

Language, Thought, and Reality

Human beings are born into language, into an already ongoing conversation, the way a fish is born into water. Language is the medium in which we exist, survive, and thrive. It is the means by which we create, navigate, and interpret our world.

While most of us are aware of language as a means of communication, we are less aware that language is our primary tool for representing reality to ourselves and to others. In fact, language is the most powerful tool we possess. It enables us to suspend our thoughts in the air or capture them on paper or computer screen so that our thinking can be seen, examined, and modified. Language is what has allowed us in the space of a few thousand years to travel from marginal nomadic existences to the moon. What we call civilization is essentially an ongoing conversation, and our cultural and technological developments are largely the result of our constantly evolving language and ability to communicate using it. In fact, it's not going too far to say that we live in a word-built world: everything from constitutions to contracts to companies to capital originates in language.

It can be useful to think of communication as the expression of thought by means of language--and of language itself as both the glass through which we see the world as well as the instrument with which we create that world. It is also important to be aware that we view the world through mental models, which are deeply held beliefs about how the world works--and that these mental models are part of the conversation into which we are born. The sunset, for example, is a mental model--an (unconscious) frame through which we see and experience: to wit, the sun does not really set. Hans Christian Andersen's story about the emperor's new clothes is really a story about people bound by mental models. Their image of the monarch's dignity kept them from seeing his naked figure, kept them from seeing reality.

Language and Business

In a very real sense, language and business are inseparable: business is talked about in language, business is analyzed in language, business takes place in language, and virtually all breakdowns in business are either breakdowns in communication or are accompanied by breakdowns in communication. Knowing this is important because it enables us to have a different conversation about business and business problems: one that includes the nature of the conversation itself and allows us to see that how we use language profoundly affects outcomes.

Meaning

Communication in business involves the conscious, strategic management of meaning--in order to impart information on the one hand and to move the action of the business forward on the other. The purpose of communication in a business organization is to achieve a common understanding of what the organization is trying to accomplish in the marketplace--and alternately to understand what the marketplace in turn is telling the business.

Meaning is the term we apply to anything that admits of interpretation. It is important to grasp that the words we use to communicate do not contain meaning; rather, they have meaning attributed to them by people. Said differently, the meaning of words resides in people, not in words themselves, and for a number of reasons, our individuality chief among them, meaning is characterized by continuous variation. Words do not come in pre-formed coin-sized denominations, where boundaries are sharp. Rather, their edges are often porous, and subtle differences in meaning can arise virtually without our immediate awareness. Another reason for this has to do with the nature of thought, one of whose characteristics is its periodic failure to distinguish what is independently real from what is projected from memory.

Slippage

Because a speaker's words are essentially a set of directions to enable a listener to build meaning, for a speaker to know whether his communication has been understood, he needs to obtain feedback from the listener. Indeed, only by asking for and receiving feedback can a speaker ensure that his communication has been understood as it was intended.

For a number of reasons there is always a certain amount of slippage between how we represent reality to ourselves and how we are able to describe reality to others. Thoughtful, intelligent employees can be communicating at their best, but the company is still losing market share. Why? Part of the reason is found in what we can call slippage.

Consider one of the most fundamental activities in business: the process of problem solving. The process of identifying problems may sound simple, but as every business person knows, gaining consensus about exactly what constitutes a problem--or 'the' problem--can be a challenging undertaking. We can point to, see, and sit on a chair, and even when chairs are not physically present we have no difficulty communicating about them. But we normally cannot 'see' a problem. A problem is an abstraction from the outset, and therein lies part of the difficulty. In fact, 'problem definition' has become an industry. Consulting firms make millions by taking on this process for client compa-

nies. At a time when many industries are undergoing profound change and new industries are developing willy-nilly, the 'sense-making' ability of managers is all the more critical.

Another barrier to effective communication in organizations has to do with an understanding of the nature of problem solving itself. The goal of problem solving is to have something go away--namely, the problem. But often what organizations really want is to bring about something that doesn't yet exist, whether that be a product, a process, or a system. In his seminal work on systems thinking, Management Guru Peter Senge has written about "the power of language. . .to bring forth new realities." Bringing things into existence is essentially a creative act--and as such is distinctly different from the process of problem solving. An understanding of the distinctions between these activities can help dispel a host of unexamined assumptions and give business people a new and productive way to talk about business and business problems.

New Realities

Senge's point about the power of language to bring forth new realities is important because it points to the fact that reality shows up in language before it shows up anywhere else.

For example, by the mid-1980s, Japanese car manufacturers had captured a big chunk of the American car market. Why? Because they built cars of superior quality. *Time Magazine* reported that the Japanese had fundamentally redefined and expanded the concept of quality. In Japanese *atarimae no hinshitsu* means ordinary quality, quality of a type that is "taken for granted." The new, expanded concept, called *miryokuteki na hinshitsu*, translates into "things gone right," indicating a breadth and depth of quality beyond what the consumer expects or can even imagine. One of the reasons Japan produced cars of superior quality then has to do with language. For the Japanese *miryokuteki na hinshitsu* constituted reality, and it became manifest in their cars.

When John Reed first arrived at what was then First National City Bank, the Operating Group, one of six divisions of the bank as it then existed, was experiencing breakdowns of a magnitude that threatened the bank as a whole. At the time, the Operating Group was viewed simply as a mechanical support function for the customer contact offices.

Reed was not the first to view the Operating Group as an independent, high-volume production operation, but he was the first to insist on calling it a "factory--which designed and controlled its own processes and products in the style of a manufacturing organization," and this 'naming' allowed something quite remarkable to happen. Once that fundamental shift in perception took place, appropriate personnel were found--professional production management--and the systemic difficulties that had plagued the Operating Group were quickly resolved. The point here is that the importance of lan-

guage in business goes beyond good communication skills. It goes to the heart of understanding business and what makes it work.

Part of Jan Carlson's success in turning around SAS was his emphasis on front-line workers--those who keep business customers happy. Early on he declared that henceforth they would be known as managers: "It may seem like a mere word game but I use the term to remind my staff--and perhaps most those at upper levels of the old pyramid--that their roles have undergone a fundamental change."

Similarly, GE's Jack Welch coined the phrase "boundary-less corporation" to help legitimize what he saw as the essential egalitarian nature of organizational success.

Capital itself is born by the process of representation in language. It is born in describing the most economically and socially useful qualities *about* an asset as opposed to the visually more striking aspects of an asset. The moment you focus your attention on the title of a house, for example, and not on the house itself, you have automatically stepped from the material world into the conceptual universe where capital lives.

Certainly one key to communicating effectively is to recognize at the outset that our perceptions of reality are not necessarily a description of what reality actually is. As Senge has also written, "Reality is made up of circles but we see in straight lines." Toward communicating effectively, it is important to distinguish what we get from outside our heads from what we get from the little voice inside our heads. This is a prerequisite for being able to put into words the 'meaning' of what is going on externally, in front of our eyes--and for being able to describe the current reality of a situation to the satisfaction of others. To be sure, the process is among the most complex and least understood of all human activities. But by becoming aware of the nature of language and of the communication process we can become increasingly aware of our capacity to create meaning and to leverage our ability to manage effectively as well.

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