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Circular Framing: A Model for Applying Bolman and Deal's Four Frames in Student Affairs Administration

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Abstract

Administrators in student affairs navigate bureaucracies, manage staff, advocate for resources, and lead with purpose (Sermersheim & Keim, 2005). Nonetheless, scholars note research concerning student affairs management and leadership remains underemphasized in the current literature (Lovell & Kosten, 2000; Carpenter & Stimpson, 2007). Few models in student affairs exist to help translate theory to practice. Bolman and Deal's (2013) four frames encourage leaders to view organizations through structural, human resource, political, and symbolic lenses. The four frames synthesize decades of literature on organizational theory and are frequently cited in higher education and student affairs publications. Previous scholarship, however, does not provide a model for applying the frames in student affairs administration. This paper proposes the Circular Framing Model—a model for administrative practice combining Bolman and Deal's four frames with Birnbaum's (1988) ideas of thinking in systems and circles. This model helps student affairs professionals critically evaluate their environments to lead and manage more effectively.

Keywords: circular framing, four frames, student affairs administration

Management and administration are vital components to the work of student affairs professionals, but they are also some of the most complex duties, requiring particular skills and knowledge (Tull, 2006). It was once believed student affairs administrators needed little more than counseling skills for effective practice. However, administrative and management skills are now considered essential (Cuyjet, Longwell-Grice, & Molina, 2009; Lovell & Kosten, 2000). Those in student affairs leadership roles have the potential to change the nature of the field by facilitating individual growth of staff and improving programs, policies, and environments for college students. However, to promote these changes, leadership within student affairs must be reconceptualized (Stock-Ward & Javorek, 2003). Part of such a reconceptualization is helping student affairs professionals better utilize theoretical frameworks in their day-to-day practice (Patton & Harper, 2009). One framework is Bolman and Deal's four frames (2013), which calls leaders to simultaneously view their organizations as factories, families, jungles, and theaters. The Circular Framing Model presented here helps student affairs administrators by suggesting how to apply the four frames based upon the context of the environment.

Exposure to models relevant to leadership and management should be a continuous part of any student affairs professional position (Stock-Ward & Javorek, 2003). Models help translate theory to practice in an increasingly complex world (Fried, 2002; Upcraft, 1994). However, Fried (2002) noted models typically used in social science research are designed for controlled environments and generally do not fit the needs of student affairs. Likewise, Stock-Ward

and Javorek (2003) argued that current management models do not promote professional development or acknowledge human diversity. Scholar-practitioners in student affairs need to conduct the scholarship of integration-taking the time to ask what previous research about organization means in the current context of higher education and student affairs (Fried, 2002). Resulting models will not only improve practice, but also possibly reduce the attrition of new professionals in the field (Tull, 2006).

Bolman and Deal's Four Frames as a Model for Student Affairs Administration

Bolman and Deal (2013) have speculated that one of the most common fallacies of those who lead and manage is seeing an incomplete or distorted picture as a result of overlooking or misinterpreting important situations. They offer a four-frame model for interpreting organizational problems and analyzing decisions accordingly. Bolman and Deal (2013) choose the word *frame* to represent the theory that an individual uses to discern a problem and solution for a particular circumstance. Channeling insights from both research and practice, Bolman and Deal present four frames: structural, human resource, political, and symbolic. Each frame is grounded in literature stemming from organizational theory and psychology. Leaders may naturally adhere to one frame and attempt to resolve all organizational issues from that single frame, but Bolman and Deal suggest that the most effective administrators are those who can reframe – understanding how to artfully employ each of the four frames to varying degrees depending upon the situation.

The Structural Frame

The individual using the structural frame views the organization as a factory, made up of interconnecting parts that work together seamlessly (Bolman & Deal, 2013). The intellectual roots of the structural frame come from Frederick Taylor (1911) and Max Weber (1947). The structural frame underscores order, direction, and efficiency by emphasizing authority in decision-making. Higher education leaders are effective when they are architects who monitor specific data through systems they design (Birnbaum, 1988).

The Human Resource Frame

The professional using the human resource frame thinks of an organization as a family of people who care for and support one another (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Building on Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs, McGregor (1960) argued that managers create a self-fulfilling prophecy with their employees. If a manager possesses a *Theory X* assumption (McGregor, 1960), he or she believes employees are naturally lazy and they therefore need controls to keep them efficient. *Theory Y* (McGregor, 1960), by contrast, advocates that organizations should align their goals with the goals of employees, creating a paradigm whereby what is good for the individual is also good for the group. The student affairs professional viewing his or her world with the human resource frame focuses on individual growth and participation. Leaders are effective through cultivating talent and performance, and processes excel when leaders emphasize support, empowerment, and self-actualization (Argyris, 1957).

The Political Frame

An organization is a battleground with limited resources and divergent interests, according to those who utilize the political frame (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Groups funnel into subgroups, or coalitions, based upon common goals and the need to gain power through alliances. Those who utilize the political frame understand that decisions must be made between competing goods (Cyert & March, 1963). The ability to influence and bargain are vital characteristics

of the political frame, and student affairs leaders are effective when they provide arenas for constructive conflict and act as negotiators between subgroups (Kezar, 2011).

The Symbolic Frame

The professional using the symbolic frame views the organization as a theatre made up of stories with heroes and villains (Bolman & Deal, 2013). What something means is more important than what it actually is, and anecdotes are more powerful than data in this frame. The symbolic frame captures meaning, purpose, and values in an organization, dimensions that have been historically underemphasized in administration (Kezar, 2011; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Colleges thrive on the symbolic frame with their traditions, symbols, fight songs, mascots, and sports teams. Leaders are most effective when they are artists who infuse meaning into otherwise mundane processes.

Reframing as an Act of Interdisciplinary Integration

The importance of the four frames is their capacity to allow for reframing – a process in which individuals must view a particular decision through four different lenses before selecting the best approach (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Bolman and Deal (2013) argue that those who can reframe situations will be most successful. Although any administrator will be more inclined to see the world through one or two of the frames, no one frame is better than any other; all four are needed for effective leadership and management in higher education (Bensimon, 1989; Bolman & Deal, 1991; Bolman & Gallos, 2011).

The Need for a Model for Applying the Four Frames

Bolman and Deal's (2013) four frames are cited often in student affairs literature. Some scholars reference the four frames in the context of power, suggesting that student affairs administrators can gain and use power through symbolic, political, and human resource means when they do not possess it structurally (Love & Estanek, 2004; Taylor, 2003). Others use the four frames to emphasize the importance of symbolism (Jackson, Moneta, & Nelson, 2009; Rogers, 2003; Young, 2003), politics (Stringer, 2009), and relationships (Ellis, 2009) in student affairs administration and management (Komives, 2011). Finally, some scholars describe the four frames while emphasizing how organizational theory is important to student affairs practice (Jones & Abes, 2011; Kezar, 2011; Kuh, 2003; Kuk, 2009; Patton & Harper, 2009; Stringer, 2009).

Although scholars consistently affirm the value of the four frames, no model is offered for how to apply the frames in practice. As Fried (2002) argued, “we have engaged extensively in the scholarship of discovery, less extensively in the scholarship of application, and have skipped the scholarship of integration” (p. 120). Student affairs administration provides an opportunity to integrate seemingly contrasting ideas into workable models that provide a foundation for effective leadership and management. Higher education leaders often fail at complex analysis because they lack awareness about the environmental subsystems that operate within their institutions (Kezar, 2011). A model is needed that helps student affairs professionals utilize the four frames within their campus subsystems, thereby giving administrators a pathway for determining how to begin the process of reframing.

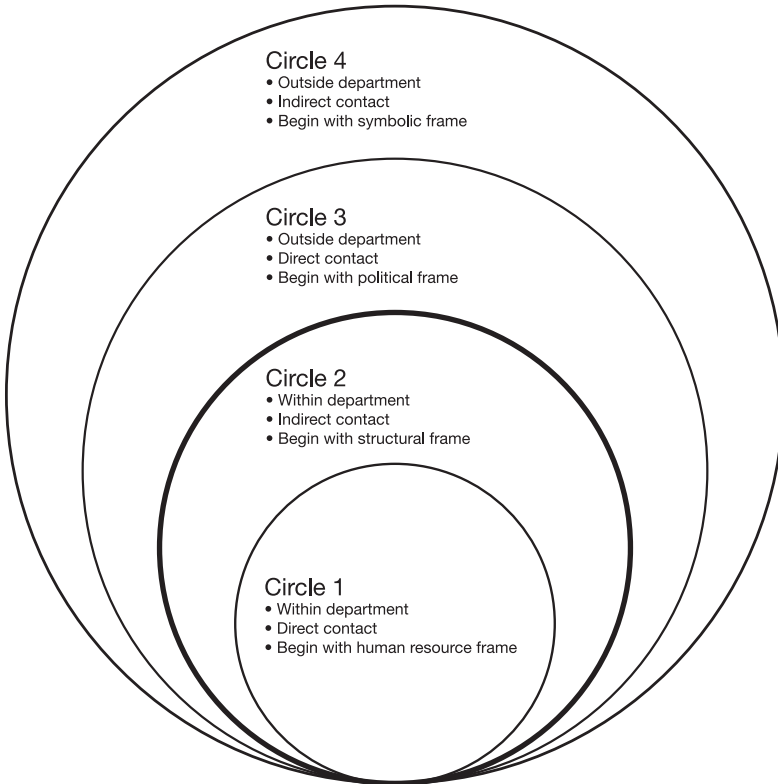
The Circular Framing Model

Understanding how a particular college functions requires looking beyond specific characteristics and analyzing it instead through systems and circles (Birnbaum, 1988). A system is an organized unit that has interdependent parts and is separated from its environment by a boundary. Systems exist throughout a college in the form of departments, areas, and divisions.

Decisions and outcomes in a system are circular, rather than linear; an outcome can influence a decision as much as a decision can influence an outcome (Birnbaum, 1988). Therefore, student affairs professionals need a nonlinear (circular) approach to understanding their environments. By interpreting their work environment as multiple circles with interconnecting boundaries, student affairs professionals can more effectively apply Bolman and Deal's (2013) four frames to analyze complicated organizational problems.

The proposed Circular Framing Model combines systems thinking, circular thinking (Birnbaum, 1988), and the four frames (Bolman & Deal, 2013) into a strategic approach to leadership. To begin, one can conceptualize an internal system as individuals who are within the department and an *external system* as those who are outside the department. Furthermore, within both the internal and external systems, student affairs professionals have a group of people with whom they have consistent, direct interaction, and a group of people with whom they have inconsistent, indirect interaction. When combined, administrators can imagine themselves in the middle of four circles that comprise the Circular Framing Model (see Figure 1). Each circle lends itself to a particular frame with which student affairs leaders can begin the process of reframing.

Figure 1.



Circle 1: Using the Human Resource Frame to be a Mentor

When utilizing the frames in student affairs practice, an administrator should begin with those he or she directly supervises. Such people are within the department and are in frequent, direct contact, so it is best to employ the human resource frame by helping employees feel like equals (Birnbaum, 1988). In this circle, the primary objective is to garner input, ideas, and opinions for the purpose of building consensus regarding common objectives and appropriate decisions to reach those objectives. The human resource frame encourages one to care not just about getting things done, but about the people who look to the manager as a role model and mentor (Bolman & Deal, 2013).

Circle 2: Using the Structural Frame to be a Boss

Ideally, consensus on decisions should include the entire department, but decentralization, departmental size, and the rapid pace of the college environment do not always allow for consensus of this magnitude. In larger units, attempting to build consensus among one's direct reports and *their* direct reports can cause rifts and confusion when people in different parts of the hierarchical structure disagree. There comes a time when it is necessary to be a boss, and this is especially important for the people who ultimately report to an administrator with whom they may have limited contact. For this circle, making decisions and expecting compliance are vital for the success of the entire staff. Here, the structural frame gives credence to the fact that decisions must be made, authority must be respected, roles must be delegated, and results must matter.

Circle 3: Using the Political Frame to be a Negotiator

In a world of limited resources and influence, politics provides a means for choosing between divergent interests and garnering the resources to accomplish goals (Birnbaum, 1988). Circle 3 represents an administrator's peers who are outside of the department but who report to the same supervisor. By becoming a negotiator in this circle, an administrator will begin to not only advocate for resources for his or her own area, but to also seek commonalities and partnerships among the divergent interests represented. In the end, learning how to use the political frame will allow an administrator to discern when it is best to partner and when it is best to compete (Stringer, 2009).

Circle 4: Using the Symbolic Frame to be a Storyteller

With so many departments, programs, and activities simultaneously existing on a single campus, student affairs is in competition with other divisions for the attention of college leaders (Schuh, 2009). While data can and should be used for such advocacy, it is easy to underestimate the importance of storytelling to communicate the positive impact of an administrator's area. The symbolic frame is often more important than the structural frame with those outside an administrator's department and division for two reasons. First, while people outside the department may demand numerical data, they rarely have the time to actually analyze the data and subsequently make meaning from it. Therefore, they will rely at least in part on the administrator's own interpretation and sensemaking (Weick et al., 2005). Second, stories move people, and the effect of well-designed anecdotal evidence can powerfully shape the way departmental outsiders in the college community view the work of student affairs.

Discussion and Implications of the Model

The art of leading and managing as a student affairs professional requires mastery of mentoring, bossing, negotiating, and storytelling. All four roles are needed, forcing administrators to see things differently (Love & Estanek, 2004). The Circular Framing Model encourages use of the context of the environmental subsystem as a guide for how to begin this process of reframing (see Table 1).

Table 1

Thinking in Circles					
Internal or External to Department?	Direct or Indirect Contact?	Who	Beginning Frame	Role	Goal
Internal	Direct	The people within your department whom you meet with on a regular basis, such as direct reports	Human Resource	Mentor	Build consensus and emphasize individual needs
Internal	Indirect	The people who ultimately report to you, but with whom you have limited contact	Structural	Boss	
	Make decisions and expect compliance				
External	Direct	The people outside your department, but who are your colleagues/peers who report to the same supervisor as you do	Political	Negotiator	Seek partnerships and advocate for resources
External	Indirect	The people outside of your department with whom you have very limited contact	Symbolic	Storyteller	Communicate successes and sensemaking through stories and rituals

Implications for Current Practice

If student affairs administrators think in systems and circles, their leadership will become more adaptive to the demands of different contexts. By appropriately analyzing the interconnecting circles of the environment, the most effective style of guidance will result from assessing the needs of each unique group. Those in student affairs administration will not only view their work as a continuous act of reframing, but also ascertain which situations call for them to be mentor, boss, negotiator, or storyteller.

The proposed Circular Framing Model provides guidance for where to begin, using organizational contexts to choose a frame from which to reframe. Administrators should be careful not to adhere to one frame exclusively, as a singular context could require the use of any particular frame. One of the best ways to navigate complex environments as an administrator is to break down such environments into smaller parts with more discernible contexts (Birnbaum, 1988). The Circular Framing Model divides the collegiate organizational environment into four circles, each with its own starting frame. Utilizing the frames within these four areas lends itself to better applicability and, therefore, more effective management and administration in student affairs.

The challenges of scholarly practice demonstrate that “simple activity and hard work are not enough, nor even close. Only continuous reflection, commitment, learning, and growth are acceptable if we are to be of service to our students and our institutions” (Carpenter & Stimpson, 2007, p. 281). The Circular Framing Model can provide graduate programs in higher education and student affairs another way to teach future professionals how to apply theory to administrative practice.

Implications for Future Research

The proposed Circular Framing Model also has implications for future research. To improve student affairs practice, Fried (2002) suggested that new models be tested and evaluated through feedback from practitioners. The four frames and the Circular Framing Model presented here should undergo such testing and examination. Although researched in other relevant areas, including with college presidents (Bensimon, 1989), no published study has empirically tested the four frames specifically with student affairs professionals. Future research could examine whether student affairs professionals lean toward particular frames and whether effective leaders in student affairs are adept at utilizing multiple frames. Such research will help to further expand and develop this model so that it continually assists professionals in utilizing theory for more effective practice.

Conclusion

Student affairs administrators utilize managerial and administrative skills to produce environments that enhance student development and promote student success. To do so effectively, leaders in student affairs must use theoretical models in their work that aid in making sense of complex environments. Bolman and Deal's (2013) four frames synthesize organizational theory in a manner that becomes translatable to student affairs practice, but no previous model proposes how to use the frames within the student affairs profession. The Circular Framing model helps student affairs administrators analyze the subsystems of their work environments while also providing a beginning frame for each context. The model equips individuals to view their environment in systems and circles, and then empowers the professional to act accordingly as mentor, boss, negotiator, or storyteller.

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