

Frame Control 101: Understanding & Controlling Frames

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At the highest level of abstraction, we can [define a frame](#) as:

A frame is a set of beliefs, values, perspectives and personal predispositions with which people filter and interpret the world

That “world interpretation” ranges from general beliefs about life and the meaning of life, to more practical, circumscribed and mundane topics such as whether a real carbonara is with eggs or cream (it’s eggs, BTW :).

Frames also include dreams, goals, personal interests, as well as selfish motives.

The selfish motives can sometimes be in contrast with other people’s own selfish interests. An individual’s frame indeed can include hidden agendas for acquiring power, [manipulating others](#) to do one’s biddings, or, sometimes, simply “throwing one’s weight around” to display dominance.

From this quick introduction, it becomes clear that people’s frames can either differ from one another, or even stand opposite to one another.

And when people with different frames interact with each other, each individual seeks to color the interaction with their own frames.Â

That negotiation of frames is often referred to as “frame control”.

Personally I’m not a big fan of the name “frame control” because it predisposes people to a combative stance whether it’s either you prevail, or you lose (win-lose).

Well, don’t get me wrong: sometimes you need exactly that type of attitude. But, usually, you are usually better served by seeking to align interests rather than fighting them.

So from now on whenever I say “frame control”, know that I am referring to a higher-level view of power and influence which includes persuasion, negotiation, and interest-alignment.

So, from a social power perspective, we can define frame control and frame negotiation as:

The body of skills and attitudes with which people navigate social interactions and influence others.

Was this intro too complex?

Don’t worry, it’s far easier to understand frames with examples, than with definitions.

And you will see plenty of examples here and in “[frame control techniques](#)” (and even more in “[Social Power](#)“).

But first, let’s start with the basics with which you can understand and analyze frames.

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Up, Down, or Across

The “up”, “down” and “across” is a system I first saw used by Kathleen Kelley Reardon, professor of management at the University of Southern California.

I read it first in her book “[The Secret Handshake](#)“, and I loved both its simplicity and its explanatory power.

So instead of reinventing the wheel or, worse, changing names so that I could brand it as mine, I borrow her system exactly as it is, together with a few examples from her, and expand on it ([there is much in giving credit](#), anyway).

This is what “up”, “down”, and “across” mean:

- **One-up** (↑□□): taking control, and generally acquiring power
- **One-down** (↓□□): giving control, and generally losing power
- **One-across** (↔□□): neutral, not taking or losing either control or power

This is a simplified system, of course, but it’s a useful one nonetheless.

The up and down can vary in intensity, power, as well as efficacy. And the “one-across” can sometimes be up to interpretation, being potentially close to a one-up or to a one-down.

Also, keep in mind that in power dynamics one-ups are not the same as personal attacks or ultimate power acquisition.Â Â

There is a certain overlap between the three of them of course, but one might ultimately lose power with one-ups. Or one might acquire power at your detriment while also being respectful. He might, for example, respectfully prove you wrong. When he does that, his authority -and power- increases, while your authority -and power- diminishes.

That’s why in this article we will also talk about the strategic use of one-crosses as tools to acquire power.

Example of Up / Down

Laura arrives in the morning at her workplace.

This dialogue takes place:

Matt: (loud, with sarcastic tone) Well, well, well ↑□! Look at who↑□□s on time for a change. (↑□□)

Laura: (apologetically) Iâ□□m rarely late (↓□□)

Matt: Oh-ho! Weâ□□re feeling defensive as well! (↔□□)

Laura: (looking downwards, lower tone of voice) Not really (↓□□)

Matt: Sorry, Laura, but it sure seems that way to me (↔□□)

Matt has gone one the offensive with two one-ups in a row, and Laura answered with two one-downs in a row.

Notice that Laura’s statement “not really”, if taken at face value, would be a power-up statement. But it’s

the nonverbal and the context that makes it a power-down.

And by that point of the interaction, Laura was so down in power that she needed a much stronger come back to rebalance the power dynamics.

Looking at the whole interaction, Laura is being very submissive.

Matt is socially dominating, and since he smelled weakness, he ends up with another one-up.

Yes, in the end, Matt *does* come across like an asshole.

But that's of no consolation to Laura, because she comes across as too easy to be bullied around.

Laura will never [advance in her career](#) with that attitude -and she will struggle to reach her full potential in life, in general-.

One-Upping Back

Here is the same conversation if Laura had been more aware of power dynamics:

Matt: (loud, with sarcastic tone) Well, well, well â□! Look at whoâ□□s on time for a change. (â□□)

Laura: (looking at the other people around) Good morning folks (â□□). And hello Matt, being your usual friendly self, I see (â□□)

Laura first ignores Matt, which is a great move.Â

Then she is warm to other people around, showing that she does not let a nasty player drag her into nastiness. That's emotionally strong and leader-like behavior.

Finally, she sends a small one-up back towards Matt.

Depending on the relationship and environment in the team, Laura might have even said: "being your usual pain the ass, I see".

Both options frame Matt as a slight nuisance, instead of someone who has to be taken seriously.

If Laura had a witty come back on the ready, she might have used it for a more direct one-up:

Matt: (loud, with sarcastic tone) Well, well, well â□! Look at whoâ□□s on time for a change. (â□□)

Laura: Woow, Mark, that truly was a deadly cut, you must have been up all night practicing that (â□□)

This one is higher in intensity compared to the previous one because it challenges Matt directly and right back, and uses the same sarcastic frame against him.

Now Laura might get a laugh back.

If not from Matt, it's likely she'll get at least some smiles from the people around.

It's also possible Matt might try another one-up. But at that point, what happens next matters comparatively less. Laura has accomplished her main objective and made her point very well: she's no pushover.

One-Crossing: If It's The Boss

If Matt is Laura's boss, then things are different, of course.

[To keep an effective relationship with the boss](#), Laura is well-advised to avoid one-ups.

As a rule of thumb, you don't want to get in a race of one-ups with people who have power over you and with people who *need* to have power over you.

The two are not the same.

A boss at work *needs* to have his reports show some deference or he will lose his effectiveness. When you one-up your boss you are challenging not only him as a person, but also his ability to get things done within the team.

Not only that's a [political mistake](#), but it's also a sign of being a bad team-player. A good team player must know when it's time to defer.

So this is a situation where you drop the one-up and go for one-crosses.

Laura must consider whether or not she's often late. If she is, she can drop the sarcasm and go serious with something like this:

Matt: (loud, with sarcastic tone) Well, well, well â€¦! Look at whoâ€¦s on time for a change. (â€¦)

Laura: Good morning Matt! Yeah, usually I come up late and stay longer as I'm more efficient that way (â€¦) (she takes some power back by defending her track record as a good worker) Do you want me to come earlier? (â€¦)

Notice that the one-cross must not necessarily be a sequence of one-crosses.

A cross can be the net effect of mixing a one-up with a one-down, as in this case.

The final question is on the submissive end and gives full power back to his boss.

The serious tone of Laura's reply also shows she has the strength of breaking free of the sarcastic frame without retreating or apologizing. That's good.

And she still re-empowers her boss in the end. Simple, effective, and respectful.

At that point, the boss can either say "no, it's OK, I was just kidding", or he can express that indeed he prefers his people to come early.

Frame Example

Let's see another example running the one-up, one-down analysis.

This is an excerpt of a conversation I've had a few hours ago.

I sat next to her on a bench while she was smoking and using her phone. I was carrying much of the initial conversation when she said:

Her: I'm talking to my boss now, can you wait (â€¦)

Her frame is one-upping because she asks me to wait (command), takes the lead of the interaction, and puts me in the lower priority bucket.

She was also texting, not talking. So if I complied to her request, I'd end up way too low on power to still have any respect from her.

So:

Me: It's OK, no need to wait, give me your number, I'll call you later when you're not talking to your boss (puts phone out, waits for her) (â€¦)

Notice that one-ups don't have to be angry or confrontational. This one is assertive-collaborative, seeking an arrangement that can work for both.

Her: (looking at the phone) Just like that? (lowering her voice, almost muttering) You can't get a number like that (â€¦)

Another important concept of frames here: you judge frames on *both* verbals and nonverbals.

This was a *tentative* one-up from her.

Verbally, she is communicating that she wants me to invest more in the interaction, and [wait around](#) while she chats with her boss.

Her frame is that you can't get a number with so little [talking an bonding](#). My frame is that you can. Her frame is that number an important step. My frame is that the number is meaningless, just a first small step.

Her frame was a token one-up.

As we mentioned earlier, frames vary in strength.Â

You can have a one-up backed by the full power of total conviction, and **you can have a tentative one-up that is just a masked one-down ready to give-in.**

This was a case of one-up by word, but a one-down by deed. Her body language and voice tonality communicated that she was already teetering on the verge ofÂ acceptance and only needed one slight last push delivered from a stronger frame.

So I just kept my phone out for her to type it in:

Me: Yeah, just like that (â□□)

After that, I rebuilt some goodwill with some more chit-chat (magically she didn't have to chat with her boss anymore :). Remember that dominance without warmth can easily make bad blood.

But notice that if she had been adamant about *not* giving her number so soon, I might have changed strategy. And instead of going one-up and trying to stick to my frame and potentially sour the interaction, I might have one-crossed and rebuilt some goodwill.

For example, I might have said:

Me negotiating frame: OK, let's make a deal, you stop talking to your boss and talk to me instead. And if we like each other, maybe then we can schedule something". (â□□)

That's a good one-cross and a good example of frame-negotiation.

Also read:

- [Leadership in dating](#)
- [Dominance in dating](#)

One-Uppings: Overview

One-uppings can take different forms, including scoldings, humiliations, criticism, jokes, or sarcasm.

Most one-uppings in normal life will use sarcasm, jokes, and innuendos.

The examples above all use more indirect forms of one-upping.

But sometimes one-uppings can also be direct and violent, either verbally or physically. When that's the case, yelling and anger are often part of the mix.

When you see high-intensity one-upping being answered with high-intensity one-upping, you are witnessing a verbal fight, and there is the risk for a potential escalation towards a physical fight as well.

But in most normal and polite conversations you will have few and mild forms of one-upping.

Good close relationships are also characterized by very few one-upping.

On the other hand, **when you see lots of one-upping in close relationships, that's a strong sign of a dysfunctional relationship.** We will see several examples in the module on relationships.

One-upmanship Awareness

When one-ups are direct and aggressive, it's easy to spot them.

But it's [when they are more hidden](#) that people often miss them. That way, they leave power on the table, and they fail to advance to the social and organizational level that they truly deserve.

Getting good at seeing and handling one-ups means getting good at power dynamics.

With this website, you are learning to see the dynamics of one-upping.

One-Crossing

Most normal conversations are chains of one-crosses.

And much of your life will be a chain of one-crosses. Good conversation are also mostly one-crosses.

But that doesn't mean that nothing power-relevant happens with one-crosses.

Quite the opposite...

Strategic One-Crossing

To begin with, don't think that one-up must always be answered with one-upping.

Yes, sometimes you want to meet fire with fire.

But many other times ignoring that fire is the most powerful thing you can do.

Strategic crosses are the true power tools of the advanced players.

One-Crossing to Win the Frame

Sometimes "one-crosses" are the best way to negotiate or outright control and win the frame.

One-crosses are especially good in all those environments where "taking the high" road awards you point.

Those environments include political debates, workplaces, and, in general, most adult conversations.

Let's see an example of using one-crosses to control the frame.

Imagine you're at a meeting, presenting an idea, and, mid-way as you speak, someone blurts out:

Joe: This is nonsense, total BS (â□□)

If you answer that with a one-up of your own, you risk getting dragged into an escalation. Someone will have to intervene to calm you both of you. That someone becomes playing peacemaker becomes the leader, and your idea will sink as together with your status and personal power.

This is the time when one-crossing allows you to win the frame:

You: Let's not be hasty. Bear with me while I explain how this works (â□□)

Very simple, without overcomplicating it.

You just ignore the insult and move forward.

If you want to ignore the insult even more strongly, avoid looking at Joe. This is the type of one-crossing that actually ends up being a true one-upping. You show Joe for being out of place without even addressing him.

One-crossing against one-upping is the framing equivalent of concealed carry calmness. Or the equivalent

of the trained fighter ignoring the drunk bully at the bar.

Says Kelley Reardon:

To become and remain effective in day-to-day conversational politics, this ability to redirect conversations is crucial. **The politically adept are rarely pulled into dysfunctional conversation patterns.**

They manage conversations the way an expert chess player manages the moves and gambits of the game.

Albeit Kathleen focuses on workplace frames, the same can be said of most normal life conversations.

One-Crossing To Buy Time

One-crosses can also be wonderful tools to buy some time.

Why would you want to buy time?

Well, it so happens in life that sometimes a frame will hit you and envelop you and you didn't even see it coming.

Imagine a colleague walks up to you with a paper in his hand and proclaims loudly:Â

Joe: This is your fault

He seems aggressive and finger-pointing. But you have no idea what he's talking about.

How are you going to handle that?

One-upping options:

You: No, it's *your* fault (â□□)

You: Don't talk to me with that attitude (â□□)

You: I don't think fault it is is the main concern, Joe, I'm a guy who focuses on solutions (one-upping the professional way) (â□□)

The problem with these answers is that you're not yet sure what happened.

You might have really fucked something up, and if you focus on attacking back, you look overly concerned about defending status than getting stuff done.

And you know that's a no-no in the workplace.

The second issue with one-upping back is that you're *reacting* instead of *responding*.

And if turns out that you made a big mistake, it will be far easier for them to win that escalation.

Says again Kelley Reardon:

It was my first lesson in what Iâ□□ve learned is a key political axiom: **You canâ□□t play in the big leagues if you let them look good at your expense. The easiest way to get snookered into such a position is to react rather than respond.** Donâ□□t allow yourself to be pulled into an attack, as a spider pulls prey into its web.

One-crosses require stronger emotional control, which is why they also make you look good.Â

If deployed well, one-crosses can ultimately allow you more room for maneuver to control the frame.

Also notice that one-crosses do not necessarily take "one-ups" off the table.Â

Because you still reserve yourself the option to go one-up or to demand a more polite tone *after* you found out what's happened.

After you clarify with Joe for example that it really “wasn’t your fault”, you might add “oh, and by the way Joe, I appreciate a more respectful tone when you talk to me”.

One-crossing options:

You: I don’t know about that, might even be, tell me what happened (â□□)

You: Interesting you see it that way, but I’m not sure what you’re talking about (â□□)

You: Let’s keep our cool, Joe (â□□) (one-upping the professional way). What happened here (â□□)

Without being weak, you send the ball back in Joe’s court to understand what’s happened.

One-Crossing To Gather Precious Intel About People

Once you will reach the relationship module you will see that I advise on remaining calm during your first relationship arguments.

This is not because remaining calm is the only best alternative.

It’s because when you focus on winning the frame you might win it too easily, and never get to know your partner.

In the article on “[how to handle break-up threats](#)” we advice that the best way to react to the first break-up threat is not to escalate it, but to understand if your partner is unstable, a game-player, or if she simply needs that commitment and you’re stumbling onto a hot-button for her.

See here how it works:

Partner: look ,if you are not able to commit, (raises voice) then it’s over (â□□)

If you escalate with a one-up of your own, you will never get to know what’s really going on in your partner’s head.

And a one-down answer such as “please, wait, I never said I’m against commitment” will work against twice as badly.

Instead, you want to get more information at this point:

You: (that sounds mean), why would you say that (â□□)

The one-cross throws the ball back in her court, and gives you more information about where you stand in the relationship -and about her moral compass-.

Use This Structure to Start Out

As you cut your teeth in social and power dynamics, this simple system of up/down/neutral is a great tool.

It provides you with a reliable tool to quickly analyze your social interactions.

And it empowers you with a simple “threat detection system”. Whenever you see a “one-up” move, you know that you need to be aware and that you might have to don your power moves helmet.

Then Add One-Layer

The beauty of this system is its simplicity.

And its drawback, is its simplicity.

So as you start understanding the basic dynamics, you want to add some more complexity to your analysis.

The first layer you want to make room for, is win-win.

We already discussed these layers actually: they are the win-win of:

- [fundamental laws of power](#)

and:

- “[mixing power with warmth](#)“

So it's just a matter of understanding how they fit into frames.

The Win-Lose “Me-Ups” VS Win-Win “We-Ups”

So far we didn't differentiate crosses between “uplifting crosses” and “neutral crosses”.

Such as, there can be no win-wins in a system with only neutral crosses.

The power-warmth approach that we saw earlier instead is designed to move you from a neutral system to one where more players can win simultaneously.

So in this slightly more complex system, we could call the one-ups “me-up / you down”, because they selfishly pull the attacker up while pushing others down.

And we could call the more uplifting crosses, “me up / you up”, since they pull both people up. The sender is pulled up for showing his magnanimity and kindness, and the receiver, for being pulled up by the sender.

Uplifting crosses of “me up / you up” is how positively [high-quality men](#) and [high-quality women](#) go around life. By pulling others up to their level -while also knowing how to deal with the many “me up / you down” individuals that populate this world-.

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