



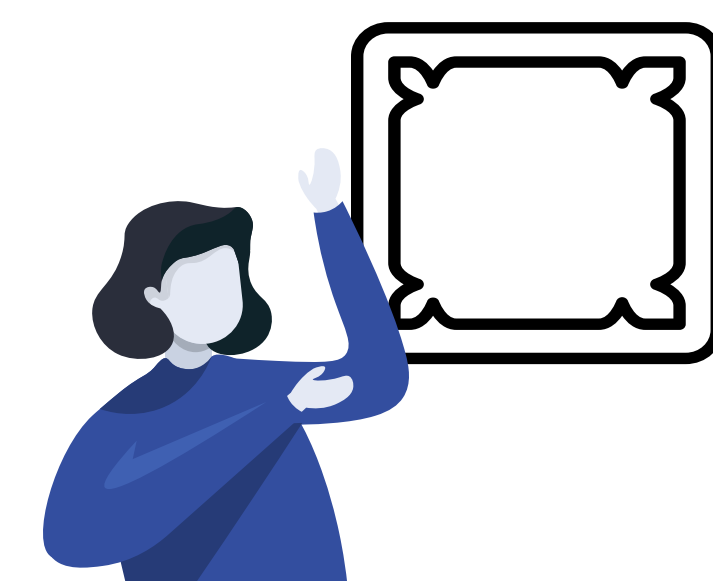
# Framing Social Issues & Perspectives

## DEAR SOCIAL SERVICE PRACTITIONERS AND LEADERS,

We are often asked to consider how we can teach youths in a relevant and engaging manner as part of our responsibility to educate the younger generation on social issues. This is especially important in today's digital era where we are competing with other channels that generate information at a rapid pace and scale.

Senior practitioners who are eager to invest in the younger generation will need to pause and review ways to engage them and to consider different perspectives of doing so. The same considerations can be applied to social issues that may draw contentious views - how can we better prepare people for conversations about difficult and divergent social issues?

For such challenging topics, pushing down information and facts in a conversation or debate will not be feasible. One way is to **focus on framing the issue** that needs to be discussed.



## FRAMING AND REFRAMING

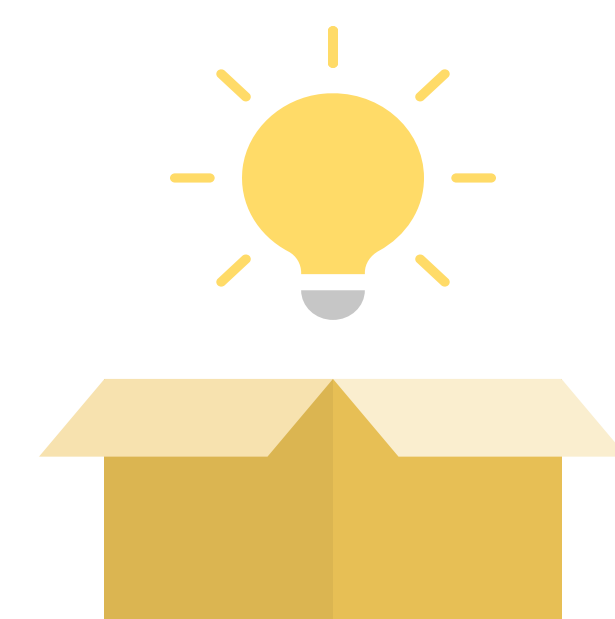
**Framing is what we choose to say, how we choose to say it and what we leave unsaid.**

The frames we use affect people's attitudes, understanding and actions and contain cues that can trigger certain patterns of thinking (Markowitz & Sweetland, 2018).



Our perceptions, values and principles also play a part in how we frame issues. It affects our choice of words, tone, visuals and interpretation of statistics in the way we present issues. Together, these elements create an overarching frame that powerfully shapes what we think, feel and do. That is why it is so important to get our frames right.

The challenge today is that there can be several different ways to frame a single issue. Having a consensus on the type of frame to use will thus be helpful in guiding public discourse and collective thinking. Likewise, "**reframing**" an issue, or changing the way we communicate about an issue, can **alter how others understand and respond to these matters.**



Framing also changes the way we hold conversations with our peers, the younger and older generations. When we reframe an issue, conversations can begin on a neutral or positive note and spark fresh insights and discussion on the subject matter, which may not happen under the original frame. We can think about topics such as ageing and education in a different manner when we use an alternative lens

and language in our discussions. For example, if we perceive the elderly as active and independent, it can change the way we describe the elderly and our outlook on the ageing process.

# KNOWING HOW TO FRAME ISSUES AND PERSPECTIVES

The most pressing issues of our time often attract the most polarising views. This is certainly true of issues like climate change, inequality and cultural diversity. What is becoming clearer is that the contestation of views using facts and statistics might not be the best method to generate public interest and participation in the topic.

We can instead make better progress by looking for “**side doors**” to **engage people to see different perspectives**, rather than knocking down the “front door” with a barrage of facts. **Using “side doors” to frame issues allows more room for flexibility in the way people perceive issues.** It avoids the need to define which way “left” or “right” is - opening up the possibility of true dialogue with diverse, even conflicting views. This prevents conversations and debates from turning into a polarised “yes” or “no” argument, which may cause a “fight or flight” reaction where speakers become defensive or feel the need to end the discussion.



The “crisis” door, so often used by social change advocates, might even lead the discussion to a dead end. The use of images such as melting icebergs, deforestation and decreasing animal populations could trigger the moral concerns of some, but it could also cause others to experience “apocalypse fatigue” (Markowitz & Sweetland, 2018). Such emotionally overwhelming frames can cause people to turn away from the issue instead of spurring action and change.

Increasingly, we are seeing the importance of **inviting the younger generation to participate in discussions and to contribute their views.** Their fresh perspectives could challenge us to review the current frames we use and propel us to find alternative ways to reframe subjects and discussions. To capture the interest of the younger generation to participate in these discussions, we must first pay more attention to the way we frame issues. This is particularly pertinent in this day and age where the youth are heavily exposed to attention-grabbing social media experiences that are specially curated for them.

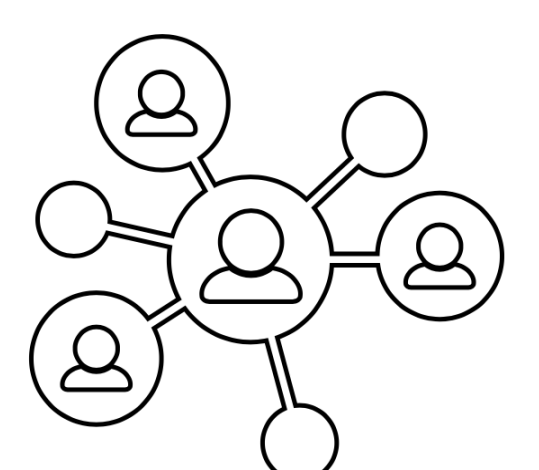


## COMMUNICATING MESSAGES



**The chosen messenger behind the message plays an important role in influencing the public’s receptiveness towards the news.** When messengers tend to be the “usual suspects”, it may cause the public to doubt their authenticity. Having credible messengers that can gain the trust of the public helps to prevent this problem.

More importantly, **the way we communicate messages should be relatable to the layperson.** The **use of images of regular citizens engaging in climate change action** has shown to **increase the salience of the message** as it **connects with the viewers’ day-to-day experiences** (Markowitz & Sweetland, 2018). Similarly, getting people to participate in local community activities will help them to link local, immediate concerns with bigger, global issues. This strategy can be used in the way we frame global issues by drawing connections and relevance to local concerns and daily life.



# INVITING DISCOURSE AND PARTICIPATION

**Inviting public discourse and engagement allows people to explore various “side doors” or alternative views on issues that matter.** For example, Youth Conversations, helmed by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY), is a platform for youths to discuss issues of concern and co-create ideas with one another as well as with the government (MCCY, 2019). These conversations are important for youths and adults to discover different perspectives and to have a conducive platform to discuss these issues.



Having a solution-oriented frame does not mean that we sweep difficult topics under the rug. Instead, a **solution-oriented frame** means that we are ready to **roll up our sleeves** and **put in the work to address challenging issues**. This also means **being open to listening to** and **accepting diverse perspectives** and **learning how to engage with these differing views fruitfully**. With this solution-oriented frame in mind, people may be more inclined to accept alternative perspectives and adopt a more holistic and balanced stance in the issues that they deal with.

## OPENING UP SPACE TO ELEVATE PUBLIC DISCOURSE

Overall, we see that opening up the space for public discourse and having the flexibility to accept a range of perspectives would be more helpful in facilitating public dialogue than compelling individuals to reach an agreement by projecting facts and value-laden messages. More youths will be interested in participating and generating solutions once they see that their opinions are valued and welcomed. The way we frame issues should thus enable a healthy and open exchange of ideas, which would hopefully create more opportunities for Singaporeans to shape the future together.

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### References

Illustrations by Fang LingYun from Singapore Chinese Girls' School

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