

UNLIMITED POTENTIAL

Volume VII, No. 7

Newsletter

The Language of Leadership: Inspiring Change

“Human communication has its own set of very unusual and counterintuitive rules.” – Malcolm Gladwell

What does it take to transmit bold new ideas to people who don't want to hear them? How does the language you use facilitate enthusiastic, energetic implementation?

Effective language involves more than short-term motivation and inspiration. It must be transformational.

Transformational leaders:

- Generate enduring enthusiasm for a common cause
- Present innovative solutions to solve significant problems
- Catalyze shifts in people's values and ideologies
- Demonstrate a willingness to sacrifice personal interests for the greater good
- Help others get through crisis moments
- Inspire people to want to change, creating a positive energy that sustains the change
- Generate followers who will ultimately become leaders

The *what* of transformational leadership is reasonably clear. It's the *how* that's usually obscure.

- How exactly do leaders communicate complex ideas and spark others into enduringly enthusiastic action?
- What words do they use to inspire others to become new leaders?
- Why are some leaders able to accomplish the feat while others fail miserably?

Stephen Denning, a senior scholar at the University of Maryland's Burns Academy of Leadership, makes the case for transformational communications in his book *The Secret Language of Leadership* (Jossey-Bass, 2007). He provides real stories of how successful leaders communicate to motivate people into action.



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More than anything, it's what leaders say – and the way they say it – that generates sustained energy and exponential results.

How to Lead Change

There's no lack of proposed concepts to answer this question. Many experts proclaim that leadership is solely an issue of inner conviction: You must find the leader deep within yourself.

Other experts encourage you to:

- Become the person others will want to follow
- Discover your strengths
- Increase your self-awareness, self-regulation and authenticity
- Become emotionally and socially intelligent
- Visualize to materialize
- Be true to yourself, and change will happen

In reality, sustained, enthusiastic change doesn't occur by osmosis or extrasensory perception. Charisma goes only so far. If leaders' own inner commitment to change is to have any effect at all, they must communicate it to those they aspire to lead – and do so extraordinarily well.

Leaders' actions speak louder than their words, but in the short run, it's what leaders say – or don't say – that has an impact.

The right words can create:

- A galvanizing effect
- Enthusiasm
- Energy
- Momentum
- Sustainable motivation

The wrong words, or even words said in the wrong sequence, can undermine your best intentions and plans, killing an initiative on the spot.

Old-School Communication

The traditional communication approach follows this sequence:

Define the problem • Analyze it • Recommend a solution

This approach appeals to reason and has been a revered intellectual tradition in organizations since the ancient Greeks. It works well when the aim is to pass on information to people who want to hear it, or who are obliged to comply and follow without question.

But if your aim is to get people to change their behavior and act in some fundamentally new ways with sustained energy and enthusiasm, old-school communication has two flaws:

1. It doesn't work.
2. It often makes the situation worse (negative impact).

People who disagree with you or have other ideas and habits won't respond well to your list of reasons to change. In fact, lecturing them on your beliefs will often lead to greater entrenchment in their long-held approaches and behaviors.

Confirmation Biases

A significant body of research shows that asking people to change often drives them more deeply into opposition. In study after study, people display a phenomenon called *confirmation bias*, first noted by Francis Bacon almost 400 years ago. As he noted, "The human understanding when it has once adopted an opinion ... draws all things else to support and agree with it."

Confirmation bias is a tendency to search for or interpret new information in a way that confirms one's preconceptions and to irrationally avoid information and interpretations that contradict existing beliefs. We listen attentively for information and messages that confirm our own thinking – and upon hearing them, we feel rewarded and validated.

If the communication varies from what we know or believe, we dismiss the message as being irrelevant or wrong. We become skeptical about the source. All of this happens instantaneously in the part of the brain that's responsible for emotional reactions – not in the areas that handle logic and reasoning.

This explains why traditional persuasion techniques fail, especially when delivered too early in a presentation. You risk speaking to a skeptical, cynical or hostile audience whose confirmation bias has been activated.

At this point, your reasons for change will be reinterpreted as reasons not to change. Even worse, skepticism and cynicism are contagious.

The Devil in the Details: Words Matter

While it would be nice to imagine that a logical, rational presentation of facts can't do any harm, especially when dealing with a group of intelligent people, doing so sets you up for failure.

If you want people to organize their thinking in new ways and be receptive to new ideas, be wary of falling into the trap of hitting them with logic at the outset of any presentation that challenges their ideas.

The tiniest details can make or break communication:

- Choice of words
- Patterns they form
- The order in which patterns are deployed

Successful leaders follow a unique, almost hidden pattern:

- **Grab the audience's attention ...**
 - **Stimulate desire ...**
 - **Reinforce with reasons**

When language follows this sequence, it can inspire enduring enthusiasm for a cause and spark action.

Moreover, successful leaders don't rely on a single communication. As implementation proceeds, they reinforce communication and work with their people to co-create the future by continuing the conversation.

In addition to words, the language of leadership is most effective when you:

1. Can share intelligent stories and narratives
2. Display appropriate, congruent body language
3. Demonstrate an understanding of the audience's story and context

3 Steps for Inspiring Change

Three steps enable the language of leadership to be most effective.

Step 1: Grab the Audience's Attention

People aren't necessarily listening when we speak. They are mentally responding to emails, preparing for their next meeting and thinking about other things, especially personal issues. The first step in communication is getting their focused attention.

In an experiment with 60 executives, researchers found the most important factors in grabbing their attention were:

1. A personalized message
2. Evoking an emotional response
3. A trustworthy source
4. Concise language

In fact, personalized messages that evoked emotion were more than twice as likely to resonate with the group.

Social scientists have shown that negative messages are more attention-getting than positive ones. To get an audience's attention, share:

- Stories about the audience's problems (*"These problems are serious..."*)
- Stories about the problems' likely trajectory

(*"These problems are getting worse..."*)

- A relevant story about how you dealt with adversity (particularly if you're new to the audience)
- A surprising question or challenge that will interest the audience

Negative stories often work best because they wake us up, activating the primitive part of the brain (fight or flight). The audience may experience anxiety or caution, however, these are feelings that can deter enthusiastic action. More is needed...

Step 2: Creating Desire

On the other hand, positive stories are extremely important for creating a desire to change and sparking people's imaginations. If you want your team to do something different, present stories and clear examples of how successful innovators are making a difference.

Appeal to both heart and mind to gain an enthusiastic buy-in. Your audience must want to change.

Effective leaders establish an emotional connection and stimulate a desire for a different future. Without this emotional connection, nothing happens. Because decisions are made emotionally and almost instantly, without really activating the brain's logic center, stimulating desire is critical.

The task isn't to impose your will on an audience; it's to enable participants to see the possibilities and come to their own conclusions, based on the evidence presented in your positive stories. These stories allow audience members to see the world for themselves, view their relationships in a new way and make progress in implementing organizational goals.

The idea of using stories certainly isn't new. But the kinds of stories that are effective for leaders are different – not big and dramatic, relayed through a bullhorn. Change often hinges on simple, unpretentious and authentic stories. Practice telling positive, minimalist stories that reveal how successful changes have occurred. This approach connects you and your audience on an emotional level, leading to action and a willingness to imagine a new future.

Unfortunately, this approach often eludes aspiring leaders. If you want listeners to own the change idea, your stories must help them discover the truth for themselves, thereby creating a new story.

What the leader says is the scaffolding – a catalyst for a creative process inside listeners' heads.

Step 3: Reinforcing with Reasons

While establishing an emotional connection is vital, reasoning remains relevant. The desire for change will wane unless it's supported and reinforced by compelling reasons.

When we encounter strange new ideas, we can easily fall into a confirmation bias and search for reasons to preserve our existing viewpoint. But if we have an emotional connection with a leader and decide to explore change, then we are open and more willing to explore new elements.

Reasons reinforce emotional connections, so ideas for change should be presented at the end of your presentation.

Remember to share the story of:

- *What* the change is, as seen through the eyes of those who will be affected by it
- *How* the change will be implemented, with a delineation of the simple steps for getting from “here” to “there”
- *Why* the change will work, with an explanation of the underlying mechanisms that make change virtually inevitable

Without a desire for change, people will have no energy or enthusiasm. Desire drives the change process.

Instead of relying on pure reason, facts and figures, tell stories that pack an emotional punch. They will cement into place the reasons for change and make them memorable.

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