

Using the Action Framework

Do No Harm Issue Paper October 2010

For the initial discussion of the Action Framework, please see the DNH Issue Paper "[Do No Harm: Additional Model of the Framework.](http://www.cdainc.com/cdawww/pdf/issue/dnh_framework_paper_Pdf.pdf)" http://www.cdainc.com/cdawww/pdf/issue/dnh_framework_paper_Pdf.pdf.

This paper assumes familiarity with Do No Harm and the elements of the Frameworks.

The Action Framework was developed in response to a list of concerns with the Relationship Framework¹. One of those concerns was that the Relationship Framework was "difficult" to use. We asked practitioners what they meant by "difficult" and how they made use of Do No Harm in actual practice. The result is the Action Framework, a model of how the very best Do No Harm practitioners think and act in a conflict sensitive way.

Now that we have had an opportunity to discuss both frameworks side-by-side with practitioners and see them in action with one another, we have learned a few more things about each framework, and how they can work together.²

Complementary

The two Frameworks turn out to be wonderfully complementary. It also turns out that the DNH community has named them well.

The Relationship Framework is better than the Action Framework at showing how all the elements of the relationship between assistance and conflict fit together. It is a better tool for teaching and understanding the concepts.

The Action Framework is better for using the concepts. It is a better tool for putting the ideas into practice quickly and easily, which is precisely where the Relationship Framework has been called difficult; the Action Framework seems to get people over the barrier of use more easily.

Building Better Analysts

The Action Framework also builds better analysts than the Relationship Framework—and it builds them more quickly.

How does the Action Framework do this? The answer is surprisingly simple: *People spend more time using it.*

The iterative nature of the loop in the Action Framework encourages people to go through the cycle *more often*. The Relationship Framework seems to encourage set workshop times for the analysis (six months is a common interval), while the Action Framework encourages weekly or even daily use.

¹ The classic "Do No Harm Framework" is now called the Do No Harm Relationship Framework.

² For more information on the two frameworks, please see the short video training modules on the [Relationship](http://donoharmproject.wordpress.com) and [Action](http://donoharmproject.wordpress.com) Frameworks, available on the DNH Blog <http://donoharmproject.wordpress.com>.

When people go through the analysis more often, they get quicker and better feedback on their analysis.

The Action Framework is structured to develop a deeper understanding of Dividers/Connectors *and* the impacts projects are having on them.

The Action Framework “starts” with a list of Dividers and Connectors, moving into how they have changed (“Worse or Better”). The process of checking change over time forces users to be specific about *how they know* the change has happened. If you don’t have an “indicator”—an indication of change—then you don’t know if change has happened. In order to get an indicator (or set of indicators), you have to think seriously about the list of D/Cs.

People in a context can tell when things have changed.

This half of the Action Framework, moving from a list of D/Cs to “change over time”, is about developing an understanding of a constantly changing context. It is the process whereby users are first engaged in doing analysis. Making a list of key factors and tracking how they change is an analysis of the context.

The other half of the Framework is about designing and implementing based on the understanding of the changing context. In other words, the loop of the Action Framework strongly encourages that Options and Opportunities be developed based on the context analysis (while this seems obvious, it is not unusual to find Options being developed—and implemented—that are not based on a context analysis). These Options are put into Action, the fourth and final step in the loop.

Using these four steps, the user gets *immediate feedback* on their analysis. Having gone completely through the Action Framework, the user has done a context analysis of D/Cs (Step 1) and their changes (Step 2), then redesigned the project to take changing circumstances into account (Step 3), and implemented those changes (Step 4).

Because the process is a loop, the user then starts the cycle anew by reviewing the list of D/Cs.

At this point, the user begins to get feedback from their implemented changes.

If the user has redesigned a project but still sees negative impacts (because D/Cs are getting worse; Steps 1 and 2), then there are only two things that could be wrong: either the context analysis is wrong or the design was wrong.

The problem is easily diagnosed through the ABCs (RTs and IEMs)!³

Did the design (Step 3) take into account and make use of the ABCs? If not, develop a design that makes use of the ABCs. If a project design or redesign does not take into account the patterns identified in the ABCs, then the patterns will continue to repeat. A project design or redesign must use the ABCs in order to have a positive impact.

³ Resource Transfers and Implicit Ethical Messages are being brought under a new acronym: the ABCs of assistance. “ABC” stands for Actions and Behaviors have Consequences, or Actions + Behaviors = Consequences. There is a brief paper forthcoming on this reframing. Look for it in the Winter 2011 Newsletter.

If the design did use the ABCs, re-evaluate the list of D/Cs (Step 1) to make sure the list is complete or focused on the most important factors. Is the original list still relevant? What other D/Cs are there to consider now? Should we reprioritize the list?

The Action Framework and Learning Analytical Skills

The Action Framework is about learning. If a user takes it seriously, they *cannot help learning*—and learning means more depth and subtlety and understanding. And, ultimately, better practice.

In a way, the Action Framework tricks people into doing more and better analysis over time. The Relationship Framework inhibits this learning because it insists on an elaborate and overly formal process that scares people away from frequent analysis.

Immediate feedback increases the ability to learn. Putting off the next analysis for three months or six months until the next workshop can be arranged reduces the opportunity for feedback and consequently reduces opportunities to really learn Do No Harm.

Objections

Some people have objected that the Action Framework does not lead to the same depth of analysis that the Relationship Framework does. This actually seems to be true *in the initial period of use*. In other words, a team which uses the Relationship Framework on a regular basis, based upon a full Dividers/Connectors analysis, with regular updates and team discussion can get more depth in their analysis in the first few months of use than can people or teams in their first few months using the Action Framework.

After a few months, however, the depth of analysis evens out.

However, the ability (time and dedication, mostly) to do the analysis required for the Relationship Framework just does not exist for most development or humanitarian workers. When people tell us that the Relationship Framework is “difficult to use”, they mean that it takes a lot of time to do a full run through the Framework’s analysis. If they don’t have time to use it fully, they tend to not use it all!

The Action Framework, by contrast, can be used much more quickly and can be done effectively by individuals. (We do recommend that teams be part of the process! Everybody gets better if teams do analysis and debriefing together. But you do not need a team to do your daily or weekly analysis.)

Finally, more depth of analysis doesn’t equal better action. In other words, the “better” analysis from the Relationship Framework does not make you less likely to do harm than the quicker analysis from the Action Framework. Depth past a certain point does not lead to better action.

The Action Framework in Action

Do No Harm now uses both Frameworks. The Relationship Framework teaches the concepts and the Action Framework puts those concepts to work. We are developing new training tools to build upon and distribute our current understanding. We welcome your feedback in this constant process of doing our work more effectively! To keep up to date on our current learnings and activities, and to give us your feedback, please check out the DNH Blog <http://donoharmproject.wordpress.com>.