

1

THE SECRET LANGUAGE OF LEADERSHIP

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

—Malcolm Gladwell

The head of a major drug company is in trouble because her firm's pipeline of new products has run dry. The managing editor of a major newspaper has difficulty inducing reporters in the newsroom to change their behavior to meet new types of competition.

A director in a global fast-food firm knows how to repair its swooning share price, but he can't get the CEO to listen. Young staff in a dysfunctional unit of an enormous engineering firm can't persuade its management that open source collaboration will help productivity, not harm it.

A health care provider can't get heart surgery patients to change their lifestyles: without healthy diet and exercise, they will be ill—or dead—within a year or two. A global conglomerate sees its share price tank; despite sterling earnings, profits, and growth, Wall Street doesn't understand its strategy.

A change-oriented presidential candidate can't connect with the electorate and loses an election he should have won. A nonprofit aimed at redressing global warming struggles to mobilize policymakers around the world in a more agile fashion.

A father puzzles what to do about a teenage boy who vanished into his room at the age of thirteen and hasn't been seen for several years. A mother ponders what to do about her teenage daughter who questions everything and won't submit to her authority.

What links these people—in this book as in life—troubled CEOs, stressed change agents, hard-pressed marketers, stymied idealists, mystery politicians, puzzled parents—is a wish to induce change. They have to transmit bold new ideas to people who don't want to hear them, and have the ideas implemented with sustained energy.

What Is Transformational Leadership?

In principle, we know *what* transformational leaders are meant to do. They change the world by generating enduring enthusiasm for a common cause. They present innovative solutions to solve significant problems. They catalyze shifts in people's values and ideologies. They demonstrate willingness to sacrifice personal interests when necessary. They help others get through critical moments of crisis. They inspire people to want to change, so that positive energy sustains the change over time. They don't just generate followers: their followers themselves become leaders.

But if the *what* of transformational leadership is reasonably clear, the *how* has remained almost totally 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?

It's become fashionable to see leadership almost solely as an issue of inner conviction. Find the leader deep within yourself.² Become the person others will want to follow.³ Discover your strengths.⁴ Become emotionally intelligent.⁵ Merely through increased self-awareness, self-regulation, and positive modeling, authentic leaders develop authenticity in followers.⁶ When you visualize, then you materialize.⁷ Be true to yourself and change happens.

Would it were so.

The reality is that sustained, enthusiastic change doesn't occur by osmosis or extrasensory perception. If leaders' inner commitment to

change is to have any effect, they have to communicate it to the people they aspire to lead. True, the leaders' actions will eventually speak louder than words, but in the short run, it's what leaders say—or don't say—that has the impact. The right words can have a galvanizing effect, generating enthusiasm, energy, momentum, and more, while the wrong words can undermine the best intentions and kill initiative on the spot, stone dead.

The Pitfalls of the Traditional Approach to Communication

Think back for a moment to the last memo or essay or journal article 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 twentieth 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.

Giving reasons for change to people who don't agree with you isn't just ineffective. A significant body of psychological research shows that it often entrenches them more deeply in opposition to what you are proposing.

In 1979, a psychologist named Charles Lord and his colleagues at Stanford University published their classic research on what happens

when people are presented with arguments that are at odds with what they currently believe.⁸ Lord's team selected twenty-four proponents and twenty-four opponents of capital punishment. They showed them studies that confirmed the penalty's deterrence as well as other studies that refuted it. What happened? The proponents of capital punishment interpreted the studies as supporting capital punishment, while the opponents of capital punishment concluded that the evidence refuted the approach. Both proponents and opponents found clever ways to reinterpret or set aside any contrary evidence so as to confirm their original positions.

For instance, whereas a participant in favor of capital punishment commented on a study confirming the deterrence effect that "the experiment was well thought out, the data collected was valid, and they were able to come up with responses to all criticisms," an opponent of capital punishment said of the same study, "I don't feel such a straightforward conclusion can be made from the data collected."

On another study showing the opposite, that is, disconfirming the deterrence effect, the roles were reversed. The opponent's meat became the proponent's poison and vice versa. The end result was that the proponents and the opponents of capital punishment became even more set in their positions. After they had reviewed the evidence, they were more polarized than before.

The phenomenon, which psychologists call the *confirmation bias*, was noted by Francis Bacon almost four hundred years ago: "The human understanding when it has once adopted an opinion . . . draws all things else to support and agree with it. And though there be a greater number and weight of instances to be found on the other side, yet these it either neglects and despises, or else by some distinction sets aside and rejects, in order that by this great and pernicious predetermination the authority of its former conclusions may remain inviolate."⁹

The confirmation bias isn't entirely illogical. Thus when I glance at a tabloid at the supermarket and read the headline, "Scientists Discover 4,000-Year-Old Television Set in Egyptian Pyramid," I smile and question the reliability of the tabloid, not my belief as to when television was invented. When we think we know something to be objective truth, our

immediate reaction to news indicating the opposite is to jump to the conclusion that there must be something wrong with the source. And for many purposes, the confirmation bias serves us well.

But why aren't we more willing to reconsider our positions in the face of serious factual evidence that should at least give us pause? Aren't we thinking at all? Apparently not, according to a recent study by psychologist Drew Westen and his team at Emory University.¹⁰ The team conducted functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) brain scans on fifteen "strong Republicans" and fifteen "strong Democrats" in the course of the 2004 presidential campaign while they were reviewing blatantly self-contradictory statements by the two candidates, George W. Bush and John Kerry. As we would expect from earlier studies of the confirmation bias, the Democrats found ways to reconcile Kerry's inconsistencies and became even more strongly Democrat, while the Republicans had no difficulty explaining away George W. Bush's self-contradictions so as to become even more fervently Republican.

But the fMRI brain scans showed something new. While the participants were considering the inconsistent statements, the part of the brain associated with reasoning revealed no signs of activity at all. "We did not see," said Westen, "any increased activation of the parts of the brain normally engaged during reasoning. What we saw instead was a network of emotion circuits lighting up, including circuits hypothesized to be involved in regulating emotion and circuits known to be involved in resolving conflicts."¹¹

But there was something even more startling. Once the participants had seen a way to interpret contradictory statements as supporting their original position, the part of the brain involved in reward and pleasure became active, and the conclusion was "massively reinforced . . . with the elimination of negative emotional states and the activation of positive ones."¹²

Remember that involuntary smile that sprang to my lips when I read the headline about the 4,000-year-old TV in the Egyptian pyramids? That smile wasn't as innocent as it looked. My brain was giving itself a psychic reward for having been able to stick to its original position. The

emotional reaction, not my thinking mind, was causing me to be even more passionately attached to my original belief.

The confirmation bias helps explain why the traditional approach of trying to persuade people by giving them reasons to change isn't a good idea if the audience is at all skeptical, cynical, or hostile. If a leader offers reasons at the outset of a communication to such an audience, the maneuver 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 dug into its current contrary position. Reasons don't work at the outset, because the audience is neither listening nor thinking.

Worse, we also know that skepticism and cynicism are contagious and can quickly turn into epidemics. They are instances of rebellious, antisocial behavior. In *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell has described how such epidemics occur in many different settings.¹³ We see it with hooligans. We see it with teenage smoking. When one person in a group is openly skeptical or cynical, it can create a license for others to be likewise: being a skeptic or a cynic can quickly become the cool thing. In the bar, after work, if the coolest person in the group says that the presentation that day was pure BS, how many others in the group are going to take the social risk of saying that they thought the presentation made a lot of sense? If they were thoroughly convinced, maybe. But if they themselves found the presentation confusing and hard to understand, the risk is that they'll go along with the cool guy, and agree that yes, it was all BS.

So although we might imagine that giving a presentation discussing and analyzing problems and reaching rational conclusions in favor of change can't do any harm, we need to think again. Giving a lecture full of abstract reasons arguing for change can quickly turn an audience into an army of strident cynics.

The Language of Leadership in Action

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 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, the order in which the patterns are deployed.

Successful leaders communicate very differently from the traditional, abstract approach to communication. In all kinds of settings, they communicate by following a hidden pattern: first, they get attention. Then they stimulate desire, and only then do they reinforce 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 Introduction illustrated the difference between the communications of Al Gore in 2000 and Al Gore in 2006. Here are two more examples of transformational leadership in action.

In the spring of 2002, Craig Dunn faced a perfect storm of bad news. AMP was famous in Australia as an icon of financial security, but the last few years had been a disaster for the company. Some major acquisitions in the U.K. had bombed and were now being undone. A major downsizing was under way. The stock price was plummeting. Rumors of an imminent hostile takeover were rampant. Many thought that AMP wouldn't survive.

Dunn, who had recently been appointed managing director of AMP's financial services business unit to help execute a turnaround, recalls going to a meeting of distributors in Melbourne at the height of the storm. "It was," he says, "just the worst meeting you ever went to. We had insults thrown at us. There was a lot of anger and disappointment. People had lost faith in the firm they partnered. And they had good reasons for feeling the way they did. We all had to face the fact that there had been a lot of poor management decisions in the recent past."

Little in Dunn's background had prepared him for this kind of challenge. Before joining AMP, he had worked as an analyst for KPMG in Europe and Indonesia, and then taken over as CEO of a Malaysia-based insurance company. In those roles, the environment was orderly. He gave people reasons and, by and large, they did what they were told. Now people were shouting and screaming abuse at him. They were furious. In such a crisis it was obvious that just giving people reasons wasn't going to work.

So he recalls going to a meeting in Melbourne and talking to the staff face-to-face. He began by acknowledging the problems AMP was facing, and said, "This is hard, this is difficult, but this is what the organization means to me."

Then he told them about a family in Adelaide that had bought one of AMP's insurance policies:

The guy was still quite young, still in his early thirties, and he had a couple of kids. But he had contracted multiple sclerosis. He was just moving to the stage where he would be in a wheelchair. He had an income protection policy with us, and in that instance we went beyond what we were required to do legally. One of our claim managers had traveled over to Adelaide. He went through the house that we had just renovated for the family, and agreed to put in a new bathroom so that they could access it in a wheelchair, and to lower the kitchen benches.

I told them what we had done for that family and what they had said to our claim manager. I was reminding people of what our firm was all about. And the value that we added to people's lives. It was true that the firm had lost its way in the past few years, but the sorts of

things that we'd done for that guy and his family in Adelaide were still happening. They were happening every day. I showed them that this was an organization worth fighting for.

And he went on to explain the actions that he planned to take to enable AMP to survive. Three years later, when AMP had not only survived the crisis but was back on the road to profitability, Dunn said: "What I came to see was that the communication is more emotional than logical: we had to draw upon people's emotional connection to the organization, to draw on that piggy bank of good will to the firm and use that as the way forward."¹⁴

Bill Gates is rightly given credit for issuing his "Tidal Wave memo" of May 26, 1995. In it, he communicated his decision to change course at Microsoft so that the nascent World Wide Web would become an integral part of the firm's computing software rather than a sideshow to the then-dominant desktop applications. The company's strong response crippled its competitor, Netscape, and won Microsoft more than 90 percent of the global browser market.

But as Gates points out in his book, *Business @ the Speed of Thought*, the issuance of the memo was more the end of the process than the beginning.¹⁵ The memo had been preceded by a great deal of leadership activity needed to stimulate the desire for change.¹⁶

In the early 1990s, Microsoft wasn't thinking very much about the Internet, but it wasn't totally oblivious. In 1991 it had hired a twenty-two-year-old specialist, J. Allard, to help ensure that it would develop the right technologies for interoperability. By mid-1993, basic Web support had been built into Windows NT. Allard had seen the promise of the just-emerging technology and set about trying to convince others in the organization that they needed to make the Web central to all their software. He set up three machines on a folding table in the hallway of a Microsoft office block, and dragged everyone he could find, from product manager to group vice president, to show off the Web and get people enthusiastic about its potential. It wasn't just that the demonstration

looked impressive; Allard could back it up with reason: the fact that in a ten-week period, customers downloaded twice as many copies of an MS-DOS upgrade from this Internet site as from CompuServe helped him prove that something big was already under way.

Then in early 1994, Gates's technical assistant, Steven Sinofsky, went to Cornell on a recruiting trip and got stuck there for several days as a result of a snowstorm. He used the time to check out how the university was using computers. He was amazed by the changes that had taken place since the year before. E-mail use by students was almost universal. Cornell's instructors were communicating with students online. A wide variety of information, including the library catalogue, schedules, grades, accounts, financial aid data, and a directory of who was who in the school community were available on the Web.

Allard and Sinofsky began writing memos and e-mail about how important the Internet was going to be. The e-mail began circulating among a large number of people in the firm.

In 1994, Gates was still thinking that the Internet was years away, because of the limited bandwidth available at the time to most Web users. The Microsoft strategy was to establish a network that would sit on top of the Web.

But the priority of the Internet in Microsoft was steadily rising from the bottom toward the top. The e-mail from Sinofsky and Allard circulated to a large number of people and sparked a firestorm of electronic conversation about what the Web would mean for Microsoft, how its programs would be affected, what capabilities they would need to have, and what new products should be developed. Sometimes ideas won quick agreement. Sometimes discussion was fierce. In the melee, many new ideas emerged.

"Hallways and e-mails," says Gates, "That's how it happened."¹⁷ Gates himself became involved in e-mail exchanges with many different parts of the business. The Internet development plans were made available on the Microsoft network so that everyone could see them. In April 1994, as a result of the efforts of Allard and Sinofsky, Gates devoted Think Week to the Internet.

By early 1995 every team had defined its Internet charter and begun development. Internet add-ons, integration, and products were being actively produced.

So when Gates sent out his Internet Tidal Wave memo in May 1995, it was important, because it meant that Gates as the top manager was announcing a change of course. But the memo was nearer the end of the process than the beginning. It was the signal of a formal decision for a change that was already largely in place. Without the spirited conversation that had preceded the memo, it would have had little effect.

The Language of Leadership: Key Steps

What's going on in these examples? Let's look in a little more detail at each of the three key steps of the language of leadership, before turning to some enabling conditions—six elements that enable the language of leadership to achieve its maximum effectiveness.

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 are not 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 attention.

How do you get people's attention? A couple of years ago, Tom Davenport and John Beck conducted an experiment with sixty executives to see what got their attention over a one-week period. Their conclusion: "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."¹⁸

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

- 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

Al Gore's movie, *An Inconvenient Truth*, uses all these tools to get the attention of an audience that isn't particularly interested in making fundamental adjustments to their lifestyle as a result of global warming. Gore talks in conversations by a stream at his home of his family growing tobacco and his sister dying of lung cancer, thus helping to establish an emotional connection between him and his audience. Such an approach can be especially effective when, as in Al Gore's case, the audience may have a false impression of the kind of person he is.

J. Allard got people's attention by buttonholing everyone he could find and physically dragging them to come and look at the Web in action on the computers he had set up in the corridor. Sinofsky's e-mail about what was happening at Cornell helped alert others that something very different was under way. What if Microsoft were to miss the wave that was already rolling?

In Craig Dunn's case, he got the attention of the audience by acknowledging the problems that management itself had generated.

Step #2: Eliciting Desire for a Different Future

As Al Gore discovered in 2000, 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 is approaching 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.¹⁹

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 people in 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 is not particularly extraordinary: great leaders have always used stories to spark change. But the kinds of stories that are effective for leaders in stimulating desire for change are very different from what we might 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.

In fact, some of the strongest stories are 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 it is told in a simple, minimalist manner.

Such stories look unassuming, but they can be astoundingly powerful. They operate 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. Thus:

- In *An Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore used several stories to show that the human race had handled other massive global challenges before. These help spark a new story inside the minds of listeners: if we have solved problems like this before, then surely we can solve the problem of global warming!
- Craig Dunn told a story about the kind of role that his firm has played in the lives of real Australians, sparking a new story in the minds of the listeners: this is a firm worth preserving!
- Sinofsky's stories about what was happening on the Cornell campus pointed to the massive changes already under way on the Web. This led managers at Microsoft, including Bill Gates, to imagine a new story: if that's what the Internet could accomplish at Cornell, just imagine what it could do all around the world!

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 listeners.²⁰

LEADING CLEVER PEOPLE

In a recent *Harvard Business Review* article titled "Leading Clever People," Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones do a disservice to the concept of leadership when they write, "If clever people have one defining characteristic, it is that they do not want to be led." Goffee and Jones argue that clever people need "benevolent guardians" rather than "traditional bosses." Because clever people are difficult, managers should use reverse psychology and suggest the opposite of what they really want.²¹

These are not helpful suggestions. The truth is that if leaders are unable to lead clever people, it means that they don't know how to be good leaders. What clever people object to is not being led, but being led badly. They object to being managed, commanded, controlled, or manipulated by people who aren't knowledgeable in the area where they are working or who are working in pursuit of goals that don't make sense. And they don't respect "benevolent guardians" any more than "traditional bosses." Reverse psychology works on clever people only when they have experienced a track record of bad decision making: in such settings, it's rational to give close attention to the opposite of what management says.

Although "benevolent guardianship" may do less poorly with clever people than traditional command-and-control management, it is a suboptimal solution. What clever people want, like all people, is good leaders, that is, people who can inspire enduring enthusiasm for a worthwhile cause.

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. 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, if the audience is skeptical, cynical, or hostile, the reasons tend to flip and become 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 taken.

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 at a different position in the flow from the Western intellectual tradition. They come, not at the beginning or middle, but at the end.

Moreover, the most effective way to present reasons that will really resonate with your audience is to give people reasons in the form of stories. The most effective stories usually include:

- The story of *what* the change is, often seen through the eyes of some typical characters who will be affected by the change
- The story of *how* the change will be implemented, showing in simple steps how we will get from "here" to "there"
- The story of *why* the change will work, showing the underlying causal mechanisms that make the change virtually inevitable

Instead of relying on pure reason, on facts and figures and arguments, stories give reasons an emotional punch. They appeal to the heart as well as the mind, so as to cement the reasons in place and make the rea-

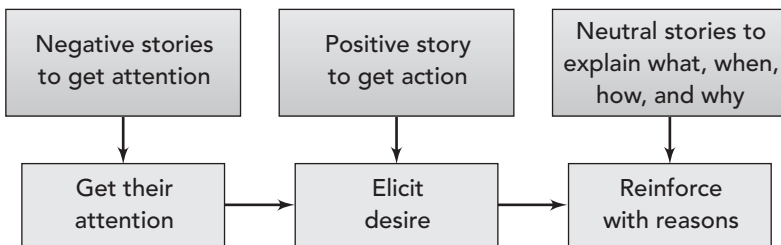
sons memorable. These three steps—one, getting attention, two, stimulating desire for change, and three, reinforcing the desire for change with reasons, are the same whatever the leadership setting. Of the three steps, the middle step—stimulating desire for change—is the most important. Without desire for change, people will have 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 only be time 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.

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

The Secret Language of Leadership.

Effective presentation to get action



authority have been adopting for the last couple of thousand years. Too often they sounded hollow, flat, distant, uninviting, arrogant, almost inhuman.²²

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.²³

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.

The Language of Leadership: Key Enablers

The language of leadership will make the maximum impact if certain enabling conditions are in place. Without these enablers, the words that leaders use—the spoken language of leadership—risk sounding glib and superficial.

Enabler #1: Articulating a Clear and Inspiring Change Idea

When people are pursuing a clear and inspiring goal, they exude a quality that is real and recognizable but also difficult to describe or define. There's a look in the eye, the spring in the step, an eagerness in the voice, a willingness to interact with each other and with outsiders, an openness to innovation. They exhibit enduring enthusiasm in pursuit of the idea. There's excitement, anticipation, a feeling of movement, a sense of purpose and direction, an impression of going somewhere. When those qualities are absent, everything feels different: work becomes work, a chore rather than a joy.

Although a few exceptional people are able to pursue any activity with enduring enthusiasm, most people find it difficult to pursue an activity with sustained gusto unless they are pursuing it *for its own sake*, not merely to achieve some instrumental or external good such as money, status, prestige, power, or winning. The perceived inherent worth of the activity being undertaken is foundational.

Instrumental benefits may accompany activities being pursued for their own sake, but if they become the principal, or worse still, the sole, objective of undertaking the activity, then the activity itself becomes degraded: energy tends to fade and enthusiasm dies.

Thus the goal of Al Gore in 2006 was not just the instrumental goal of lowering levels of CO₂ emissions, but the moral goal of preserving the planet. The goal of Craig Dunn was not just the instrumental goal of improving the profitability of AMP; he was out to preserve a firm that does worthwhile things for the community. The goal of J. Allard and Steven Sinofsky at Microsoft was not just the instrumental goal of producing more profitable software, it was the inherently valuable purpose of integrating all software with the World Wide Web.

CAN WINNING BE THE GOAL OF TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP?

Transformational leadership concerns activities that are pursued primarily for their own sake, not merely for the sake of instrumental benefits such as money, prestige, prizes, or the status of being considered a winner. If at any point, instrumental benefits become the principal goal of the activity, then the chances of its being the subject of sustained enthusiastic commitment are reduced, if not eliminated.

An alternative view is articulated by Jack and Suzy Welch, in their book, *Winning*:

I think winning is great. Not good—great. Winning in business is great because when companies win, people thrive and grow. There are more jobs and opportunities everywhere and for everyone. People feel upbeat about the future; they have the resources to send their kids to college, get better health care, buy vacation

homes, and secure a comfortable retirement. And winning affords them the opportunity to give back to society in hugely important ways beyond paying more taxes. . . . Winning lifts everyone it touches—it just makes the world a better place. When companies are losing, on the other hand, everyone takes a hit. People feel scared. They have less financial security and limited time or money to do anything for anyone else. All they do is worry and upset their families, and in the meantime, if they're out of work, they pay little, if any taxes.²⁴

There are several reasons that a focus on the achievement of instrumental goals like money, prestige, prizes, or winning per se is unlikely to be the subject of sustained enthusiastic commitment.

One is pragmatic. It is an intractable fact of human nature that most people find it difficult to remain genuinely enthusiastic for a sustained period of time about primarily instrumental goals. When everything is done for the sake of something else and nothing is done for its own sake, then purpose is obliterated. When purpose is obliterated, life loses its meaning. When meaning dies, energy fades and enthusiasm dies.

Instrumental goals like winning are fundamentally about acquiring the title of “winner” as accorded by other people. When people spend their lives trying to elicit such decisions from other people rather than doing what they themselves believe is worthwhile, they end up as prisoners of other people’s opinions. With no genuine views of their own, they have little to be enthusiastic about.

Moreover, it isn’t true that winning lifts everyone it touches. Wherever there are winners, there are by definition also losers—usually many more than winners. As a result, winning is necessarily an aspect of win-lose activities. This is because external goals like money, status, prestige, and the title of “winner” are finite resources, and are governed by a win-lose dynamic. If A wins, B loses. If C becomes famous, everyone else is less so. If D is president, no one else can be president at that time. In the world of instrumental goals, truly win-win outcomes are rare, perhaps nonexistent. Even having money is not so much about the absolute fact of having money—it’s about having more money than other people. In such zero-sum games, the inherent

worth of the activity is often subordinated to the goal of getting ahead of others, and to doing whatever is necessary to achieve victory. When that happens, one has entered a rat race: the activity shifts from inspiring to deadening, from fun to dull, from energizing to burdensome: it becomes mere work. By contrast, when activities are pursued for their own sake, innovations that any one individual makes tend to be shared with others and so everyone benefits. An advance by one helps all. The dynamic is inherently win-win.

Finally, the suggestion that those who focus primarily on winning will eventually get around to doing something worthwhile in itself, such as “give back to society,” has meager evidence to support it. Even if we set aside the inevitability of a large group of “losers” who by definition accompany the “winners” and who won’t have anything to give back to society, the reality is that winning as a primary goal becomes a drug. Because winning doesn’t satisfy in itself, people need more of it to keep going. Hence people who devote their life primarily to winning usually never get round to doing anything worthwhile in itself. Instead, they find themselves on their deathbeds, wondering where their lives went.²⁵

Transformational leadership invites people to stop postponing their lives and start right now doing what is genuinely worthwhile—and inviting others to join in.

Enabler #2: Committing to the Story of Change

Managers are appointed by other people. Leaders appoint themselves. Deciding to be a leader is a choice we have to make on our own. No one else can do it for us. It’s an internal decision to adopt a stance, an orientation toward the world, to pursue an activity for its own sake and to set out to induce others to do likewise. Are we genuinely ready for the challenge of leadership? Are we ready to commit mind, body, and soul to the goal?

This was a crucial difference between the Al Gore of 2000 and the Al Gore of 2006. In 2000, Gore hadn’t yet crossed this bridge. By 2006, he was talking about a goal to which he was totally committed. As a result, he sounded very different. He was no longer wearing a mask, trying to

project a persona that he hoped would appeal to the audience. Instead, he was telling the electorate what he, Al Gore the person, genuinely believed.

When leaders decide to commit themselves to change, they take a stand. They adopt a position. They cross a Rubicon. Conscious of the need for the change and what it will take, they commit to making it happen. They decide that it's worthwhile and that they're willing to pursue it, come what may, whatever it takes. Their inner commitment gives life to the words they use. It becomes a central part of their new life story.

Enabler #3: Mastering the Audience's Story

Story also has enormous implications for the way we understand our audience as well. We like to spend a lot of time thinking about the content of what we are going to say. No less important is figuring out the story that the audience is currently living. If we don't understand the story of the people we're talking to, how can we craft a new message that will resonate with them?

It's easy to underestimate the effort involved in getting inside the listener's mind. Abraham Lincoln once said, "When I'm getting ready to reason with a man, I spend one-third of my time thinking about myself and what I am going to say—and two-thirds thinking about him and what he is going to say."²⁶

That's because as leaders we need to overcome what psychologists call *fundamental attribution error*. This is the tendency that we have as human beings to assign the cause for other people's actions to dispositions or personality-based explanations of behavior, whereas we tend to assign the causes of our own actions to the situation we are in. We tend to think: "I didn't get much done today because I got to bed late last night; you didn't get much done today because you're lazy." In effect, we have an unjustified tendency to see people's actions as reflecting "the sort of people they are" rather than on the social and environmental forces that influence their actions.²⁷

We need to work hard to overcome fundamental attribution error and understand the world of our listeners in all its peculiarity, its strangeness, its stubborn differences. We have to stop thinking of people as obstacles,

as enemies, as resisters, as opponents, as malcontents, as stupid or obstinate or irresponsible or ill-willed, and rather as people we deeply want to understand, people whose world in its own way makes sense, albeit in an incomplete fashion. And the best way to do that is to work on understanding the listeners' story.

We need to start from where the audience is, not where we are. We need to figure out why our followers don't see the change idea as positively as we do. Within what story do they find themselves cornered? What artificial walls have the listeners constructed around their current existence so that they don't see the same future we do? What imaginary constraints are hampering them from imagining something different? What mythical limitations are hobbling their vision? Which of their most heartfelt dreams are currently unfulfilled? If we can understand these aspects of the audience's story, then crafting a new story that will resonate with them is often relatively simple.

How do leaders make sense of the listeners' world even if they know the answers? Although agreement on a comprehensive framework for human personality is not complete, psychologists are tending to the view that the best way to make sense of this subjective world is through stories: stories are ideally suited to capture how a human actor, endowed with consciousness and motivated by intention, enacts desires and beliefs and strives for goals over time and in a social context.²⁸

Formulating the listeners' stories can help leaders reach out imaginatively and get inside the subjective world of the people they are seeking to change, develop a sense of what it is like to be living in that world, and get a feel of its logic and power and order, even its compelling beauty.

Enabler #4: Cultivating Narrative Intelligence

Stories aren't the only rhetorical tool available to leaders. Later chapters introduce others: questions, metaphors, images, offers, challenges, conversations, arguments, data, and the like. But among the communication tools that are most effective in terms of inspiring action, stories tend to predominate.

In principle, we shouldn't be surprised at the primary role of storytelling in communications about change. We know that human beings

think in stories. They dream in stories. Their hopes and fears reside in stories. Their imaginations consist of stories. They plan in stories. They gossip, love, and hate in stories. Their emotions have a narrative character.²⁹ Their decisions rest on narratives: as philosopher Alisdair MacIntyre has pointed out, “I can only answer the question, ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’”³⁰ Storytelling is closely associated with the very conception of the self.³¹

Although we shouldn’t be surprised by the idea that storytelling is important to leadership communications, the fact is that we are. In fact, at first glance, it often strikes business executives as profoundly counter-intuitive. This is not what we were taught at school. It’s not how we’ve been trained. It’s not the norm in formal organizational meetings. Our mantra has been that analytic is good and anecdotal is bad: it isn’t logical to generalize the idiosyncratic vagaries of a single story to an entire population. And so we go on making PowerPoint presentations full of abstractions and bullet points, like medieval doctors slicing patients’ veins to remove excess blood, not realizing that everything we are doing and saying is making the situation worse.

The notion that a deep understanding of narrative is key to transformational leadership strikes many people as surprising and in some sense unacceptable idea. And yet it has an even more surprising dimension than that.

If it’s true that we think in stories, and make decisions in the form of stories, then what this means is that *all* forms of communication directed toward action—not just stories themselves, but questions, metaphors, images, offers, challenges, conversations, whatever—are effective to the extent that they generate a new story in the mind of a listener. If yes, then the communication is effective. If not, then the communication fails. These varied communication tools are effective when they point to a story. Story provides a unifying concept to understand whether and to what extent any communication directed toward action will be effective.

And if that is so, then narrative intelligence—the ability to “think narratively” about the world—is central to leadership.³² But what exactly does it mean to think narratively about the world? It means the capacity

to understand the world in narrative terms, to be familiar with the different components and dimensions of narratives, to know what different patterns of stories exist and which narrative patterns are most likely to have what effect in which situation. It also means knowing how to overcome the fundamental attribution error and understand the audience's story. It implies the ability to anticipate the dynamic factors that determine how the audience will react to a new story and whether a new story is likely to be generated in the mind of any particular audience by any particular communication tool.

The ability to think narratively—that is, narrative intelligence—reflects a recognition that the narrative aspects of the world matter because human goals matter, and narratives encapsulate human goals. The pattern of words that we use matters: are they abstract, cold, impartial, objective, inert, seemingly remote from human goals? Or do they have all the richness and texture and objectives of human existence, making them likely to engage an audience? And the sequence of patterns matters: one order generates excitement; the opposite generates hostility. And the stories that these patterns of words elicit in the listeners' minds matter. And the responses, witting or unwitting, in the form of a nod, a smile, or a frown from the listeners matter. And what the leader does about those responses matters, whether the responses are encouraging or discouraging. And the interaction among narratives matters, an interaction that is taking place in seconds: a single word, or phrase, or sequence, at the right time—or out of place—makes all the difference. The outcome—one way or the other—will be decided in a flash. An ability to act and react agilely in this quicksilver world of interacting narratives is the gist of narrative intelligence.

Overall, cultivating narrative intelligence will be a key enabler of using the language of leadership to full advantage.

Enabler #5: A Commitment to Telling Authentically True Stories

In some activities of the human species, such as espionage, lying is required: deception is the essence. In other activities lying is frowned on

but widely practiced. Politicians and salespeople routinely shade the truth to win office or make a sale.

Transformational leaders are in a different situation. If they are to inspire enduring enthusiasm for change, they must tell the truth. Lying and leadership are like oil and water: they simply don't mix. The distrust that lying breeds is devastating to trust and credibility.

Honest mistakes are possible, of course, but it's vital that when a mistake is discovered, leaders level with people and explain the mistake and how it came about, rather than wait to be found out, as if deliberately hiding something.

And when leaders tell the truth, it's not just a matter of factual accuracy. It's not merely telling a story that's true as far as it goes. It's about telling the authentic truth, including everything that's relevant to understand the story. It needs to be a story that once people check it out—and if the story has an impact, they will check it out—and all the facts are known, people will still say, “Yes, that's pretty much what happened.”

Here's a famous example of a story that's factually accurate as far as it goes, but isn't authentically true:

Seven hundred happy passengers reached New York after the *Titanic's* maiden voyage.³³

No one could quarrel with these facts—but the story leaves out the little detail that the *Titanic* sank and fifteen hundred passengers drowned. And when those facts become known, if they aren't already known, then the negative backlash on the story and the storyteller is massive.

That was the problem with Al Gore's presidential debate story about Caley Ellis, the fifteen-year-old schoolgirl who had to stand in the classroom. What Gore said was factually accurate as far as it went. But when it emerged that she had to stand through class only on opening day—and that was because of extra equipment stacked in the classroom, not, as Gore had implied, on a permanent basis because of a lack of facilities, the backlash against Gore's candidacy was inevitable.

Although telling a story while omitting relevant facts is a very bad way to tell a story, ironically, many corporate communications follow

exactly this pattern. They paint a rosy picture of some situation when—just around the corner, just below the surface—some omitted negative element lurks. The omission creates a massive backlash against the story and the storyteller once it becomes known, if it isn't already known—and instantaneously if it is known.

Enabler #6: Deploying the Body Language of Leadership

Cesar Millan doesn't train dogs: he rehabilitates them. It's the owners he has to train. And what he trains them in is leadership. He shows the dog owners how to embody in their behavior the calm assertiveness of leadership vis-à-vis the dogs they own.

The dogs he works with are difficult dogs—dogs of all breeds and sizes that have been terrorizing their host families, often for a considerable time. Typically they are dogs that combine warm, loving behavior with a dark side—barking, biting, chewing, jumping, pulling—all the things that vicious, uncontrollable dogs do. Often they are dogs that dog trainers have given up on in despair. Now these dogs are terrorizing their owners' households and turning their lives into nightmares. Often the families are desperate and on the verge of doing away with the dog. They call Cesar Millan as a last resort.

Some of the most striking examples involve contrasts in size—say, a tiny chihuahua owned by a burly policeman who is fearless in dealing with criminals on the mean streets of a big city, but is terrorized when the tiny, biting canine doesn't get what she wants. When you see what the dog gets away with, it's as though the chihuahua owns the policeman rather than the policeman owning the chihuahua.

Usually these dogs are even more difficult and aggressive with strangers than with their owners. But when Cesar Millan walks into the room, these dogs typically stop barking and snarling and pulling and jumping. Then they do a strange thing: they sit down. They gaze calmly and quietly at Millan and wait to see what he's going to do next. When these dogs see Millan, they immediately recognize that they are not dealing with one of the pliable human beings they have been terrorizing for so long. Dogs grasp in a flash that Millan is someone who can't be shoved around. They

see at once that they are dealing with someone who means business. They sense in Millan someone who is 100 percent there for them. They understand the body language of leadership. They see immediately that they are in the presence of a leader.

There is nothing particularly extraordinary about Cesar Millan's physical appearance that would give him an edge in what he does. He is medium height and stocky in build, not physically dominant. Born in Mexico, he is mild in manner and pleasant in his demeanor. As you watch him go about his work with dogs and with people, it is evident that the calm assertiveness of his behavior comes not from any surface characteristic, but from within. It is evident in the way he holds himself, the way he moves, the way he looks at his surroundings, and the way he talks.

What's even more striking is how quickly and easily the calm assertiveness of leadership embodied in Cesar Millan is mastered by the dogs' regular owners. The body language of calm assertiveness is relatively simple to learn: square shoulders, open body stance, feet firmly planted on the ground, the right kind of eye contact. It adds up to "being there" for the audience.

Perhaps what's most extraordinary is that as soon as the regular dog owners embody these behaviors, they are at once treated as leaders by their dogs. They can immediately resume ownership of their own households. They discover that if they are there for the dog, the dog will be there for them.

The body language of leadership that Millan teaches to dog owners is the same body language that leaders need to master if they are to be effective in their communications with other human beings. Without the calm assertiveness of the body language of leadership, the verbal language of leadership will have little, if any, effect.

This is one of the differences between the Al Gore of the first presidential debate and the Al Gore of 2006: the aggressive brashness of the 2000 presidential debate has morphed into the calm assertiveness of *An Inconvenient Truth*. Whereas the Al Gore of 2000 was a tedious bore, the Al Gore of 2006 is rock-star popular. Small differences in body language can have a massive impact.

Mastering the Language of Leadership

For a very long time, we've been living with the idea that leadership and change are driven by the efforts of a few exceptional people. This book puts forward a different idea. It says that change and leadership don't require exceptional people at all. Leadership and change are driven by ordinary people who act and speak in a different way. Once people grasp what is involved in acting and speaking in that way and take the trouble to master it, then they find that *anyone* can drive change, if they want to.

For too long, we've been thinking that leadership was some kind of innate gift, a mysterious kind of genetically inherited charisma. But once we've deciphered the language of leadership and understood its essential enabling conditions, transformational leadership is no longer a mystery. Once the hidden patterns of the language of leadership are made explicit, leadership becomes accessible to anyone.

While the main elements of the language of leadership are relatively simple and quick to understand, putting them into practice is something else. The bare essentials can be grasped in minutes, but fully mastering them may take a lifetime.

For some, particularly those habituated to the practice of hierarchical command-and-control management, learning the language of leadership will entail deep change. It isn't some kind of party trick. It isn't just a set of superficial techniques—it's a different way of thinking, speaking, and acting. It requires that we understand our own values, thinking through what we are attempting, exhibiting more than a little humility, and being able to level with others and speak from a genuine point of view. It involves acquiring a new perspective on the world, a profound clarification of what it means to be leader.

The three steps of the central triad of the language of leadership—getting attention, stimulating desire, reinforcing with reason—offer a way of making sense of any leadership communication. They provide us with a flexible structure that can be populated with suitable leadership content. In Part Three, I discuss in detail how they operate: if you want to get

right into the nitty-gritty of the leadership presentation itself, you may want to skip ahead and start there. Appendix 2 contains a set of exercises and templates that can facilitate preparation of the various communication tools discussed in the book.

But to get the maximum value from the language of leadership, it's a good idea to make sure that the enabling conditions are in place. Part Two addresses those issues. Is our goal clear? Is it potentially inspiring? Are we fully committed to it? Do we understand the people we are trying to convince? Have we developed appropriate narrative intelligence? Are we being authentically truthful in our communications? Is our leadership presence up to snuff? If any of these enabling conditions are not in place, the language of leadership will have some impact, but it won't be optimal. If the enablers are in place, they will ensure that the language of leadership inspires truly enduring change.

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