

# Speaking Consequentially

## Part One: Strong and Creative Speech

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In our earlier paper, “Speaking Matters,” we argued that “strong and creative speech” was essential to leadership. Several of our readers responded that this claim was compelling, but too vague. In this paper, we expand on the concept. It is the first in a four-part series that lays the groundwork for a deep dive into the practice of speaking consequentially. We start with some definitions, move on to examples intentionally chosen from different cultures and from globally known leaders outside of business, and conclude with two examples in the business sector from our client work.

Speech is strong when it is memorable and transformative. Creative speech gets us out of our mental ruts by finding strong ways of combining familiar words. Consider an example from William Shakespeare: “Parting is such sweet sorrow.” His compact phrasing—combining simple terms in unforgettable ways—has inspired generations of thinkers, orators and writers.

We’re advocating for speech that is both strong and creative. To achieve this, the time, place and audience all must be considered together. To speak in an inspiring way, it’s essential to seize the moment for the right word, or the right change of vocabulary and to draw on the specifics of circumstances and place. Strong and creative speaking always communicates clearly what is at stake, often includes a compact story, and drives home distinctions between key terms and goals. Let’s take a look at these three components.

### 1. What Is at Stake?

Defining what is truly at stake is an important component of strong and creative speech. Reactions to temporary issues are best handled through ordinary conversations. Transforming an audience is another matter, and always means giving larger purpose to your listener’s responsibility for the future.

A mistake we often encounter when this is attempted is that a speaker will fly too high, offering a big picture that is too far removed from the listener’s experience to be compelling. Instead of flying too high, offer a compelling story and make important distinctions.

### 2. Analogy and Story

A good story or succinct analogy can change a group’s orientation to the future more effectively and efficiently than almost any other method. We all know the power of a good story to change not just our mood, but our way of looking at the world. We also know the power of a boring story line to make us lose interest in the overall message and fall asleep.

An elegant analogy can change a group’s worldview deeply. Think of the German scientist Erwin Schrödinger’s notion of a “book of life.” We use his analogy now to understand DNA, and it has profoundly shaped our sense of ourselves, our health, our past and our possible futures—indeed, it has made our very awareness of the world different from those of the eras that precede ours.

## IN ACTION

We were working with the newly appointed head of North America for an expanding brand. A narrow time window was open for rapid expansion, large sums were at stake and the brand had not yet established appropriate infrastructure. To capture the window of opportunity, the company decided to hire established, strong, risk takers as unit managers.

In talking through the challenge of this approach, a dominant concern was that, across the different business locations, there be coherent operations for employees and a consistent experience for customers. At that time, though, the necessary level of organizational development—the typical command and control toolbox—was not available.

At the first meeting of his unit managers, the leader addressed the issue with the declaration, “It’s all about trust.”

This was strong language that immediately captured everyone’s attention. It also became creative, as the leader articulated that the future of the brand and of his audience members’ reputations was at stake and in their own hands. He then told compelling stories from personal experience about how trust (or the lack of it) impacted customers, investors, peers and future relationships. Finally, he drove home distinctions by following up with every leader during each performance related conversation, asking whether trust was being built by their speech, actions and decisions.

The brand today is listed as one of the 100 most recognized in the world. The leader is loved and respected by his direct reports, his peers in the industry, and even by employees many levels down in the organization. On a recent visit to one of the units, a middle level manager said to us, “We would walk through walls for him.”

## 3. Making Distinctions

Making distinctions when you speak helps with defining what’s at stake and with choosing the right story or analogy. “He who knows others is wise; he who knows himself is enlightened.” In a simple but powerful way, the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu creates with this sentence a distinction between wisdom and enlightenment, and in doing so, opens for his readers a new way of thinking about thinking itself.

In every business situation, leaders sort through what is relevant and critical and what is not. This narrowing down of what is considered basic for the future is a most powerful force and it, of course, needs to be communicated. In business process design, how a process is delineated—where does it begin and end?—is the most critical element contributing to the effectiveness of the process in achieving business results. This delineation is an example of distinctions in action.

One last example of the importance of distinctions can be found in the difference between companies that view customer service issues as a cost, and companies that view it as fundamental to their brand promise. This distinction carries through every department and level of an organization. While those that see customer service as a cost seek to minimize variance, those that view it as core to brand promise look for ways to build a strong foundation for creative action to provoke loyal advocacy from their customers. Strategy and resource allocation are impacted deeply by the distinction. The distinction informs both unit and corporate culture and thereby shapes thinking, information processing, action and choices for everyone in the organization. It will affect how your employees talk with and about your customers. It will affect the words you choose to speak as well.



## Conclusion

There is a tension between the three ingredients of strong and creative speech discussed above and the need to take advantage of the time and place to speak consequentially. Communicating what is really at stake is the hallmark of all great leaders. We know this both through history and through our own experience in working deeply with some remarkable leaders in business today. How can you contemplate what is at stake, draw distinctions, and choose compelling comparisons or illustrations, when you need to rise rapidly to the occasion? In our next paper, we will talk about the state of mind necessary to work foundations like these into the very fabric of reflection about the state of an organization.

To download a copy of the Speaking Matters paper, go to <http://www.c3corp.com/pdfs~/SpeakingMatters.pdf>



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