Brilliant but blurred
Joel is Chief of Staff at a major metropolitan hospital. His feedback report revealed that, while people were very fond of him, sometimes they couldn’t follow what he was talking about. I’d experienced this myself; I’d often had to ask if he’d changed topics.

It’s not that Joel wasn’t smart. Quite the contrary. Joel was brilliant. I just couldn’t always follow his train of thought. And, it seemed, others were having the same problem.

So we discussed a tool I call frameworks. Frameworks are signposts you drop into place to tell your listeners where you’re headed.

I gave him an example I knew he’d understand. We’d discovered that we both enjoy a podcast called Radiolab and, I told him, they use frameworks all the time.

A lesson from masters
Radiolab delights in telling stories about the world around us in a style that plays with sound the way painters play with color. They know that when they make a leap in their stories, they have to tell us listeners where they’re going if we’re to have any chance of following along.

And, of course, part of the fun of each podcast is exactly that: following along with hosts Jad Abumrad and Robert Krulwich on a stimulating journey with lots of fun twists and turns.

Joel thought he knew exactly what I meant. “I think I heard a great one this weekend,” he said. “At the very beginning of this one section, a guy’s voice comes on and very slowly asks this big, important question. Then Jad cuts in and says something like, ‘That was Dr. Jones at Such-and-Such Laboratories. Remember him because we’re going to come back to him. But first, we have to jump about a hundred years earlier to Spain, where someone was already asking that same question.’ That’s a framework, right? He made this big jump but he told me exactly where he was going.”
Frameworks in real time
That snippet from Radiolab is indeed a perfect example of a framework. But it’s rather elaborate. I doubt you’d ever hear anything like that in actual conversation. Frameworks are usually quite short and simple. Here are four samples of frameworks I’ve heard leaders use recently:

“We touched on something earlier that I’d like to go back to.”

“Let me think out loud for a minute.”

“I’ve heard three different ideas so far. I’d like to add a fourth.”

“I have a question that may seem unrelated.”

Joel said he understood but then expressed a different concern.

“Radiolab is edited like crazy,” he said. “But when I’m running a meeting, or talking to you, I’m communicating in real time. What do I do about that?”

“Pay attention to what you’re saying!” I said and we both laughed.

All joking aside, knowing what’s about to come out of your mouth is essential if you’re going to use frameworks. And that was a struggle for a client named Paige.

“What am I about to say?”
Paige had an Ivy League pedigree and, professionally, was in a hurry. Before she was 35, she was an officer of the company and managed one of its biggest business units. But she had a reputation for blurting what she was thinking. In her junior roles, people had tolerated that behavior. Now, in her executive position, blurting her ideas had potentially serious consequences. It was important that she stop.

During high school, Paige had been the smartest kid in the room. But at college, and then in her MBA program, she was surrounded by people who were just as smart as she was. So she decided she was going to be not only smart, but smart and fast.
But, over time, her speed had become an overused strength; it led to her blurting her thoughts which was getting her into trouble.

“I don’t know if I can slow down my thoughts, Tom,” she said. “I think the way I think!”

“I agree,” I replied. “I don’t think it’d be helpful to try to slow down your thinking—just your speaking.”

I suggested she could allow all her thoughts to fire away just as they normally did. Then, before speaking, ask herself what she was about to say. After a quick assessment of her upcoming thoughts, speak the assessment first; tell people what she was about to say.

“You think so fast, Paige, it’s not as if you’re going to go silent for long.”

“No,” she said, agreeing with a smile, “I just have to remember to do it! I’m not used to thinking about what I’m going to say.”

Then, because I wanted her to hear what frameworks actually sound like, I gave her three examples that were different from the ones I’d given Joel:

“Stick with me—this is a whole series of thoughts linked together.”

“I have one comment, then one question.”

“I’d like to pursue Becky’s idea a little further.”

I hope you notice that all these examples are quite different—but each one tells me what’s coming next.

Frameworks add gravitas

After Paige had been trying to implement frameworks for a while, she made an interesting observation. “I always thought most executives were pretty stiff. I used to wonder why they weren’t more gung-ho about the work.

“What I’m seeing now is that being an executive means thinking at a whole other level. As an executive, if I’m bounding around with all my enthusiasm, saying whatever comes to mind, I could do some serious damage. Trying to insert frameworks has slowed me down. I think it’s better for the business.”
“And it’s better for you, Paige,” I added. “When you slow down, you often sound more senior. It’s hard to have gravitas when you’re blurring the first thing on your mind or when people can’t follow what you’re talking about.”


She went on. “But now, instead of applying that adage to a speech I’ve prepared, I’m applying it to what’s coming out of my mouth!” I agreed again.

Frameworks in writing
Frameworks enhance your communication in any medium. Joel began to observe that one board member used frameworks in her emails. She would often have a short, single line of text saying something like, “Here’s a different topic.” Because her single line stood alone, floating in the middle of white space, it stood out clearly—like a signpost. I wasn’t surprised when he said he thought this woman was a particularly good communicator.

He also noticed that I often send emails with subject lines like, “Three things from Henschel.” Then in the body of the email, I use a number at the start of each item. Those numbers become their own frameworks.

Are you aware that you just read a framework? The words in bold-face type above, “Frameworks in writing,” are themselves a framework.

(If you go to the free archive of Executive Coaches Tips, you’ll see that I didn’t always use frameworks. They didn’t appear until mid-2008, when professional writer Nancy Breuer joined my group of editors. Her very first suggestion was to insert frameworks, which she called “internal headlines.” The benefits of bold visual signposts were instantly apparent. I’ve used them ever since. They help, don’t they?)

Once you start looking for them, frameworks are all around you. People who use them make their mark as strong communicators. Start noticing frameworks. Then start using them. Whether you’re writing or speaking, telling people what’s coming next is a crisp display of The Look & Sound of Leadership™.
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