

Leveraging Language for Leadership Impact and Team Effectiveness.

By Sahar Schwaninger

Through the inherent energy and the history of collective intelligence, memories and potential they carry, words are pivotal allies of leadership. One of the great powers of words is that of breathing into our intentions the very shape of the aspirations we yearn to create thus giving it form. The words we use, literally carry our thoughts in the space of relationship; they give directionality, colour, texture to our actions; they plant seeds of becoming.

Intention has now been widely recognized as a catalyst of innovation, a pillar in the process of creating inspiring visions and bringing them forth into reality. Working with intention is especially fit to the complex and moving waters of our times, where leaders continuously need to adapt and respond to an evolving context and steer their ship towards success, moment by moment. When it comes to language, intention literally matters: the choice of vocabulary, the selection and placement of words, the intonation, silence, speed, rhythm... all of what is a rich set of tools at our disposal to shift our communication from binary transactions focused on "getting things done" in a static way towards fertile creative grounds of development and potential building. Especially in a VUCA world, (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous), leveraging language in leadership is a fundamental tool to master.

What is your intention?

The premise of using language as a leadership ally is that of knowing your intention in a detailed manner or refining it until it resonates with your essential vision. An intention is not a goal and it is not an objective either. It is well explained through the philosophy of yoga: the sanskrit term "Sankalpa" (intention), conveys a sense of reverence and devotion, will and determination which sustains the attitude of the yogi(ni) throughout his / her practice; it

is an act of purpose.

Your intention as a leader may be to develop yourself so you may be the change you inspire your organisation to become; to embody hope, trust, serenity and a positive attitude despite turbulent waters; to engage in being deeply human and carve new ways

of working or doing business that honour future generations despite increasing pressure to extract resources and meet short term targets; or in simplicity to be at peace with yourself and welcome every challenge of the day with calm and clarity.

As you work with refining your intention, by choosing the words that best describe what you are earnestly yearning to achieve, you will empirically find the “right” words and this is already an act of making words your ally and anticipating the results you wish to create. This practice is evolutionary: it cannot be done once and used for years to come, it rather continuously unfolds fed by your care.

We communicate through our senses

When I work with clients on clarifying their intention, I take them through a sensory process which wires their minds for success by making use of their mental representations of reality anchored in who they are in essence. We know through the modeling of Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) that we make sense of the world around us through the filters of our brain: as it is impossible for our brain to grasp the totality of the information it receives at any given moment, it uses sensory capacities to prioritise, make sense, comprehend and respond. Each individual has a preferred VAKOG sensory channel, also called modality: Visual, Auditory, Kinesthetic (body), Olfactory and Gustatory - the predominant ones being Visual, Kinesthetic and Auditory.

As a leader, your preferred channel will determine the language that best speaks to you and which you prefer to leverage with your teams. For example, a leader with visual preference will speak in terms of vision, images, graphics... while a leader with kinesthetic preference will speak in terms of movements, feelings and sensations. As a result the former will lead through pictures while the latter through felt senses. The understanding of these modalities plays an important role in your communication success as a leader to yourself, your teams and your stakeholders.

Becoming conscious of the modalities to which the vocabulary you choose belong to, will give you a better understanding of the impact you create.

Some examples of wording through the lens of the main modalities:

Visual	Kinesthetic Auditory
I see what you mean I get the picture Let's focus on this!	I feel what you mean. I hear what you mean. I can tap into this. Let's talk about it! Let's shake it off! It sounds like

Perspective, insight, vision, brilliant, clarify	Balance, grip, grasp, Tone, harmony, tuning, pressure sound
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Because our human bodies are wired for these modalities, leveraging the VAKOG in our communication strengthens our need for connection and improves communication. A main challenge in our business world today is the use of non-specific language which is non-sensorial: rather than using the VAKOG, it is conceptual and flattens the possibility to touch our humanity through communication: e.g. "the sales results are generating the expected return" which could be translated in visual language into "our sales are lining up, making a brilliant picture" or in kinesthetic language into "our sales are as hot as can be this month and we are hitting our expectations". As we use sensory language, it is our whole bodies that come to life and we enrich our experience.

The impact of language: shaping your becoming

As you work to refine your sensorial language, you can paint more inspiring landscapes for your stakeholders, helping them feel exciting new possibilities and hear unheard new melodies. The richer your use of language through the VAKOG, the greater potential you are tapping into.

Unfortunately this rich creative process is seldom exploited to its full length. What would it be like to make this process more conscious? What impact would it have on you as a leader and

on your teams, organisation and wider ecosystem if your words reflected the understanding of the power they withhold?

One of the oldest uses of this power we have made as humans is that of story-telling. In ancestral traditions, wisdom was passed down through stories of creation shared around a ceremonial fire. The great myths of our civilisations were captured in the form of stories, tragedies and tales which to this day, we continue to tell our children and explore in our movies and human dramas. As leaders, you have the responsibility of becoming aware of what stories you are feeding.

Stories work in delicate ways with our human psyche and if you have closely played with the creative process yourself, you may have experienced that very fine line where imagination and reality intertwine. When my daughter was 4 years old, she wanted to bike down a small hill on her own but was terrified at the height and the idea of riding free. As I stood up next to her, I asked her if she was scared. She groaned in a moan, her body tensed and anxious. But she really wanted to take that risk and so I whispered in her ears:

"You are stronger than your fear". She repeated that many times to herself until she took the deep decisive breath and set off. Luckily, she made it. To this day, anytime she is going to take a challenging step, she takes a deep breath and tells herself *"I am stronger than my fear"*. She has created an anchor of success for herself. Of course, this is not an absolute truth but rather a belief which is serving her well, for now.

As leaders you can instil a sense of success in yourself and your teams by carefully choosing the words and modalities of your language. You can set the stage for success, pride, confidence, hope, trust, belonging, playfulness, creativity...and build meaning by working with intention and weaving language into your thoughts and actions.

Conversely, you can set the stage for failure, arrogance, helplessness, hopelessness, betrayal, loneliness, separation, fear and destroy meaning also by the choice of words and language you use and these are all very difficult to repair once they have been broken.

Leveraging language to create success is inherently a matter of self development: It is as you work through your own relationship to failure, arrogance, despair... that you embody the words which are feeding your intention. There is no better communication than the one which conveys alignment between the words we speak and who we are. After all, over 90% of communication is non verbal. But there is a magical effect: as we grow into who we yearn to become and upgrade the words we speak accordingly, it is our very own presence that

becomes a vector of change, we become congruent and that may very well be what our times are calling for.

About the author

Sahar is a leadership coach and mindset shift consultant in business. She facilitates leadership transformation with large and medium sized companies.