

# Protective Frames

Imagine yourself at the edge of a cliff—looking down into a chasm far below, wind howling around you, and nothing but sharp rocks to break a fall. Would you feel a little nervous—maybe even terrified? Or are you exhilarated, wanting to step forward just a bit more for the excitement of it? If you are scared, what would it take to feel safe? If you are exhilarated, what would have to happen to scare you?

## The Playful State: A Protective Frame

Being in the Playful state signifies that there are no significant outcomes at stake; danger is far away and needn't be a factor, and you are free to try the action, to take the risk or to have the conversation. With fear of harm or penalty removed, it is as if you have a protective frame around you.

Daily life gives us countless events or opportunities to feel either fear and anxiety or fun and excitement, depending upon your state of mind at that time. The feeling of safety you have in potentially dangerous situations is called a protective frame, and you can only have this protective frame in the Playful state.

For those who don't stand at the edge of a cliff on a regular basis, try these questions. What scares you the most? What do you avoid at most costs? How do you feel about riding roller coasters, speaking in public, or applying for a promotion or new job, telling someone you love him or her out loud? Now, consider these questions. What excites you the most? What do you find so exhilarating, you can't stay away? Riding a roller coaster, speaking in front of large groups of people, reaching for that promotion, opening up to someone you love?

Fear and excitement are flip sides of the same coin. Why are some of us exhilarated by the roller coaster and others so scared of it? What causes us to be so scared in one situation, and so excited in another? What if you could flip a switch, and have the thing that scares you most suddenly become something exciting?

Reversal Theory gives us that switch to flip and they are rooted in the Serious and Playful states. Let's review the key features of these two states.

### Serious state

- ▶ Wants little new or unexpected data or unplanned stimulation (physical, emotional or intellectual)—interruptions to task-accomplishment lead to anxiety.
- ▶ Goal-oriented—looks to the future.
- ▶ Risk-averse—risks make goal accomplishment less certain.
- ▶ Ideal emotion is relaxation.

### Playful state

- ▶ Seeks stimulation and is open to the unexpected and unplanned (physical, emotional or intellectual)—the process of work and life are joyful.
- ▶ Lives in the moment—there are no consequences.
- ▶ Boredom-averse—risks are great ways to fend off boredom and inject stimulation.
- ▶ Ideal emotion is excitement.



If in the Playful state there are no consequences, then the risky, slippery edge is a fine, even an exhilarating, place to be. It is only the Serious state that knows how unsafe that edge is and causes the uncertain future to be a motivating factor. So if getting to the next level—giving the feedback, going after the sale, taking that stand—scares you and makes you back away from what feels like a dangerous

edge, you are in the Serious state. The trick, then, is to reverse into Playful state—where giving the feedback, going after the sale, and taking the stand are exciting—where you seek that stimulation within your protective frame.

### Jenny's Protective Frame Example

One of my favorite protective frames came from my father. I was to speak at a conference for the first time, and was terrified of the enormity of the event. My father told me that conferences are just a small part of the ongoing conversation that professionals have in their field—when you are speaking at a conference, you are just adding your voice to that conversation for a little bit. The conversation started long before you got there, he reminded me, and will be going on long after you leave the stage.

This was more than a decade ago, but I still replay his voice in my head before every conference—and it never fails to give the confidence and safety I need to become excited about the conference, rather than afraid. After all, “it’s just a conversation.”

### A Coach's Protective Frame

Jane was an accomplished manager, but she tended to avoid giving corrective feedback to her subordinates, fearing the emotional response that she might get—and in the past had gotten. She feared that someone would start crying or yelling, and that she (Jane) would shut down and not know what to do. It turns out that she had never been taught a useful process of giving difficult feedback—she did not know the steps, so she needed both a model for feedback and practice at using this model, but her fear stood in the way of engaging with any of this learning.

My goal, as Jane's coach, was to get her not only to have these tough conversations, but to engage with them fully and without the cloud of fear or dread that had cast its shadow in the past. I introduced her a 6-step model for giving difficult feedback and while we were practicing the steps, I burst into unannounced tears (all put-on, of course) during the role play. Our good relationship and the over-the-top nature of my performance made for a rather comical scene.

When we weren't laughing, we were creating techniques, phrases and approaches in her words and style that would have been useful and appropriate in such a case. I would throw in an angry example every once in a while for us to practice with, and after a few sessions of her practicing staying on course and talking her way through some pretty intense emotional reactions, she felt more secure. The safety of our relationship and the humor we found created the protective frame Jane needed to exercise the skills required (Mastery and Self states) to engage in the feedback task that she had previously avoided.

Jane was ready to do the real thing. Giving difficult feedback was never a task she looked forward to, but she had removed the fear from the task through her creation of a protective frame. Reframing the effort, developing comfort with a skill set, finding humor in the extremes of her fears, and discovering the need for personal support, Jane was able to embrace what had been a very difficult managerial task—and at the root of this growth was accessing the Playful state.