



Speaking Matters

By Todd Lapidus and Matt Cohen

Language Impacts the Future

You're fired!

Once spoken, the words change your reality. This simple act of speaking brings a new future into existence. Words have this power in other aspects of life. Take the words “I do” at a wedding. If you don't say, “I do,” it isn't a marriage.

We make a difference, sometimes a bad one, every time we speak. This paper launches a discussion of why, as leaders, we often fail in making our language powerful and effective. It explores how we can communicate differently by turning our weakness into power and approaching speaking as a consequential act.

Powerful Conversations—or Wasted Words?

We often ask our team members in their conversations with customers to follow operating procedures that impose controls on what they say. Customers can smell the emptiness of scripted language, which makes the words ineffective. In businesses where the quality of service interactions impacts pricing power, the development of such protocols is a waste of time and resources.

There is often similar waste when managers talk with front-line team members. Hurried or cursory speech can limit creativity. Instead, entering the flow of team members' worlds, picking up on things that superficially seem like they're excessive or unnecessary in order to generate substantive observations and interventions—these skills can make a difference.

Leadership communicates with the broadest spectrum of people: team members, suppliers, investors, press, community. To choose effective words, listening is key. It is important to discern where the interests of these groups share common ground with leadership's interests. This sweet spot creates dynamic conversations from which productivity swells.

Turning Weakness into Power

Meaningless words grow from blindness to our own historical baggage and from concepts that are worn out, for both the speaker and the audience. Most business jargon falls into this category and, to our point, creates the wrong kind of listening, because hackneyed conversations deaden the energy and turn off the audience. In the absence of effective words for garnering attention or igniting action, the leader inevitably then turns up the heat of positional power. At best, this sets the stage for compliance.

There's important development potential here because the instinct to dominate is strong. In the business world, those “in charge” tend to dominate the conversation. Instead, we suggest listening by accessing the spacious part of the mind. This is the part that listens with a feeling or attitude that is open to learning something new. It can be simultaneously analytical and creative by bringing both statistical and inspirational ways of looking at business problems into the same conversation. The result is a powerful and engaging dynamic.

Working with new terrain where the maps have not yet been crafted—think a new revenue stream or significant process improvement—holds the potential for opening a wellspring of powerful conversations. But these do not happen without essential skills.

Speaking Consequentially

What we're encouraging business leaders to do—access a different sensibility in order to create enhanced relationships—goes beyond traditional active listening advice, which emphasizes positive body language, or repeating back and confirming key items. While profound engagement is a function of listening and observing, it is much more than simply creating a feedback loop.

We're suggesting that leaders cultivate the following habits oriented toward powerful conversations and the creation of a shared future. You will find that they can change your team's ability to open up to new possibilities.

- Speak from the awareness that the goal of each communication is to shape the next beginning.
- Strategically, stop dominating the conversation and enter the flow of your audience's world.
- Use strong and creative language that is deeply connected to the moment of speaking. This will challenge listeners to think about old habits.
- Engage your listener with what's important now, for going forward.
- Give your listeners time to become aware of their past frames of reference and drop their old baggage—to reorganize what they already know into new and more effective ways to deal with what is facing your business today.

The ability to speak in a way that matters and inspires is at the very core of leadership.



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