models of family structure—the “strict parent” and “nurturing parent” forms. The strict parent model assumes that the father is the moral authority who supports and defends the family, tells his wife what to do,

and teaches his kids right from wrong. The preferred way to do that is through painful punishment that will result in a disciplined adult who pursues self-interest, follows moral precepts, and becomes a successful self-reliant adult. Lakoff contends that this set of values is strongly held by radical right-wing conservatives. Given this foundation of thought, it naturally follows that such conservatives would favor limited government, capital punishment, harsh prison sentences, limited taxation, and so on. If people possess moral, and self-reliant, values, government should not need to meddle into the lives of citizens.

Contrast this with the nurturing parent model that is gender neutral. Instead of teaching children to pursue their self-interest, Mom and Dad nurture their children and encourage them to make the world a better place. Children should be taught to empathize with others and take responsibility for themselves and the community. All sorts of other public policy values follow, such as supporting antismoking legislation, a clean environment, consumer protection, fair treatment, equal opportunity, two-way communication, and building strong communities at work and at home.

While some individuals clearly embrace one or the other world view, many are “biconceptuals” (that is, they embrace aspects of both and may favor one or the other in different settings such as work, home, or sports). In many ways, the American culture embraces both the strict parent and nurturing parent models. Individuals can embrace the paradox

that people should be punished and live with the consequences of their behavior while also believing that mercy, compassion, and forgiveness are warranted in some circumstances. A skillfully framed message can evoke one or the other set of values, leading people right where the politician wants them to go.

The second assumption about human behavior is that values and identity have a stronger persuasive force than a portrayal of facts. Lakoff contends that the biblical phrase, “The truth shall set you free,” simply doesn’t work in the domain of politics. A union member, for example, might vote for an anti-union Republican who taps into his “strict parent” assumptions and images. A first generation citizen of Latino origin might support tax reductions for wealthy Americans if he or she envisions entering that stratum of society at some future time. They might embrace the assumption that pursuing self-interest and amassing wealth is a proper reward for disciplined self-reliant behavior. In Lakoff’s words, “People identify with their self-interest, but vote their identity.”

Rules of Thumb for Political Persuasion

How does one move from these assumptions about human nature to the artful practice of persuasion? A few of his guidelines are as follows:

- Frame the political debate in terms of values and moral vision.
- State your values early and often.
- Attacking the opponent’s frame reinforces their message. When arguing against the other side, do not use their language.

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- Show respect for the other side.
- Unite with others who generally share your values. Be willing to compromise with coalition members to maintain a united front and communication strategy.
- Be proactive, not reactive. Play offense, not defense.
- Display controlled passion and dignity in making your case.
- Find stories where your frame connects with the audience.

The Ethics of Framing

In addition to providing guidelines for engaging in debate, the author makes some important distinctions between two unethical practices in framing issues—spin and propaganda. He defines “spin” as putting “an innocent frame on an embarrassing occurrence to make it sound normal or good.” Propaganda is “an attempt to get the public to adopt a frame that is not true and is known not to be true, for the purposes of gaining or maintaining political control.” Deceptive framing is often used to cover up a weakness in the advocate’s position. Some organizations, for example, call their new and reduced health insurance benefits package the “security plus” health plan. The phrase conjures up images of enhanced health protection, when in reality employees are paying more and receiving less. In Lakoff’s words, “Deceptive framing is not only reprehensible, but usually breeds cynicism and reduced credibility.” Authentic framing, on the other hand, conveys genuine values and beliefs in support of a course of action. Martin Luther

King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, for example, envisioned a country where the “Black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics will join hands” to celebrate a new condition of freedom in our country. His authentic use of language changed our country forever.

This book is clearly a partisan treatise that may, at times, oversimplify and misrepresent conservative positions. Nonetheless, it provides valuable insight about the art and science of framing messages for political advantage. Lakoff teaches us that “frames trump facts” and that presenting genuinely felt values that link to people’s identity is a powerful means for building support.

In the world of public administration, extraordinary leaders need to assess changing external conditions, formulate missions and visions, reposition priorities, reorganize structures, build a winning culture, redeploy staff, build networks of coproducers, and create new human resource and information technology systems, among other actions. Given these responsibilities, authentic framing is an additional tool for building support to generate meaningful change. A change initiative can be framed in terms of enhancing citizen value, preserving democracy, building organization capacity, and giving meaning to one’s professional life. A skillfully framed message can tap into an employee’s identity as steward of the public interest, who works with a sense of pride to create meaningful results. George Lakoff’s book, *Don’t Think of an Elephant*, is a reasonably good choice if your goal is to learn how to strategically express values that attract a following and unite people in pursuit of worthy goals.

Author Index	Issue/Page
Bailey, Margo	1/8
Baker, David L.	4/31
Bayat, M.S.	2/15
Blake, Richard	2/43
Bunker, Kerry A.	4/9
Caulkins, Jonathan P.	1/22
Chakrabarti, Oisika	2/56
Cicotte, Barbara L.	1/16
de Barbieri, Mary Ann	1/13
Dzuray, Emil J.	4/22
Douglas, Judy	2/54
Edwards, Amy	3/61
Ferreira, I.W.	2/15
Fillichio Carl	2/51
Gill, Tony	3/26
Ginn, Marshall H.	1/11
Goldstein, Rachel	3/49
Grimaldi	1/54, 2/61, 3/64, 4/62
Helgason, Kristinn	4/42
Hyde, A.C.	1/3, 1/57, 1/61, 1/62
Jackson, Rick	1/40
Klareskov, Vilhelm	4/42
Kenny, Brooks B.	1/19
Kissane, Jonathan M.	2/4
Kluver, Jodie	4/16
Laubsch, Paulette	2/43
Leuenberger, Deniz Z.	1/60, 4/16
Long-Green, Alethea	1/28
Marnell, Peter A.	2/27
Master, Warren	1/2, 2/3, 3/1, 4/1
McGinnis, Patricia	4/60
Mendis, Patrick	3/3
Miller, GERALYN M.	2/47
Morrison, Erica L.	1/22
Mortlock, Mick	3/9
Naff, Katherine C.	1/59
Nathanson, Phillip	3/42
Pettibone, Craig	1/51
Phillips, Dale	2/32
Pinterić, Uroš	3/38, 4/27
Pizzella, Patrick	2/37
Plant, Jeremy	3/13
Raga, Kishore	2/22
Rasmussen, Jill C.	1/19
Romito, Joe	3/32
Runde, Dan	4/38
Sanow, Susan	1/7
Saxton, Gregory D.	1/34
Shiplett, Myra Howze	1/26
Shipman, Stephanie	3/53
Spahr, Adrienne	3/57, 4/14
Stier, Max	4/55
Stone, Steve J.	4/22
Taylor, Derek	2/22
Trahant, Bill	4/49
Vivadelli, John H.	3/20
Wakefield, Michael	4/9
Walker, David	1/29, 2/10
Weeks, Dale	4/3
Weidemann, Timothy	1/22
Yearout, Steve	4/49
Yi, Hyong	1/62
Zauderer, Donald G.	1/44, 4/65