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## Framing and Priming: An Exploration of the Effects of Language and Mixed Messages on Ethical Decision Making in Teams

With ever-increasing scrutiny on the actions of business leaders, organizations are placing more emphasis on ethics training and responsible leadership. The focus of our research is the manner in which managers communicate these kinds of emerging priorities to employees. More specifically, our research addresses the impact that decision framing and priming—in the form of language and mixed messages—have on ethical decision making in teams. The broader purpose of our study is to investigate both types of influences on decision making to determine how and whether they interact to influence team effectiveness in terms of both profitability and stakeholder opinion.

Most business executives must make important decisions without “perfect” information—that is, without access to all the information that might be helpful in making decisions. They also have limited access to time in which to make decisions, since they face deadlines and other constraints. Psychologists have found that people use heuristics, or rules-of-thumb, to aid in decision processes in the face of such imperfect information and limited time.

As humans, we are susceptible to decision framing and priming because of our “hard-wired” heuristics. Framing error occurs when we subconsciously allow temporally distal and generalized messages to have an influence on our decision processes and behaviors regarding a certain task. In contrast, priming is more relevant to the immediate task, and involves the selection of specific words or phrases that convey certain subconscious behavioral cues.

Our research on MBA teams examines whether priming and framing—in terms of stockholder versus stakeholder interests—influence team decision-making processes and outcomes. We also explore whether there are differences in team decision-making processes and outcomes when consistent versus inconsistent messages are considered simultaneously.

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We use a complex simulation that provides detailed information on how teams’ decisions influence both the profit their company is making and the opinions about their company that local stakeholders hold.

The result of our research is a confirmation of the powerful effects of both decision framing and priming. Teams that are framed or primed for a particular perspective (either a profit-driven, stockholder-oriented focus, or a corporate social responsibility, stakeholder-oriented focus) appear to focus their efforts in that direction. Teams that are framed and primed for a stakeholder perspective achieve significantly higher opinion scores when compared to those who did not receive these messages.

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One of our findings is associated with the “mixed message” situation—that is, when a framing message and priming message are inconsistent with one another. Are teams overwhelmed with the mixed messages, resulting in a short-circuit, or are they able to achieve both goals (profit maximization and high stakeholder support)? As it turns out, each perspective becomes salient for the teams, and in most cases, both team profit and opinion score outcomes increase relative to the control condition. The teams appear to be doubly motivated to achieve a healthy profit and to work hard to generate

as much support as possible for the plan. Thus, rather than experiencing confusion and conflict, the teams develop the more difficult objective of balancing dual outcomes, and focus their attention on achieving this stretch goal.

Lastly, our results indicate that the proximity of priming to the actual decision-making task provides even more powerful effects on behavior and outcomes than framing. This is not to say that framing doesn’t matter; indeed, the stakeholder frame in the mixed condition results in a higher opinion score. Rather, priming appears to be the more powerful tool for managers to use in their attempts to focus employee behaviors.

In conclusion, our research shows that proper management of messages can result in an increase in both the financial and social responsibility performance of the firm—the two objectives are not mutually exclusive. It just takes a concerted communication strategy by management.

