



The New Language of Leadership: Purpose, Presence, and Commitment

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"As I considered the importance of language and how human beings interact with the world, it struck me that in many ways the development of language was like the discovery of fire—it was such an incredible primordial force. I had always thought that we used language to describe the world—now I was seeing that this is not the case. To the contrary, it is through language that we create the world, because it's nothing until we describe it. And when we describe it, we create distinctions that govern our actions. To put it another way, we do not describe the world we see, but we see the world we describe." Joseph Jaworski

Language: Our Human Gift

Language comes so naturally to us that we seldom stop to think about what an amazing gift it is. As well-known author Steven Pinker says, all over the world humans fashion their breath into “hisses and hums and squeaks and pops” and listen to others do the same. Why? It is not the sounds themselves, but rather it is because these sounds create meaning for us. Information and feelings generated from language are the means of sharing our ideas in all their “unfathomable vastness.” When we listen to others speaking, we can be lead to thoughts that we have never thought before and that may never have occurred to us on our own.

Take, for example, some of the following sentences excerpted from Pinker’s book *Words and Rules*. “Behold the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains. Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence. Energy equals mass times the speed of light squared. I have found it impossible to carry the heavy burden of responsibility and to discharge my duties as King without the woman I love.”

Ask yourself these questions: What is this boundless expressive power of language? What is the trick to using language effectively and thus filling one another’s heads with so many ideas? In what ways can we, as leaders, begin to use language to both inspire others and ourselves?

Let’s look a little more closely to the phenomenon of language itself. According to Pinker, language holds its endless fascination for two reasons: words and rules. They each work by different principles, are learned and used in different ways, and most likely reside in different parts of the brain. Words are basically

the link between a noise and thought – so anytime we make a particular sound, we have a particular thought. By the time we graduate from high school, we typically know 60,000 words. People recognize words quickly. The meaning of a spoken word is accessed by the brain in about 1/5 of a second – before the speaker has finished pronouncing it. People produce words almost as fast. It takes the brain about 1/4 of a second to program the tongue and the mouth to pronounce it.

So here's the second premise of language – rules. We don't just arbitrarily blurt out words, but we *combine* them into phrases and sentences in which the meanings of the words can be inferred by how they are arranged in a sentence. Inside each of our brains is a code or protocol or set of rules that specifies how words may be arranged into meaningful combinations. These patterns of sentences repeat themselves. The patterns vary from culture to culture, from region to region (“hey y'all,” “how's it going?”), from work setting to work setting (“get me the catheter stat,” “send me an email to confirm”), and among and between various age groups (“like you know,” “what-ever!”).

To contrast this point, we cannot say, “hey going whatever y'all” and make sense in any setting. We can say, *a leader is inspirational*, but we can't say *an inspirational leader a is* and make any sense. We follow the rules of language combining and we forget we even know the rules. In this way, we come to anticipate each other – create shortcuts so we just don't have to use much effort to listen or think. We know the kinds of things that will be said in a particular context. This is called the *background of obviousness* and it's what allows us to be efficient and to create a culture.

We have an infinite variety of possibilities for combining words that reveal amazing possibilities. We call the interaction of combining words to make meaning with one or more people a *conversation*. A leader is aware of the power of conversations and she pays attention to how she speaks and listens. Then she can be infinitely creative in generating conversations.

Just think about the habits of speech we get into and how easily we come to anticipate each other's words, and thereby think we know their meaning. As we discovered above, we have infinite ways to combine words to create meaning. Nevertheless, we get stuck in our own patterns. Given this tendency to expect a certain message or feel you know the meaning of the speaker's words, it's no wonder we have trouble listening to each other.

The Power of Language

Language brings forth the world that you live in. Because language forms the rails of thought, if you can't speak it, you can't see it. By distinguishing one thing from another, something comes into focus for us. For example, some people look at the night sky and see stars. Others look at the sky and see constellations

or patterns of planets and stars. Others look at the night sky and can locate black holes, determine time/space distances, and on and on. In other words, the more distinctions you have, the more you literally see.

When you communicate with someone else, you are communicating with someone who lives in a different cognitive universe. Each of us sees the world according to our background, history, and experiences. When you speak to another person, his or her system is going to respond in ways that differ from your somatic and cognitive associations. Thus, each of us is a unique observer and what we say reflects how we see the world. Said differently, there is an interdependency between the observer we are and what we say.

If you want to improve your communication, it's profoundly useful to observe how you use language in conversation with yourself and others. What distinctions are you using? The more distinctions you have about these actions, the more your world will begin to show up differently. In other words, change your language and you will change your world.

The New Language of Leadership

In what ways can we choose to be deliberate in our choice of speech? How can we be more confident that what we say will bring our desired results?

Our claim is that if we speak the language of a leader and we design the conversations of leadership (such as inspiring a vision, creating accountability, satisfying a customer, and so on), we become the leaders we want to be. These conversations literally change the future. In changing the ways we speak, listen, and respond in conversation, we change ourselves. This is something that can be learned.

This way of using language is *new* because we are not just learning techniques or enhancing communication skills that already exist. It is new because speaking in this way actually changes the way you observe and think about the world. We are learning new patterns of speech and new rules for combining words. As a result of engaging in these new conversations, our understanding also changes.

We say that managers are in the business of taking care of the present while leaders are concerned with the future. If leaders are in the business of shaping the future, then it is up to us, as leaders, to learn the most powerful ways we personally can affect the future.

Embodying the new language of leadership is not just learning about leadership—it is *affluence* in speaking the language. The new language of leadership has a threefold intent: to be *purposeful*, to be *present* and to be *committed*. Let's consider each of these three leadership distinctions, in turn.

Purpose

When you are purposeful in your words, you choose the message you most want to convey. Are you asking for something? Are you offering something that you hope will make someone else's life easier? Are you speaking to say something good about yourself so that others will be impressed? Are you telling a story and you want your listeners to get the point? Are you sharing a poem in which you want to inspire others?

When know what you want, you choose your words so you can get what you want. You may even design the conversation in your mind before you actually have it. The key is to know your own *purpose* or *intention*. This is easier said than done. Sometimes our very good intentions do not *impact* the listener in the way we desire.

You have the best of intentions, but somehow you are not listened to in the way that brings understanding. Surely you can think of dozens of examples – perhaps you were hungry and as you passed the McDonald's you said to your husband, "Gee, I feel like eating a cheeseburger" and still he passes right by the restaurant. You were making a request to stop at McDonald's, but your husband heard you commenting on your current interest in cheeseburgers in your diet. You may say to a friend, "I like your dress, its so slimming" and what she actually hears you saying is, "she thinks I am fat."

Purpose in Conversations

In order to design the conversations you most want to have, you can choose from the five basic building blocks for conversation:

1. **Requesting** something
2. **Offering** something
3. Making a **promise**
4. Stating a **fact/assertion**, and
5. **Assessing** or **declaring** something

These are five actions that you perform in language all the time – the problem is that you may not have been purposeful in these speech actions the past. In the new language of leadership, you perform all of these speech actions, being clear about your purpose.

Every interaction that we have at work is a conversation. But not every conversation is a productive one. You can dramatically improve your ability and effectiveness by changing the kind and frequency of conversations you have. To do that, you must make distinctions about conversations. A conversation can take many forms – one form is called a *promise*. A *promise* makes things happen and it's the first step toward delivering results. Powerful leaders make

promises and even more importantly, they get their power from many people promising them. That is called *delegation*. Another conversation is an *offer* – this is where you see something that is missing and determine an action or contribution you can make to provide it.

Five Distinctions: Language as Action

The purpose of speech is to not just to describe the material world “out there.” Language also is our means for coordinating action with others – to get something done. When we speak we act, and our action changes both our and the listener’s reality. Each time we speak we create a social contract that directly impacts our and the listener’s lives, making a commitment that what we say is so.

Quite likely you participate in a series of conversations that collectively may be thought of as a complex network of conversations that utilize all of these five basic building blocks. Take a step back and look at a typical day’s conversations. For example, you ask your boss for permission to take off tomorrow afternoon on annual leave; you factually describe a scenario that demonstrates the completion of all your tasks today. You promise to deliver the rest of the information she needs by 9:45 a.m. tomorrow thus allowing you to complete the project by noon so you can take tomorrow afternoon off. You also offer to teach a peer how to write Excel macros in case something unexpected occurs; and after you teach her, she declares her appreciation for your having done so. The following describes these basic speech building blocks in more detail:

1. Requests

You want something. A request is an action that you take when you seek the assistance of another in satisfy your underlying concern or need. A request is made in the present at the moment you say it, but it invites a future action by another person or persons. A request also involves a commitment (or a promise) on the part of the requester to be satisfied if the mutually understood and agreed to conditions specified in the request are met, i.e., completion date and time.

2. Promises

A promise is what you speak to indicate your commitment to fulfill some future action in response to a request or an offer. It *implies* that you understand the other’s request or offer fully and that you are competent and sincere about fulfilling that request. Trust is the foundation for our belief that someone will carry out a promise. Without trust, relationships, organizations, and societies experience a constant state of chaos.

3. Offers

An offer is a promise to provide someone with what you believe they want or need. In other words, you want to give the other person something or take an action at some point in the future to benefit the other person. It is likely that you (or the other person/people) have conditions of satisfaction before the other person can be accepted. The other person's acceptance is a promise to receive the offer. For example, you offer to provide a friend with a loan after her wallet was stolen. Specifying *by when* and *how* the money is to be paid back are the conditions of satisfaction for accepting the offer. She may *counteroffer* with her own conditions of payback and a conversation of negotiation may ensue.

4. Declarations

A declaration is a statement of intention in which someone with the authority to do expresses a commitment to make something happen. Declarations bring forth new:

- Possibilities
- Identities
- Contexts, paradigms, models, or maps
- Stands or positions
- Commitments and networks of support

The Declaration of Independence is an example of this linguistic act. The United States was brought into existence when a group of men empowered to do so declared independence from England. At the moment a judge declares a defendant "guilty", the future of this person's life is forever changed. When you say, "I do" during a marriage ceremony, you and your partner's lives are changed. When your boss labels you the employee of the month, your customers and co-workers likely view you differently.

The questions to consider when assessing declarations are:

- Does the person have the authority to make the declaration?
- What is the person's level of personal commitment to fulfilling this declaration?

Declaration of NO

Another key declaration is saying *no*, especially to someone's request. When we have an inability to say *no*, we can easily get into a state of *overwhelm*. There are not enough hours in the day to fulfill the promises due. Consequently, the stress of overwhelm decreases our ability to fulfill promises. If that happens, our health may be negatively impacted and others may doubt our ability to keep our

commitments. On the contrary, when we say *no* too often, we deny ourselves new possibilities and experiences and, in the extreme, motivate others to not make requests of us in the future.

Declaration of Yes

Another critical declaration is that of saying *yes*. When we say *yes* to a request, for example, we demonstrate our willingness to be available to others. If we say *yes* too often, it might reveal an overemphasis on pleasing others, a lack of personal vision and mission, and/or a lack of autonomy. On the flip side, if we do not say *yes* often enough, others might consider us rigid and tend to avoid us. The ability to accept offers and reject requests are critical leadership skills!

Declaration of “I Forgive You”

In our relationships, one of the most important declarations is the act of forgiveness of our self and others. This declaration carries the commitment not to hold on to past resentment. Although people break their promises and cause us pain, the act of forgiving allows us to free ourselves from the burden of guilt, anger, and resentment.

Declaration of “I Don’t Know”

As you participate in the Leadership Alchemy learning community, a declaration of “I don’t know” leaves you open to new learning and experiences. By allowing others and ourselves the space to say: “I don’t know and I will find out,” we strongly demonstrate our support for continuous learning and growth.

Assessments: Declaration of Opinion or Interpretation

An assessment is a type of declaration – a judgment that you make about someone, something, or some action, which determines the action you will or will not take. Thus, assessments are our current interpretation of the world – our opinion of what will happen in the future based on our view of what occurred in the past.

I assess that _____ is valid.

Assessments are never facts, even though a lot of people may share the same assessment. Assessments are always informed by the interests and standards of the person making the statement. Each of us views the world differently – through our own set of filters. When we declare our assessment, we sometimes forget about our uniqueness and that when we make an assessment, especially in public, our and the listener’s conception of reality changes.

To illustrate, when we say that our supervisor lacks people skills, others perception of our supervisor will likely be altered by our declaration. They will expect that, in the future, our supervisor will demonstrate this lack. Hence the power of assessments – declaring our judgment changes the future! Never forget that assessments are probability statements of what might occur in the future – something that may never occur. Assessments are not intrinsically bad. We cannot get through the day without assessments. Given the power of assessments, though, we should exercise care in making assessments and be vigilant about those assessments we utter in an almost automatic fashion.

5. Assertions

An assertion is a statement you make for which you are willing to provide evidence. They are what we typically call *facts*. When we regularly make what others believe are accurate assertions, we build trust, leading others to believe what we say is true simply because we say so.

I assert that _____ is true/false.

For example, I can say that the temperature is 61 degrees and show this to you on a thermometer. You and I live by the social agreement that a thermometer reflects temperature. A society builds certain ways of establishing a common understanding of a quantitative value-weight, length, height, time, etc. If you cannot prove an assertion as a "fact," you may have to withdraw it. Our ability to discern the difference between assertions and assessments is a key communication and leadership skill.

In sum, knowing your purpose is like having a compass to guide you. The speech acts described above are used to express your desired intention and to consciously build conversations that bring you your desired outcome(s).

Presence

Presence means to give this present moment your full attention with balance between your own concerns and the concerns of others. The more *presence* you have, the more likely the scales are tipped in favor of focusing on others. You include and transcend matters of your benefit in order to act consistent with the greater good.

When a leader has presence you know it. You make an assessment that as a leader, his private conversations are no different than his public conversations. You can see presence in facial expressions, tone of voice, breath and full focus of attention. There's a sense of authenticity about this person that what she says and what she does is consistent. This aspect of presence is developed through the practices of centering and attention training. The Ariel Group offers some ways of building our presence as leaders:

P (present):

- Deepen your breathing
- Learn to relax
- Focus on the present moment
- Concentrate

R (reaching out)

- Improve your listening
- Increase your eye contact
- Make a more authentic connection
- Listen for personal connection
- Break out of shyness

E (expressive)

- Pause more
- Have more emphasis in your speech patterns
- Use more volume
- Use lower tones
- Use more facial expression
- Use more gestures
- Show more emotion physically and vocally
- Have more energy
- Use metaphors

S (self- knowing)

- Increase your self confidence
- Learn to trust yourself and your intuition
- Improve your preparation process

"As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

- Marianne Williamson

Commitment

Commitments are contracts we make with our selves and others to fulfill an action. The commitment itself is a performative speech action (a declaration) that in turn brings forth more action in a particular direction. However, just making a declaration does not assure commitment. When we make declarations and do not keep our commitment(s), or act inconsistent with our declaration, trust is undermined and our public identity is impacted.

As a leader, the key to developing commitment is determination, passion, and conviction that what you care most about can and will be realized. For example, when you have a complaint about something, it's because you care about it. You look at a current situation and say, "this is not working." And as a leader, you don't leave it at that – you look at the principle that is at stake or the issue behind the complaint (such as creativity, initiative, dignity, fairness or whatever) and you determine what you are going to do about the deeper issue at stake. Your pledge to do something (i.e., commitment) generates vitalizing energy to move forward.

Likewise, when you hear people complaining about something at work, you don't get stuck in the complaint. Instead you ask, "how would you like it to be?" In this way, you are turning the conversation toward the future and to possibilities. Even more, you are creating a context for action. This context provides opportunities to not only see "what we cannot stand but also the commitments we are ready to stand for." (Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey)

*"Destiny is not a matter of chance, it is a matter of choice.
It is not a thing to be waited for, it is a thing to be achieved."*

- Jeremy Kitson

Passion is the fuel that makes the quality of commitment come to life. Think of Nelson Mandela and his commitment to dignity throughout his 27 years in prison. Mandela's passion for what he held most precious – the values of freedom, dignity, equality, and respect not only sustained him and his colleagues in prison, even the prison guards were touched. Mandela's commitment to his vision of South Africa never wavered, until finally the power of that vision was realized.

"Don't spend your precious time asking 'Why isn't the world a better place?' It will only be time wasted. The question to ask is 'How can I make it better?' To that there is an answer..."

Leo Buscaglia

Designing Conversations Using the Linguistic Distinctions

Addendum One: Ten Linguistic Viruses That Can Make You Sick

Adapted from *You Are What You Say: A Harvard Doctor's Six-Step Proven Program for Transforming Stress through the Power of Language*
by Matthew Budd, MD and Larry Rothstein, Ed D

1. Not Making Requests

Often people think there is something that they want or need from someone else, but they don't make a request of any sort. Sometimes we expect others to take action, even though we've never asked them to do so – we expect them to read our minds. When they don't, we may hold internal conversations of complaint. We might also publicly complain to coworkers or to friends and never say a word to the person who did not fulfill our unexpressed request.

2. Living in a World of Unexpressed Expectations

We find ourselves living in a world of "shoulds." We have private conversations about what another person should and should not do and never express our concerns in the form of a request of the other person.

3. Making Unclear Requests

Not taking the time to clarify what you want. Sometimes we do not establish clear deadlines or define our conditions of satisfaction so there is a mutual understanding of what constitutes satisfying our request. Remember that other's don't necessarily see the world the way you do. They cannot read your mind.

4. Not Observing the Mood of Requesting

Some people make requests that sound like demands; while others make requests that sound like begging. If you sound like you are demanding, a person might decline your request because he or she views you as arrogant or righteous. If you sound like you are begging, the other person may feel manipulated.

5. Making a Promise Without Being Clear About What Was Requested

Sometimes you think you know what's being requested of you, but as you go along you realize that you don't know what the other person really desires. That's the time to stop and clarify what the requester really wants.

6. Saying Yes to Every Request

We believe that we are "good people" and it's "bad" to say no. Something happens to yes sayers, they often end up doing things they really don't want to do and end up feeling angry and resentful.

7. Undermining Trust: Breaking Your Promise

When you make a promise, you are committing yourself to a future action and creating an expectation you will fulfill your promise. Trust is the assessment that you will fulfill your promise. By saying one thing and doing another one undermines trust.

8. Treating Assessments as the Truth

If we treat assessments as the truth, we are destined to encounter conflict. Your judgments are a reflection of your history of living and the standards for satisfaction that you embody. You can provide evidence for what you say, but that still doesn't make it true. Your perceptions are your reality, but not necessarily factual.

9. Making Assessments Without Rigorous Grounding

Even though your judgments aren't the truth, you can make them with rigorous grounding; you can say what you say based on evidence. For example, a medical diagnosis is only an assessment. To be grounded, it must be substantiated by a lab test, an extensive medical history, a physical examination, X-rays, etc.

10. Making Fantasy Declarations

A fantasy declaration is one that is based on an assumption that something will happen of its own accord, as if by magic.

Designing Conversations Using the Linguistic Distinctions (cont'd)

Addendum Two: More Definitions

Automatic assessment – A patterned interpretation of a common breakdown.

Breakpoint – An unexpected turn of events. Occurs when our anticipation of reality is not confirmed by actual events. Can be experienced as a breakdown (in U.S. culture, it is followed by an automatic assessment, “Oh, Shoot!”) or a breakthrough (Oh my goodness!).

Commitment – A deliberate and determined pledge to carry out an action in the future. Commitments can also be called social contracts as making a commitment brings forth coordination that generates action. The building blocks for carrying out commitments are:

- Requests
- Promises (that include offers)

Grounding Assessments – Assessments that are deemed necessary for predicting the future and that are demonstrated to be valid based on past observations and occurrences. Assessments may be grounded by evidence (assertions) you provide to validate the assessment. For example, a doctor makes grounded assessments for the sake of improving a patient’s health and then provides evidence to show the patient how healthy she is. A lawyer makes a grounded assessment based on the facts of a case and the law in order to protect a client's rights under the law. Each has a background of knowledge (facts) to support his or her authority.

Your assessments of yourself and others may be ungrounded: "I can't do math;" "Things won't get better;" " I could never be friends with him." Think of some of the automatic ungrounded assessments that have shaped you because you consider them to be “the truth.”

Passion – The powerful fuel that ignites purpose, presence and commitment.

Presence – The balance between listening to one’s self and to the concerns of others for the sake of taking care of them and for achieving your own vision.

Purpose – To have a powerful clear intention that sets a course into action.

Trust – An assessment of sincerity, competence, and reliability. Trust is not absolute, it differs from one territory of life to another. For example, would you trust your car mechanic to diagnose and treat a life-threatening medical problem?

Designing Conversations Using the Linguistic Distinctions (cont'd)

Addendum Three: Five Linguistic Vitamins for Health and Well-Being

Linguistic Vitamin One: Make clear requests.

Linguistic Vitamin Two: Decline with respect and dignity.

Linguistic Vitamin Three: Listen to assessments as assessments, not as the truth

Linguistic Vitamin Four: Convert complaints to clear requests.

Linguistic Vitamin Five: Promise soundly and take care of broken promises.

From the work of Matthew Budd and Larry Rothstein,
You are What You Say