

# Framing Consultation: From Conflict to Collaboration

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Baha'is use consultation as a spiritual and practical decision making process to discern truth and take action. Baha'i consultation is at the very foundation of modern group process. It contains the values and attributes necessary for optimal group performance. While there is no prescribed process for consultation, there are a number of principles inherent in it.

Consultation asks the parties to:

- detach from any pre-conceived outcome
- speak from their own experience
- listen with an open heart and mind
- be open to all viewpoints
- strive to understand the truth of the situation
- identify spiritual principles
- consider all of the available options
- apply spiritual principles to the options
- unity around the decision and implementation
- evaluate and improve your consultative process

Framing can be a valuable tool in resolving difficult issues during consultation. Framing allows the parties to move beyond their individual needs and consider a broader range of perspectives. Framing also promotes more creative options and more durable resolutions. Framing helps move the parties from conflict to collaboration.

Conflict happens when emotions rise and choices are limited. The keys for resolving conflict involves empathy and options. Framing helps create empathy and generate options.

Collaboration is when people work together. Consensus is when everyone agrees on a solution. Consensus is words and collaboration is deeds. Since we should "let words, not deeds, be our adorning", a decision isn't complete until it has been acted upon. So unified action, or collaboration, should be our goal in consultation.

Conflict resolution begins with empathy - I don't care how much you know until I know how much you care. When there is little empathy and few options you have the most intractable conflicts (4). The best resolutions come from the highest empathy and the most options (1).



and thus have more creative solutions. Brainstorming research has shown that the best predictor of a good outcome is the number of choices available.

Abdul Baha offers us an excellent model for framing.

Every imperfect soul is self-centered and thinketh only of **his own good**. But as his thoughts expand a little he will begin to think of the welfare and comfort of his **family**. If his ideas still more widen, his concern will be the felicity of his fellow **citizens**; and if still they widen, he will be thinking of the glory of his **land and of his race**. But when ideas and views reach the utmost degree of expansion and attain the stage of perfection, then will he be interested in the **exaltation of humankind**. He will then be the well-wisher of all men and the seeker of the weal and prosperity of all lands. This is indicative of perfection. (SWAB, 69)

Framing is defining the situation at a higher level. This quote offers 5 levels of framing: self, family, fellow citizens, race and humankind. If we were to consider framing the issue in terms of the exaltation of humankind, we are at the highest level. When we are at this highest level, we are in the land of unity.

Please God, that we avoid the land of denial, and advance into the ocean of acceptance, so that we may perceive, with an eye purged from all conflicting elements, the worlds of unity and diversity, of variation and oneness, of limitation and detachment, and wing our flight unto the highest and innermost sanctuary of the inner meaning of the Word of God. (KI, 60)

Framing is an important skill in problem-solving that creates the possibility for more creative and expansive solutions. Most situations start out framed with Yes or No solutions: I'm right and you're wrong. The key to resolution is expanding the understanding of the problem which will allow for a wider range of choices.

Framing is stating the problem in a way that encompasses all perspectives, is neutral, future-focused and allows for the possibility of a solution. Framing broadens the issue beyond the narrow positions of the parties and allows them a greater freedom to resolve the issue.

### **Case Story — Framing**

I was asked to come in and work with a group of homeowners in a case regarding a barking dog. This case involved about twenty people in the neighborhood.

I asked only four questions, but the way that I **framed** those questions opened up the possibilities for resolution. Here are the questions:

## Four Questions - The Frame

Where do you live?

What would you like to share about your dog?

What is normal for a dog in your neighborhood?

How can we help a dog that can't live according to the norms of this neighborhood?

The neighbors in the Case of the Barking Dog worked together and came up with a very creative list of about twenty different things that they could do to help a dog that couldn't live according to the community norms. We took that list and put it in order by cost, so we started with the least expensive and moved toward the most expensive.

The least expensive included things like install a doggie door (so the dog could go inside at will), put a radio outside the house for the dog, have the dog socialize with other dogs and people. The more expensive choices were things like doggie day care, doggie psychiatrists and doggie Valium. We did not end up with an agreement, rather we ended up with a prioritized list of options. It was agreed that the dog owner would start with the least expensive idea and just keep working down the list until they found the things that worked.

Now, the interesting thing in this case was that I never found out who owned the dog that was misbehaving because that was not important. Nobody ever pointed a finger; nobody ever said "You did something wrong, dog owner." It was all about working together to solve the problem, sitting in a circle of equals around the list of issues and the proposed solutions which, in the spirit of consultation, belonged to everyone equally. When you take a neighborhood perspective, no one has to defend or be accused of wrongdoing.

### Prioritizing choices by cost

Allow the dog to socialize with other dogs

Allow the dog to socialize with neighbors

Place a radio in the background

Install a doggie door into the garage

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Doggie valium

Doggie day care

The evolving frames in this case study would look like

Self level, conflict frame- what to do about the bad dog

Neighbor level, collaboration frame - how can we work together to help the dog that can't live according to our neighborhood standards.

Framing helps us develop a broader understanding of a situation, promote empathy, design a wider range of choices, create consensus around the decision and produce collaboration in action. It blends in a seamless way with consultation and can be used in almost any situation.

"Where do you live?"

Each person went up to a map, showed where they lived and how long they had been there, and what their hopes and dreams were for the community.

One person got up and said he and his spouse had lived there for five years and were looking forward to raising a family there.

Another couple got up and said that they had only lived there a few months and were just renting until they could afford a place.

The next person got up and said they had just sold their house and were leaving within the next few months.

And someone else got up and said they had been there about a year and were very happy with living there.

Thus, we began with a question that allowed people to connect with one another and help create empathy.

"What would you like to share about your dog?"

Everyone in the neighborhood had a dog and they all wanted to share what was important to them about the about the dog they owned.

"What is normal for a dog in your neighborhood?"

Someone said, "While it's okay if they come on my lawn, I don't want them on my front porch."

Someone else said, "Well, I guess they could come in my backyard occasionally."

Another said dogs should always be on a leash and that they should be quiet after ten PM.

"How can we help a dog that can't live according to the norms of this neighborhood?"

### Two Wings of Consultation

<u>Rational</u>	<u>Emotional</u>
Frank	Loving
Straightforwardness	Compassionate
Truthfulness	Humility
Overlook faults	Calmness
Honesty	Serenity
Trustworthiness	Composure
Unfettered	Amity
Understanding	Concord
Candor	Patience
Tact	Sincere kindness
Wisdom	Fellowship

Devotion  
Dignity  
Moderation

Friendliness  
Unalloyed love  
Courtesy

These are all words taken from the Baha'i Writings that describe consultation.