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The Secret Language of Leadership

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When leaders give reasons for change to people who don't agree with them, it's worse than ineffective. A significant body of research shows that it usually entrenches those people more deeply in opposition to what the leaders are proposing.

In 2003, Howell Raines was fired from his post as managing editor of the *New York Times*. Raines had every managerial advantage. He had the strong support of his boss. He had a clear strategy for reenergizing the newspaper. He was able to hire and fire and place his own associates in key positions. Under his tenure, the newspaper won an unprecedented number of Pulitzer prizes. The pretext for Raines's dismissal after only nineteen months on the job was the revelation that a young reporter—Jayson Blair—had been found guilty of plagiarism and lying. But the deeper underlying reason for Raines's dismissal is that he had "lost the newsroom." He had failed as a leader to win the hearts and minds of the staff of the *New York Times* to implement his bold change strategy.

In 2007, Bob Nardelli was dismissed from his position as CEO of Home Depot. He'd arrived with impeccable credentials, implemented a plan to revive the struggling company, and achieved dazzling financials. After six years, he had doubled sales and more than doubled revenues. Gross margins had also steadily improved. The apparent trigger for Nardelli's departure was his unwillingness to lower the amount of his extraordinary pay package. This had become an issue because the stock price was down 7 percent since Nardelli had taken over, while his compensation remained astronomical. But the underlying reason for his departure was that he wasn't able to generate sustained enthusiasm among the array of investors, shareholder advocates, hedge funds, private-equity deal makers, legislators, regulators, and nongovernmental organizations who want a say in how a company is run.

When Reasons Do Not Prevail

The problem for Raines and Nardelli, as for many CEOs these days, is that unless they can generate sustained enthusiasm for the ideas they are pursuing, their very survival as leaders is in jeopardy. Both had powerful reasons why they should remain in their jobs, but in each case, reasons did not prevail. Why?

Many psychological studies have shown that when we believe something firmly, our immediate reaction to news indicating the opposite is to jump to the conclusion that something must be wrong with the source. Raines and Nardelli had alienated people, and so their reasoned arguments fell on deaf ears. This phenomenon is known to psychologists as the "confirmation bias."

The classic study was done by Charles Lord and his colleagues in Stanford University in

1979. They took 24 proponents and 24 opponents of capital punishment and had them read scientific studies. Some studies supported the case for the death penalty, while others undermined it. The researchers found that both sets of subjects were reinforced in their views by studies that were consistent with their preexisting opinions, while they were able to find ingenious reasons why the studies that conflicted with their preexisting opinions were unsound or not to be taken seriously. The result was that the group was more polarized after the experiment than before. The experiment has since been replicated many times in many different settings.

This is why the traditional leadership approach of trying to persuade people of something different by giving them reasons why they should change their minds isn't a good idea if the audience is at all skeptical, that is, cynical or even hostile. If a leader presents reasons at the outset of a communication to such an audience, it will likely activate the confirmation bias and the reasons for change will be reinterpreted as reasons not to change. This occurs without the thinking part of the brain being activated: the audience becomes even more deeply entrenched in its current contrary position. Reasons don't work, because the audience is neither listening nor thinking.

So although leaders might imagine that giving a presentation discussing and analyzing problems and reaching rational conclusions in favor of change can do no harm, they need to think again. Giving a talk full of abstract reasons arguing for change can quickly turn an audience into an army of strident cynics.

And yet appealing to reason to change people's minds isn't rare. Think back for a moment to the last memo you wrote, or the last time you gave a presentation. If you followed the traditional model of communication, you went through a familiar trinity of steps. You stated the problem you were dealing with. Then you analyzed the options. And your conclusion followed from your analysis of the options.

Define problem >> Analyze problem >> Recommend solution

If this was your model, it wasn't unusual. You were doing what has always been done in organizations or universities. It's the "normal," the "commonsense," the "rational" way of communicating. It's an appeal to reason—a model that has been the hallowed Western intellectual tradition ever since the ancient Greeks. It reached its apogee in the 20th century. And it works well enough when the aim is merely to pass on information to people who want to hear it.

But if you're trying to get human beings to change what they are doing and act in some fundamentally new way with sustained energy and enthusiasm, it has two serious problems. One, it doesn't work. And two, it often makes the situation worse.

How Successful Leaders Communicate

To find out what language is capable of generating enduring enthusiasm for change, I have spent the last decade studying how successful leaders communicate in scores of organizations, large and small, around the world. What I've seen time and again is that massive differences in the impact of leadership communication can be achieved by paying attention to the tiniest details of the words that are used, the patterns they form, and the order in which the patterns are deployed. As Malcolm Gladwell has observed, "Human

communication has its own set of very unusual and counterintuitive rules." Successful leaders approach communication in a way that is fundamentally different from the traditional, abstract approach. They communicate by first getting attention, then stimulating desire, and only then reinforcing with reasons:

Get attention >> Stimulate desire >> Reinforce with reasons

When the language of leadership is deployed in this sequence, it can inspire enduring enthusiasm for a cause and spark action to start implementing it. Moreover, successful leaders don't stop with a one-time communication. As implementation proceeds, it is inevitable that the cause they are pursuing will evolve. While that is happening, leaders and their followers stay in communication and co-create the future by continuing the conversation.

Of course, words alone won't work. The language of leadership is most effective when certain enabling conditions are in place, including a truthful commitment to a clear, inspiring change idea that is illuminated by narrative intelligence, appropriate body language, and an understanding of the audience's story. When all these enabling conditions are present and working in sync with the language of leadership deployed in the right sequence, transformational leadership takes off.

The Language of Leadership: Key Steps

Let's look in a little more detail at each of the three key steps of the language of leadership.

Step 1: Getting the Audience's Attention

If leaders don't get people's attention, what's the point in even trying to communicate? If people aren't listening, speakers are simply wasting their breath. And in most settings today people simply aren't listening in any attentive way. They are mentally doing e-mail, preparing for their next meeting, reminiscing about what happened at last night's party, planning lunch, or whatever. They may be aware in a vague, background way that someone is talking, and even conscious of the subject under discussion. The first step in communicating is to get their urgent, rapt attention.

How do you get people's attention? A couple of years ago, authors Tom Davenport and John Beck conducted an experiment with 60 executives to see what got their attention over a one-week period. Their conclusion, as reported in the Harvard Business Review: "Overall, the factors most highly associated with getting attention in rank order, were: the message was personalized, it evoked an emotional response, it came from a trustworthy source or respected sender and it was concise. The messages that both evoked emotion and were personalized were more than twice as likely to be attended to as the messages without these attributes."

Social scientists have also shown that negative messages are more attention-getting than positive messages. Among the more effective ways to get the audience's attention are

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

- A story of how the presenter dealt with adversity that is relevant to the issue under discussion—particularly if the presenter is new to the audience.
- A surprising question or challenge in an area of interest to the audience.
- At Microsoft in the early 1990s, a young engineer named J. Allard became alarmed at the competitive threat the Internet was posing to Windows. Allard
- didn't just write memos, he got people's attention by buttonholing anyone he could find and physically dragging them to come and look at the Web in action on the computers that he had set up in the corridor.

Step 2: Eliciting Desire for a Different Future

Failing to distinguish between getting attention and stimulating desire can have disastrous results. That's because what gets people's attention typically doesn't stimulate a desire to act. Whereas getting attention is generally done more effectively by negative content, getting people to want to do something different needs to accentuate the positive. Negative stories, questions, or challenges wake us up. They activate the reptilian brain, suggesting fight or flight. They start us thinking, but they also generate worry, anxiety, and caution. They don't stimulate enthusiastic action.

Nor does the traditional practice of using a comprehensive set of analyses of the reasons for change generate enthusiastic action. For one thing, it's too slow. By the time the traditional presenter has reached the conclusion, the audience has already made up its mind—largely on emotional grounds. For another, it's addressed to the wrong organ of the body. To gain enthusiastic buy-in, leaders need to appeal to the heart as well as the mind. The audience has to want to change. To be effective, a leader needs to establish an emotional connection and stimulate desire for a different future. Without the emotional connection, nothing happens. And stimulating desire is key, because decisions are made almost instantly, or as Malcolm Gladwell might say, in a blink.

The task here isn't about imposing the leader's will on an audience, which, in any event, is impossible. It's not about moving the audience to a predetermined position that the leader has foreseen. It's about enabling the audience to see possibilities that they have hitherto missed. It means creating the capability in the audience to see for themselves the world and their relations with others in a new and more truthful light. It involves pointing a way forward for people who find themselves—for whatever reason—cornered by the current story that they are living.

The idea that storytelling might be important for leadership has been gaining recognition in recent years. But the kinds of stories that are effective for leaders in stimulating desire for change are very different from what most people suspect. Some of the most effective stories are not big, flamboyant, theatrical epics, well-told stories with the sights and sounds and smells of the context all faithfully evoked. Stories told with a bullhorn don't necessarily elicit desire for change.

What is often counterintuitive to leaders is that the most effective stories are often the smallest and the least pretentious. It's precisely because they are small and unpretentious that they work their magic. It's a question of understanding the right form of story to elicit desire: generally, it's a positive story about the past where the change, or an analogous change, has already happened and the story is told in a simple, minimalist manner.

Such stories can be astoundingly powerful by sparking a new story in the mind of the listener. It's this new story that the listeners generate for themselves that connects at an emotional level and leads to action. In the new story, listeners begin to imagine a new future.

Quickly stimulating desire for a different state of affairs is the most important part of the communication: without it, the leadership communication goes nowhere. It's also the piece that is most consistently missing in the communications of aspiring leaders. And it's the trickiest facet of leadership, because it involves inducing people to want to do something different. The key insight is that if the listeners are to own the change idea, they have to discover it for themselves in the form of a new story.

And it's not "just" a story. What's generated becomes a new narrative to live by, a story that is both credible, because it makes sense of their lives as they understand them, and capable of being put into practice. The newly emerging narrative is constructed both from the ongoing stories of the people and their organization and from the new story put forward by the leader. It is born in the listeners' minds as a more compelling version of their ongoing life stories. The listeners themselves create the story. Since it's their own story, they tend to embrace it. What the leader says is mere scaffolding, a catalyst to a creative process going on inside the listener.

Step 3: Reinforcing with Reasons

An emotional connection by itself isn't enough. Reasons are still relevant. The desire for change may wane unless it is supported and reinforced by compelling reasons why the change makes sense and should be sustained. But where the reasons are placed in a presentation is crucial.

When we encounter strange new ideas, we are subject to the confirmation bias and seek to preserve our existing viewpoint. We stubbornly ignore, discredit, or reinterpret information that is contrary to views we already hold, to avoid the dissonance of being wrong. By contrast, when we have made a decision to explore change, we actively look for elements that confirm the decision we've already made.

So if reasons are given before the emotional connection is established, they are likely to be heard as so much noise. Worse, they tend to flip, becoming ammunition for the opposite point of view. By contrast, if the reasons come after an emotional connection has been established with the change idea, then the reasons can reinforce it, because now listeners are actively searching for reasons to support a decision they have in principle already made.

Giving people reasons at a time when they are ready to receive them is one of the keys to communication that leads to action. Reasons are put in the flow at a different position from the Western intellectual tradition. They come not at the beginning or middle but at the end.

These three steps—one, getting attention, two, stimulating desire for change, and three, reinforcing the desire for change with reasons—are the same whatever the leadership setting. Of the three steps, the middle step—stimulating desire for change—is the most important, because it generates desire for change. Without desire for change, there is no energy or enthusiasm. Indeed, without desire for change, there is hardly any point in getting the

audience's attention. And without desire for change, there is nothing for reason to reinforce. It's desire for change that drives the change process. So if transformational leaders do only one thing, they should make sure they stimulate desire for change.

The three steps form a flexible template. They offer a way of making sense of any leadership presentation. In some situations where resistance in the audience is particularly high, the speaker may need to spend a great deal more time getting attention than when the audience is already somewhat interested. By contrast, in an "elevator speech," there may be time only for the critical middle step—a story that kindles desire for change. Where generous time is available, the speaker may be able to give a large number of reasons in favor of change. The template can be tailored to meet the needs of the specific audience and the time available.

Continuing the Conversation

Leaders who talk in this way sound very different from typical authority figures of the past—managers, teachers, parents, or politicians. True, some of those people were inspiring. But most of them communicated in the familiar top-down, paternalistic, authoritarian, domineering, I'm-in-charge-so-I-know-what's-right manner that people in positions of authority have been adopting for thousands of years. Too often they sounded hollow, flat, distant, uninviting, arrogant, almost inhuman.

By contrast, the true language of leadership feels fresh and inviting; energizing and invigorating; challenging and yet enjoyable; lively, spirited, and fun, as when equals are talking to equals. It generates laughter and energy. It is not laughter at others, but laughter with others. It's the exhilaration of the discovery of possibility. Leaders show people that the end they thought they were coming to has unexpectedly opened: they laugh at what has surprisingly come to be possible.

In short, it feels like being engaged in a great conversation that opens up new vistas and wider horizons.

And once started, the conversation must be continued. Leadership isn't about making a single presentation, after which the audience sees the light and rushes out to do what the leader says. It's about an ongoing openness to dialogue, combining a fierce resolve with a continuing willingness to listen.