ENGINEERING

# FRAMING THE FINDINGS

## CASELET

Lena had been with North River Engineering for just under a year when she was assigned to the Maple Ridge development project. The firm had been hired to prepare the environmental impact assessment for a proposed mixed-use complex that promised jobs, new housing, and a long-awaited grocery store for the neighborhood. Lena went into environmental engineering because she cared about public good, and this felt like meaningful work.

Over several weeks, she and her small team modeled stormwater runoff, assessed habitat impacts, and reviewed changes to traffic patterns. The results were clear, if not dramatic. The project would increase runoff into a nearby creek, stress existing drainage systems, and gradually reduce water quality. Local wildlife wouldn't disappear overnight, but migration corridors would be cut-off in some areas, and some species would slowly be pushed out. None of this was catastrophic, but it also wasn't nothing.

Lena worked with her team to prepare a draft of these findings. In the next client meeting, as Lena was presenting the report, one of the client representatives interrupted. "These results are…challenging," he said carefully. "Can we soften this a bit? I'm not saying to lie, but language is important. If regulators see words like 'harm' and 'degradation,' we're facing delays that will cost millions. Can we phrase this as something like 'manageable impacts' or 'minimal anticipated change'? Maybe start by emphasizing the mitigation strategies and keep the risk discussion brief?"

Lena was somewhat shaken by this comment, but she had encountered all sorts of client requests over the years. Although she had to admit, this one made her a little uncomfortable. She moved on and finished the presentation, but later her project manager echoed the point more bluntly: "We're not lying. We're framing. Our job is to be accurate, but also reasonable partners to our clients. Besides, the economic benefits here are huge."

Lena was beginning to feel unsure about herself, but she decided, at least as an exercise, to revise a draft of the report along the lines of the client's request. When she finished, she re-read the proposed new version. All of the data was still present and accurate. She had changed no numbers. But the overall impression from the report would become far gentler. The risks were minimized, the uncertainties highlighted, and the benefits foregrounded. A casual reader, or a busy regulator, might walk away believing the ecological consequences were trivial.

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She sat for a moment, feeling a tension in her chest. These two reports told noticeably different stories. She wondered how much responsibility belonged to the person who chose which truths to spotlight and which to tuck into footnotes. The project promised things people in the area genuinely wanted; the costs were quieter, slower, harder to see. The deadline for revisions was tomorrow morning. Lena closed the report, then opened it again, aware that whatever she decided would not feel simple.

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