

Returning Civility to Local Government: A Reframe

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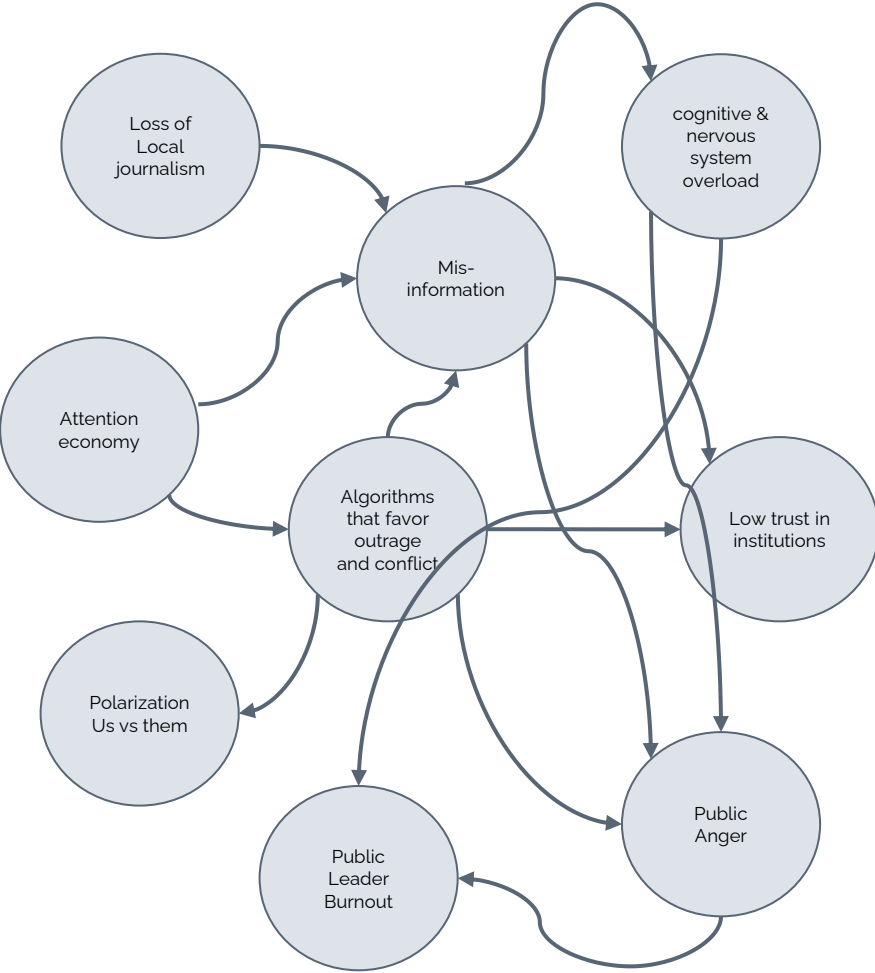
What we've heard...

- Contentious public meetings
- Social media outrage
- Misinformation
- Burnout in public service leadership

A blue speech bubble with a white question inside. The bubble is rounded on the top and bottom, with a small tail pointing downwards and to the left. The text is centered within the bubble.

**What are you
noticing or experiencing?**

Research: Multiple Interacting Factors



1. Public meetings as spectacle
 2. Social media outrage
 3. Polarization
 4. Low trust in institutions
 5. Loss of local journalism + misinformation
 6. Cognitive overload
 7. Strain on public servants / burnout
-and more?



Common call:

We need to bring civility back

But...

What do we really mean by civility?

Civility: Two dimensions

1. Politeness or etiquette
2. Civic norms (*how people occupy public or civic spaces together*)

Civility can be misused as a civic norm

- Dominant groups set the rules for what is “appropriate”
- Urgent or angry voices labeled “uncivil”
- Surface order maintained while deeper issues go unaddressed
- People who have been marginalized are excluded or silenced

An abstract painting with a textured, layered appearance. The background is a mix of warm and cool colors, including yellows, oranges, blues, and greys. In the center, there is a dark, semi-transparent rectangular area containing silhouettes of several people standing and talking. The overall mood is contemplative and artistic.

**How can we build cultures of
engagement that are
resilient, responsive, and
pluralistic?**

From Civility to Deliberative Capacity

- Redefine civility as inclusion + recognition (*people feel seen, valued*)
- Co-create norms with the community
- Design better forums where disagreement can continue productively
- **Measure success by:** *Can we continue the conversation?*



Democracy Needs both Competition and Collaboration

Competition

- Voting, debate, campaigns
- Clear rules help us decide when we can't all agree
- But democracy is more than winners and losers

We also need deliberative spaces

- Smaller face-to-face conversations
- Deliberative forums for joint learning and decision making (recommendation)
- Everyday forums: low stakes, test ideas, build trust



Designing Better Civic Spaces

- Create distinct spaces for expression, learning, decision-making
- Mix of small-group community dialogues and citizens' panels
- Work with trusted local groups to create informal forums
- Connect formal and informal spaces

Intentional Mix of Spaces (a democratic ecosystem)

Create deliberative forums for decision making (*where norms are co-created*)

- Advisory groups / Task Forces that can deliberate and provide insight on policy or project/program design.
- Citizen initiative reviews: panels of citizens review ballot initiatives and publish pro/con findings for voters
- Town halls with dialogue design
- Civic leadership academies

Support everyday understanding and connection

- Study circles / dialogue circles
- Civic group dialogues
- Kitchen table conversations
- Youth councils, panels
- Civic game nights, potlucks, block parties, democracy bowling night, story circles



Two deliberative tools you can use right now

- **Frame issues for collaboration:** Define issues in a way that invites joint problem solving and includes what people care about
- **Joint learning:** Explore trade-offs together

Tool #1:

Frame Issues for
Collaboration

Here's a scene that might be familiar to most of us:

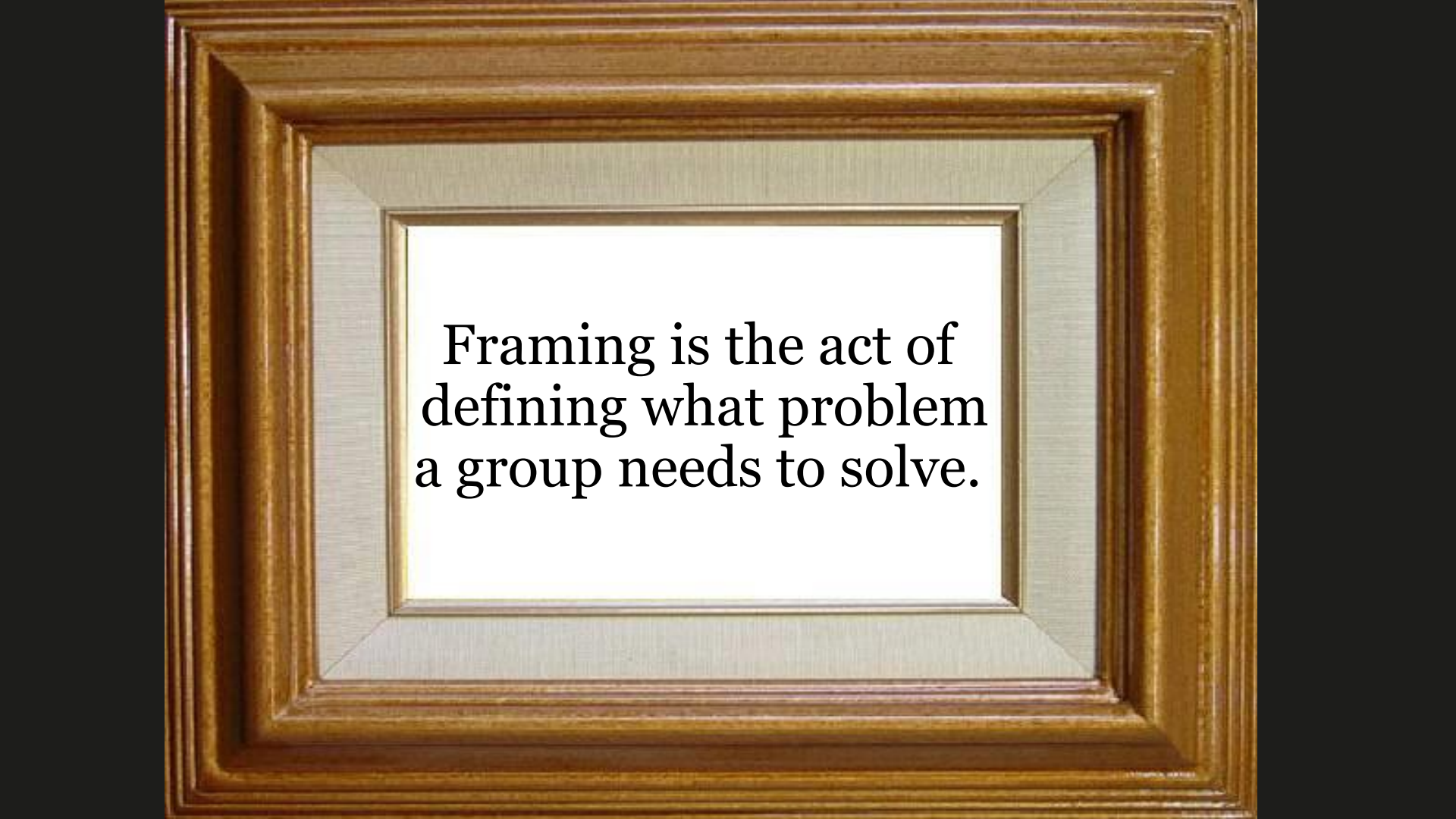
A city council subcommittee is meeting to decide how to move forward on renovating the community recreation center. Some members are focused on keeping costs low, while others are focused on sustainability and accessibility features, while still others keep raising worries about neighborhood traffic during construction, and the conversation is swirling

Then someone says: **"The central question we need to answer is how can we renovate the recreation center within the budget in a way that reduces community impact and maximizes accessibility and sustainability?"**

What happened?

Someone has skillfully framed the issue.

There is an art to framing issues skillfully, especially if your purpose is to help a diverse group work together productively to address the issue.

A wooden picture frame with a white mat and a white center containing text.

Framing is the act of
defining what problem
a group needs to solve.

How an issue is framed affects...

**What / who
is left out**

**What / who
is included**



A collaborative framing statement:

- Provides *clarity and focus* - the heart of the issue
- Enables all stakeholders to envision their **interests** being met
- Provides *creative space* for a range of solutions

Consider this real framing question...

Why not take advantage of the opportunity for farmers in the Umatilla basin to create needed jobs and boost Oregon's rural economy, by allowing them to utilize a very small increment of additional water from the very large flows of the Columbia River?

another framing of same issue...

Why should the agri-business industry be allowed to take even more water from the Columbia River when science clearly shows that water flows in the Columbia are already below historic levels needed for salmon?

**How would you frame this issue in a way
that would produce a productive
discussion?**

The final framing....

How can we manage Columbia Basin water in a way that could provide economic benefits from additional irrigation and improve ecological conditions for fish?

Tool #2

Joint Learning

Importance of Joint Learning

- Foundation for joint problem solving
- Understanding builds the cohesion of the group

Joint Learning

Data/Information Needs:

- What information do we need to make good decisions?

Sources:

- What are the sources of information we all can trust?

Meaning:

- What did we learn and what does it mean for our decision(s)?

Joint Learning

About the issue(s)

- History
- Legal framework
- How people are situated or impacted differently
- Technical or scientific information

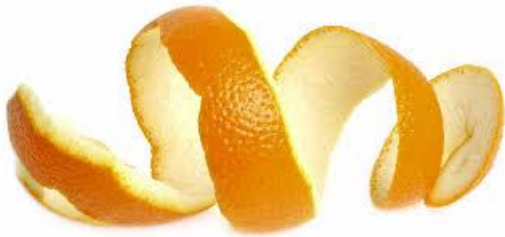
About the interests

- Own / Others
- Common or overlapping
- Priority of interests

Interests vs. Positions



Interests vs. Positions



Forms of Joint Learning

- 
- *Go-rounds, small groups*
 - *Storytelling / oral histories*
 - *Site visits*
 - *Presentations from experts*
 - *Legal research*
 - *Mapping and modeling*
 - *Research by consultants*
 - *Joint fact finding / participatory research*
 - *Science-policy workshop*



Oregon Resources

- **Oregon Solutions:** Building collective solutions
- **Oregon Consensus:** Public policy dispute resolution
- **Oregon's Kitchen Table:** Community engagement
- **Education Programs**
 - Civic Leadership Academies
- **Research program**