

Understanding the Four Frames of Leadership in Higher Education

Based on the work of Lee G. Bolman & Terrence E. Deal

Stage setting for July 22nd Workshop

(this was developed with the assistance of Generative AI)

Leading in Complexity

Colleges and universities are intricate, values-driven entities where formal structures, human relationships, political interests, and deep-rooted traditions converge. Currently this is further complicated because significant external pressures are leading to high-stakes strategic discussions about the future of institutions, if not the industry at large. Higher education leaders frequently encounter ambiguity and conflicting demands, whether they are navigating departmental decisions, institutional change, or campus-wide initiatives. The **Bolman and Deal Four Frames Model** provides a practical method to "reframe" challenges by examining them through four distinct but complementary lenses. This framework empowers leaders to better comprehend their environments, diagnose problems, and make more effective, holistic decisions.

The Four Frames

1. Structural Frame

- **Focus:** Organization, roles, policies, and procedures
- **Metaphor:** Factory or machine
- **Higher Ed Context:** Departmental organization, curriculum design, governance structures, accreditation compliance

2. Human Resource Frame

- **Focus:** People, needs, relationships, and professional development
- **Metaphor:** Family or community
- **Higher Ed Context:** Faculty/staff morale, advising relationships, student engagement, mentoring, workload equity

3. Political Frame

- **Focus:** Power, conflict, scarce resources, and negotiation
- **Metaphor:** Jungle
- **Higher Ed Context:** Budget decisions, faculty governance, resource allocation, advocacy, institutional priorities

4. Symbolic Frame

- **Focus:** Culture, meaning, traditions, and institutional identity
 - **Metaphor:** Theater or temple
 - **Higher Ed Context:** Campus rituals, traditions, mission statements, symbols, ceremonies, alumni culture
-

Why It Matters

Most individuals tend to view problems through a dominant frame, which can limit how they interpret and respond to complex situations. The most effective leaders in higher education know how to **reframe**—shifting perspectives and drawing on multiple lenses to understand nuance, foster collaboration, and lead with insight.