

Leadership and the Limitations of Language

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Abstract

The elusiveness of our words, their inability to fully capture reality, and our natural tendency to hear only what fits with our existing framing lenses contribute to the limitations of language. These inadequacies are especially important when it comes to leadership since language is the leader's most important resource. In order to be effective, leaders must be aware that language creates contexts and that contexts are, by nature, limiting. This awareness doesn't immunize them from the limitations of language but it does position them to use language in ways that maximizes its impact. In order to create shared meaning and a shared vision, and to overcome these limitations of language, leaders must 1) be as clear and concise as possible about the organization's direction, values (culture), and performance expectations; 2) encourage dialogue and a rich diversity of perspectives, and 3) use transformative language to rewrite the future. Changing people's entrenched beliefs and behaviors that have been successful for decades almost always requires a story about the future that engages and captivates them. That future, which is only a possibility today, must be appealing enough to produce the necessary courage in people to take on the status quo. It must be "hittable" enough so that it shows up for people as feasibly solvable and they simultaneously show up for themselves as capable of tackling it. And, the new future must be inspirational enough to unite and align them so that their decisions and actions can be coordinated efficiently and effectively.

Keywords

Philosophy of Leadership, Context, Future, Double-Edged Sword Phenomenon, Multiplicity of Meaning, Map/Territory Mismatch

1. Introduction

Whether it's articulating the organization's strategy, publicly recognizing the exceptional work of a task force, or presenting an annual report to the board, language is the leader's most important resource. Without communica-

tion—the spoken word, the written word, or the unsaid but conveyed—it would be impossible to set direction, establish rules and policies, develop performance expectations, or shape the culture. Language allows us to bring our leadership challenges into sharper focus, allowing us to see details and “make sense” more clearly. More generally, language is a practical tool that allows us to communicate with others and access and understand the world. Indeed, one of the distinguishing factors about *being* human is our use of complex language. As Carruthers notes, “take away language and you take away much of what it means to be human” (Carruthers, 1996). It is simply unfathomable for us to imagine navigating the world without language. Accordingly, it is undoubtedly an effective and indispensable resource.

Yet, when one thinks about the language spoken by real people on a day-to-day basis, it is hard to disregard the fact that much of what is said is unclear, vague, or open to interpretation (Lipman, 2003). Comments such as, “He’s a great leader,” often rest heavily on opinion with little solid evidence to support the assertion. The French writer and diarist Anais Nin was right when she said, “We do not see things as they are. We see things as we are” (Souba, 2009).

Obscuring this ambiguity of language is the lack of a shared understanding of what leadership is, aptly summarized by leadership guru Warren Bennis nearly six decades ago:

Of all the hazy and confounding areas in social psychology, leadership theory undoubtedly contends for top nomination. And, ironically, probably more has been written and less is known about leadership than about any other topic in the behavioral sciences. Always, it seems, the concept of leadership eludes us or turns up in another form to taunt us again with its slipperiness and complexity. So we have invented an endless proliferation of terms to deal with it: leadership, power, status, authority, rank, prestige, influence, control, manipulation, domination, and so forth, and still the concept is not sufficiently defined (Bennis, 1959).

This elusiveness of language, its inability to fully capture reality, and our natural tendency to hear only what fits with our existing frames of reference contribute to the limitations of language. Yet, as noted above, in spite of these shortcomings, language is by far the best tool we have for communicating with one another, planning for the future, and inventing new products. Herein lies the “paradox”, or, to put it another way, the *duality* of language—on the one hand it is a vital asset; on the other hand, it can be a liability. In this article, we present three characteristics of language that contribute to this duality. Following Souba (Souba, 2014), it is our contention that *being* a leader is inextricably linked to using language to reframe people’s challenges such that more effective ways of being and acting are the outcome. In this way, the leader takes advantage of the power of language. However, one must be cognizant of the limitations of language, for they can hamper effective leadership. We thus offer recommendations for dealing with these imperfections.

2. Three Overlooked Features of Language That Are Essential for Effective Leadership

In this section we present these intriguing characteristics of language. Two of these, which we call *The Multiplicity of Meaning* and *The Map-Territory Mismatch* can, if not held in awareness, significantly compromise the leader’s effectiveness. The third, properly understood and applied, can be used by the leader for maximum effectiveness. This we call *The Double-edged Sword Phenomenon*. The combination of these aspects is what we called, in the preceding section, the duality of language.

2.1. The Map/Territory Mismatch

The map/territory mismatch refers to the inability of language to accurately capture reality. The term is meant to emphasize that any topographical map, though a representation of some geographical territory, is not the territory itself. In other words, the representation (the map), no matter how accurate or useful as a reproduction, is not the object of representation (the territory). Though the example of geographical map is illustrative, we mean for the map to be understood much more generally, i.e., the term “map” here means everything and anything that humans formulate by means of language. The map-territory mismatch is well illustrated by the Buddhist story of the finger and the moon. While the finger (language) points to the moon (reality), one must be careful not to equate the finger with the moon.

The statement, “the map is not the territory”, was coined by the Polish-American scientist and philosopher

Alfred Korzybski. The phrase encapsulates his view that an abstraction derived from something is not the thing itself (Korzybski, 1993). He compared a person's language to a map. The map is intended to describe the territory that we call "reality" (the external world). When there is a close correspondence between map and territory (for example, engineering), there tends to be a high degree of effective functioning, but when the correspondence is poor (for example, health care) major dysfunction is observed. In Weinberg's words:

We can never describe completely even the simplest bit of matter. We can never exhaust what could be said about a single grain of sand.... For words are *about things*; they are *not* the things themselves.... Whatever we call a thing, whatever we say it is, it is not. For whatever we *say* is words, and words are words and not things. The words are maps, and the map is not the territory. The map is static; the territory constantly flows (Weinberg, 1991).

What's the take home? We can generate all sorts of maps and models of how the world works, but they can only approximate the actual world or the actual phenomena being examined. The actual territory is beyond verbal description. For example, as I participate in a weekly team meeting, I might experience a number of different conversations taking place. In and of themselves, my observations constitute an abstraction. The very same conversations show up for others differently, depending on their frame of reference and their beliefs and values. Each of us selectively filters and distorts what we hear and see to fit our existing mental maps. I will register certain sights, sounds, feelings and so forth, which will form my representation of the event and will invariably be different than yours.

Words stand for, or represent, things but words are not the things they stand for. If we keep in mind that what we're generating is only a map, and that many others maps can be drawn for the same territory, it becomes much easier to reconcile differences. Most disagreements, arguments, fights, and wars are the result of relying on maps of reality that don't correspond to what is actually going on. People argue based on their own maps and fail to realize that others use different maps that are equally legitimate. Most conflicts would never happen if we could keep that in mind.

2.2. The Multiplicity of Meaning

The multiplicity of meaning is best characterized by the platitude, "Leadership is in the eye of the beholder." The words "leader" and "leadership" mean different things to different people. We have all witnessed the same set of tough conversations in a team meeting only to discover that one member felt the team leader exercised good leadership while another felt it was mediocre at best. This is because we each have our own criteria we use to evaluate leader and leadership effectiveness. In the words of Nobel laureate Henri Bergson, "the eye sees only what the mind is prepared to comprehend" (Souba, 2009).

The most common conception of leadership is that it is about a person in charge who wields clout, controls resources, and has answers. In contrast, leadership has more recently been defined as an exercise in language that results in the realization of a future that wasn't going to happen otherwise (Erhard, Jensen, & Granger, 2011; Souba, 2014). The first perspective sees leadership as the purview of a small group of people at the top of the organization while the second one extends leading to anyone. In fact, it has been observed that there are as many definitions of leadership as there are people trying to define it (Bass, 1990). Thus, in the absence of agreement about what leadership is and who a leader is understood to be, those who practice leadership may do so from very different mindsets (Fairholm, 2004).

In 2014, Fortune magazine said of Angela Merkel, Germany's Chancellor, "Merkel may be the most successful national leader in the world today" (Fortune Editors, 2014). On what basis are such claims made? What criteria are used in making such a judgment? Presumably, there is some rationale for making such assertions but it will vary from pundit to pundit. Because we lack a set of rules for defining good leadership, much of what we say about it is opinion.

Take the controversial Donald Trump. Is he an effective or ineffective leader? It's an interesting question because most of us have never met the man and the opinions on both sides of the fence can be heated to say the least. But regardless of where you fall on the Trump continuum, your assessment of him as a leader will reflect three things. First, your appraisal will be strongly influenced by your so-called implicit leadership theory. First coined by Eden and Leviatan (Eden & Leviatan, 1975), the theory posits that we each have a set of beliefs that delineate the kinds of attributes, personality characteristics, skills, and behaviors that contribute to or impede effective

leadership. These beliefs, variously referred to as prototypes, mental models, or schemas, affect the extent to which an individual accepts and responds to others as leaders.

Second, what you read about Trump, the observations you've made of the man on television (and perhaps in public), what other individuals and groups say about him and the extent to which they align with your implicit leadership theory will shape your assessment of him as a leader. And finally, your assessment of Trump as a leader fit to lead the United States depends in part on your assessment of the general state of the nation. Trump is arguably a more attractive candidate at a time of economic instability; we presume, because of his wealth, that he has a solid understanding of fiscal and market hydraulics.

Washington Post columnist Barton Swaim suggests that what is most distinctive about Trump is the syntactical structure of his sentences (Swaim, 2015). Most of his sentences, notes Swaim, are pithy and to the point if not controversial, certainly not the language of your typical politician: "Our country could be doing much better"... "We have deficits that are enormous"... "We have all bad trade agreements"... "We have a military that needs help"... "Our country doesn't work" ... "Everybody wins except us"... "We need victories in this country ... We don't have victories anymore."

Trump's verbal incisiveness and controversy ("We need strong borders; we need a wall"), which is "completely lacking the shame/veracity filter" (Taibbi, 2016) can be seen as both entertaining and frightening. Few people come away without a bias. Moreover, his most frequent hand gesture—a big, open-palm, double-hand motion downward—generates an image of a big personality. In combination with his discourse structure, it's been suggested that "he's turning political discourse into reality TV" (Atkin, 2015).

Based on our observations of Trump's language, demeanor, and deportment during the recent Presidential primaries, how they fit with our implicit leadership theory, and how they fit with our assessment (as vague as it might be) of what the United States needs in its next president, we decide whether or not Donald Trump is or will be an effective leader. This point is that what you observe or hear is always interpreted in and through language. And, when you are leading, you are functioning in the province of language.

In other words, whatever leadership is—its value, its purpose, its roles, and its attributes—this meaning is not given before language in and by some detached, prelinguistic domain and then subsequently labeled with words (Souba, 2014). Rather, language itself, always already operating in our lives, is constitutive of leadership, providing us ready access to it. As such, language is the bridge between the created present and the uncreated future. In creating and exchanging meaning, effective leaders translate ambiguity into clear messages that convey the rationale for change and enroll others in a compelling strategy that breeds alignment and commitment. Because language influences our thinking and emotions, it is most powerful and effective for tackling challenges that rely heavily on conceptual, innovative solutions as opposed to those problems that are straightforward and technical in nature. Many leaders today spend much of their time in the domain of content, where issues are understandable, strategies are familiar, and solutions seem straightforward. Complex problems cannot be tackled by solely addressing content; the issue in question must be situated within an appropriate conversational context to provide a basis for action. Leaders do this by creating linguistic distinctions that prompt cognitive shifts in others, jarring them loose from their entrenched worldviews (Souba, 2013). This property of language—its ability to bring forth, out of the unspoken realm, innovative ideas and possibilities—will determine the future of our world.

One of the key assumptions of sense-making is that there must be a universal foundation, a structure of some sort behind knowledge or beneath it, upon which what we know is built, assuring its certainty of truth (Bruffee 1986). In contrast, the social construction model assumes that there is no such thing as a universal foundation or bedrock of knowledge. There is only concurrence, a consensus arrived at for the time being by communities of informed peers. Concepts, ideas, theories, reality, and facts are all language constructs generated by knowledge communities and used by them to maintain community coherence (Bruffee, 1986).

Communication is always an interpretative process and, as such, the interpretation of language (what is said, how it is said, and what is not said) sometimes creates cross-cultural misunderstandings because of differences in experiences, interpretation, and thinking. In Lipman's words, "it is not that people have a precise view of the world but communicate it vaguely; instead, they have a vague view of the world" (Lipman, 2009).

Human beings are meaning-makers by nature: we cannot exist without making every effort to understand whatever we encounter. "No need is so compelling," said Willis Harman, "as the need we all feel for our lives to make sense, to have meaning. We will tolerate almost any degree of austerity or risk in this indomitable quest for meaning" (Harman, 1998). Yet, in spite of our search for meaning, it is a mountain with no top.

2.3. The Double-Edged Sword Phenomenon

Most of us remember that well-known childhood saying, “Sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never harm me.” If only that were true. Contrary to what you may have been told as a youngster, you discovered that words can be extremely injurious and destructive. One of the ironies of language is its double-edged sword nature—it can imprison yet liberate, destroy yet create. Words can divide and separate but they can also motivate people to go the extra mile. Consider the following examples:

You are hereby committed to the Bureau of Prisons for the term of life [US District Court Judge Denise Casper words to Whitey Bulger] ([Valencia, Murphy, & Finucane, 2013](#)).

By the authority vested in me, as President of the University, by the Board of Trustees, I confer upon you the degree of Bachelor of Arts, with all the rights, honors and opportunities attached thereto, and direct that your name be forever enrolled as an alumnus of the University (Standard conferral of undergraduate degrees at University graduations).

That on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State ... shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free ([Lincoln, 1863](#)).

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness ([Preamble, US Declaration of Independence, 1776](#)).

Words are powerful. They have destroyed marriages, sentenced people to death, provoked wars, and triggered mass murders. Our ability to talk together about subjects that matter deeply to us often seems to result in dispute, division, and violence. At the same time, words have been the ingredients of numerous important treaties and truces. They have inspired people to put a man on the moon, and brought out the best in people. Listen to the words that Bobby Kennedy spoke in Indianapolis minutes after Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot and killed in Memphis on April 4, 1968:

In this difficult day, in this difficult time for the United States, it is perhaps well to ask what kind of a nation we are and what direction we want to move in. For those of you who are black,... you can be filled with bitterness, with hatred, and a desire for revenge. We can move in that direction as a country, in great polarization—black people amongst black, white people amongst white, filled with hatred toward one another.... Or we can make an effort, as Martin Luther King did, to understand and to comprehend, and to replace that violence, that stain of bloodshed that has spread across our land, with an effort to understand with compassion and love.... What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence and lawlessness, but is love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or whether they be black ([Kennedy, 1968](#)).

Against the setting of what America was founded to stand for most essentially (a nation where “all men are created equal ... endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”), Kennedy’s words helped outraged people understand that vindictive acts in response to King’s assassination would be counterproductive. His speech inspired them to let go of old reactions (we want payback) and long-standing assumptions (racial harmony is impossible) that were destructive, which helped people see possibilities for a different future. King created a new framing lens from which new ways of being, thinking, and acting could emerge. His speech disclosed to people that, in spite of the tragic circumstances of that night, they could intentionally choose not to live a life dictated solely by circumstances. Greatness, Jim Collins reminds us, is not a matter of circumstances; rather, it is a matter of choice ([Collins, 2001](#)). On a night where pillaging, pyromania and rioting were widespread across the south, there was not a single act of vandalism in Indianapolis.

Language is a system of verbal and written representations (symbols) that are culturally specific and convey meaning about the world. Language is the most powerful of all human symbols, serving as the primary cultural representation of reality. “Language is the road map of a culture,” says Rita Mae Brown, “It tells you where its people come from and where they are going.” ([Brown, 1988](#)).

In its representational (symbolic) role, language is descriptive and comparative. Most of us presume that our representational view of the world is the objective reality and the same one shared by others. This limits possibilities for new learning and for transforming ourselves and our organizations. Our background listening says, “He’s an idiot and he won’t change,” or “This is how we do things around here and there’s nothing we can do about it.” Language is just a medium for labeling and quantifying things that are already there. Today is just another version of yesterday and much of what will happen tomorrow is already given.

Our understanding of the world is constituted in language, rather than being given by a fixed, objective reality. But language is not merely symbolic in its use. It is also the vehicle through which human beings construct the future. In this constitutive capacity, language articulates possibilities and has the ability to invent new futures. In Heidegger’s words, “language alone brings what is, as something that is, into the Open for the first time.... Language, by naming beings for the first time, first brings beings to word and to appearance (Heidegger, 1993).

In other words, the real power of language lies in its ability to bring forth, out of the unspoken realm, innovative ideas and possibilities. Language is an important medium leader use to generate action, get results, and create new futures. John Stuart Mill referred to language as “the light of the mind.” It is through language that we are able to articulate visions and “make sense” of new ways of understanding and exercising leadership. Language is the principal tool that leaders use to persuade people to revise their entrenched worldviews and incorporate new ways of thinking and working so they can create the necessary shared leadership to tackle tough challenges. Language from this viewpoint is not first and foremost a system of symbols representing what is, but rather that through which what it is to be human is disclosed and made accessible.

Watson and Crick created a new future with language in 1953 when they discovered the double-helical structure of DNA, cracking the code of genetic instructions for all life on earth. However, the significance of “revealing” a double helix that “unzipped” was not in labeling something that was always already there, but in making available new knowledge that allowed scientists to relate to and engage with the world more meaningfully (Souba, 2011). What was unknown was “language,” emancipated so the rest of the scientific community had access to it. Watson and Crick’s discovery paved the way for the birth of new knowledge domains, to include bioengineering, biotechnology, and bioinformatics.

The constitutive and symbolic properties of language are complementary, much like two sides of the same coin. Collier and Toomey explain:

If language is viewed as strictly representational, you assume that a given word may stand for a given object, and do so unambiguously.... [But] our daily conversations can be careless, full of ambiguity and misunderstanding, or exact with respect to rules and accepted canons of use.... A conception of language as purely representational is deaf to the full range of meaning of a given word: all language is inseparable from a host of assumptions and prejudices, in fact, what you mean by a certain word is likely to differ at least slightly (and perhaps significantly) from what I mean by it (Collier & Toomey, 1997).

We are born into language and we inevitably continuously live in language. Things (objects, people, conversations, situations, relationships) are events in the world whose meaning reflects how they are perceived, interpreted, experienced, and re-presented. Reality does not exist outside the process of representation. Hence, to speak is to be in collusion with reality as eloquently articulated by John Dewey in his magnum opus *Experience and Nature*:

When communication occurs.... Events turn into objects, things with a meaning.... Where communication exists, things in acquiring meaning thereby acquire representatives, surrogates, signs and implicates, which are infinitely more amenable to management, more permanent and more accommodating, than events in their estate (Dewey, 1929).

Dewey is asserting that language allows us to convert events into “talkable” objects that have meaning in the sense that we can label them, classify them, describe them, and argue about them. Without this ability to convert an event into an object, we could not participate meaningfully in the world. Our “reality” is a socially constructed interpretation generated by a shared language that functions to open up to us a distinctively human world that makes the world intelligible. Thus, while reality is not created solely by language, as humans we have the world we have because we have language. Our truth reflects the way the world has linguistically disclosed itself to each of us in our experience.

2.4. Taking Stock

When asking the question: What is the real world?, we must be cognizant of two things. First, we must keep in mind that any theory of reality resides in language, and thus is conceptual. Second, we must remember that reality isn't words; reality isn't an idea. It is easy to confuse the idea and the concept with reality. Indeed, sometimes the confusion goes so far that we forget that our outlook on life is just beliefs. Von Ward elaborates:

When people speak and act on worldviews so deeply inculcated since birth, they are unconscious of the fact they are simply beliefs. At a conscious level the beliefs are taken as real as one's hand. These beliefs—regardless of the lack of objective, external evidence—form a gyroscope-type mechanism that insures the individual's behavior remains consistent with his or her subconscious sense of self (Von Ward, 2012).

Because it is conceptual, language discriminates and “carves up the world.” The irony is that we use language in an attempt to capture and describe reality, and yet in so describing, we often drift away from reality. Language works by means of concepts, which are human constructions. As we have seen above, the map is not the terrain or territory that it represents. It has a similar structure to the territory, which in large part accounts for its usefulness. As relates to language, words are, at best, only maps of reality; they are not the objects that they represent. Thus, while language is useful in pointing out things in the world, we ought to be wary about confusing our descriptions of the world with the way things actually are. One reason we are presented with the multiplicity of meaning is because the map is not the territory.

As an example, consider the following: It is a fact in the world of academia that research requires grant money, which involves an application for funding. One way of interpreting this actuality would be to “see” it as a burdensome inconvenience. We can imagine someone saying, “Ugh, these NSF applications are such a pain. It's so time consuming and the chances that I'll ever even receive funding are so minimal. I only submit grants because it's an expectation.” On the other hand, someone might respond to the same set of facts with optimism: “Filling out these grants allows me the opportunity to receive funding to do research that could change the world for the better.” The former has a tone of disdain, the latter one of optimism. The facts are the same, and yet the meaning that is distilled from them is drastically different. Exemplary leaders use language to reframe the future so that even the most daunting challenges can become “hittable.” (Souba, *In Press*). This example illustrates the double-edged sword phenomena, that is, how language can either be destructive or constructive, depending how we use it. Leaders, in particular, must use language to constructively reframe organizational challenges such that their ways of being and acting (and those of others) are optimal for the situation they are dealing with.

How, then, do leaders accomplish this? That is, how, given these limitations of language, how can leaders ensure their effectiveness? How do we master language with greater care so that our conversations help us make the distinctions required to perceptively and prudently monitor and oversee our world and our lives? We offer a few suggestions below.

3. Being an Effective Leader Notwithstanding the Limitations of Language

In all their dealings, exemplary leaders are aware that language creates contexts and contexts are, by nature, limiting. This awareness doesn't immunize them from the limitations of language but it does position them to use language in ways that maximizes its impact.

3.1. Be as Clear and Concise as Possible to Foster a Shared Understanding

Language functions as an essential tool that leaders use to communicate, describe, inform and set direction but it is only as good as what people do with it. For leaders, language is not simply an utterance. Exemplary leaders use language to bring forth, out of the unspoken realm, fresh ideas and novel possibilities. “We are nothing save the words we use,” writes Richard Rorty (Rorty, 1991). Recognizing this, leaders stress to others the importance and power of language.

Moore pointed out more than 100 years ago that “talk is cheap, and it is one of the few luxuries many of us can afford; nevertheless, the man whose perpetual loquacity converts him into a nuisance should be required to hire a hall, where he could talk to himself without disturbing his fellow creatures” (Moore, 1909). However, good leaders know that talk is not cheap. They recognize that language is the resource that affords them the opportunity to enroll others in a shared vision and they are especially clear about three things: direction, values (culture), and

expectations. In the words of Marcus Buckingham, “Clarity is the antidote to anxiety, and therefore clarity is the preoccupation of the effective leader. If you do nothing else as a leader, be clear” (Buckingham, 2005). The strategy and the way in which performance and reward are linked must be both understandable and concise. Culture is the most difficult element of the organization to change and usually the last. Former IBM CEO Lou Gerstner said it this way: “You can’t talk a culture into changing. You can’t just exhort people to be different. You’ve got to point to fundamental strategic changes you’re going to implement in a company and then drive the execution of that strategy. And it is in the execution of the strategy that the culture begins to change” (Lohr, 2002).

3.2. Encourage Dialogue and Diversity of Perspective

Calvert points out that “it is seldom understood that the world we perceive is the world we see through words, that the world of experience is the world of arbitrarily conferred meanings. Each of us has learned to see the world not as it is, but through the distorting glass of our words. It is through words that we are made human, and it is through words that we are dehumanized” (Calvert, 1972).

Dialogue is the antivenom to the toxic dehumanization that words can create. A dialogue is not a discussion. In a discussion, conflicting views are shared and each party argues for and defends their viewpoint with the goal of persuading others to accept their position. The emphasis is on winning rather than on learning. Dialogue, on the other hand, is explorative; it emphasizes suspending judgment and listening generously. Bohm and colleagues stress that dialogue is about inquiry into the kinds of processes that fragment and interfere with honest, open communication (Bohm, Factor, & Garrett, 1991). In dialogue, people can explore the individual and collective presuppositions, beliefs, and values that often imperceptibly control their behaviors. It can reveal the factors that lead the group to avoid certain issues. Increasing trust between members of the group leads to the sharing of thoughts and feelings that are usually kept hidden.

Wilhelm von Humboldt reminds us that “the diversity of languages is not a diversity of signs and sounds but a diversity of views of the world” (Brown, 1967). The single biggest challenge for the world today is getting people with diverse views of the world to get along. Overcoming this challenge will require lots of dialogue. Heed the words of Martin Schultz, President of the European Parliament, when he addressed the University of Siena in April 2016:

My message is a simple one: we live in a world that communicates faster and more efficiently than ever before, but it is a world where dialogue is becoming ever more scarce and superficial—and this is a danger for everyone.... Dialogue can only truly take place if we listen to each other’s concerns in a genuine fashion.... Dialogue is the search for a synthesis: the search for definition of common norms, rules and values which can guide our public and private life. Dialogue is the antidote against any form of radicalization, because it works like a magnet that always reminds us of our shared humanity (Schultz, 2016).

3.3. Using Transformative Language to Rewrite the Future

Transformative language, also called future-based language, has the power to create new futures by helping people expose their long-standing outdated framing lenses that prevent them from seeing new possibilities for the future. This kind of language doesn’t just describe how things show up, it transforms how they show up (Zaffron & Logan, 2009). It does this by reframing the future.

The future is the primary temporal dimension for human beings because we understand ourselves by projecting ourselves forward into some way of life, some way of being and acting. Our lives are made meaningful by the possibilities we project. When faced by a particular challenge or dilemma, I can choose this or that; I can choose to be this way or that way. My choices are not unlimited as they may be restricted by practical issues, fear, my skill set, or my preferences. “Such projection,” notes Blattner, “is not a cognitive or intellectual achievement, nor even an imaginative one, but rather a concrete form of conduct” (Blattner, 2005). Fairfield elaborates:

To live is to be oriented toward a future. While we live in the present, and draw upon from the past, human life is inherently future-oriented in the sense that our choices and actions are undertaken with an anticipation of what they will bring about. It is for the sake of its future consequences that much of our present assumes the form that it does. Particular endeavors are undertaken for the sake of a future that one is committed to (Fairfield, 2001).

Virtually every task or responsibility that involves projecting yourself onto possibilities (e.g., what is you plan for closing the budget deficit?) involves a self-projection into the future. From an adaptive perspective, a capacity to imagine and plan for our future confers a survival advantage. But the future is also the framing lens for the present. When the future you're living into has a powerful underpinning, it gives your life meaning and purpose and it gives you the wherewithal to bring that future into the present.

Creating a new future is first and foremost about “seeing” differently. Seeing differently involves a change in your framing lenses (your beliefs and values) through which the circumstances you're dealing with show up for you. This capacity is critical because in order to change your mind you must “see” differently (knowing more is not enough). When you change your mind you alter your view of reality. When your view of reality (truth) changes, you inevitably change your world. Because we make sense of the world by way of language, change is always a linguistically mediated event. Peter Block elaborates:

A shift in our speaking and listening is the essence of transformation. If we have any desire to create an alternative future, it is only going to happen through a shift in our language. If we want a change in culture, for example, the work is to change the conversation—or, more precisely, to have a conversation that we have not had before, one that has the power to create something new in the world. This insight forces us to question the value of our stories, the positions we take, our love of the past, and our way of being in the world (Block, 2009).

4. Final Thoughts

We have stressed the importance of future oriented language because it is a vital and underutilized resource leaders have at their disposal. Changing people's entrenched beliefs and behaviors that have been successful for decades almost always requires a story about the future that engages and captivates them. That future, which is only a possibility today, must be appealing enough to produce the necessary courage in people to take on the status quo. It must be “hittable” enough so that it shows up for people as feasibly solvable and they simultaneously show up for themselves as capable of tackling it (Souba, *In Press*). And, it must be inspirational enough to unite and align them so that their decisions and actions can be coordinated efficiently and effectively. Our best leaders use language to jolt people loose from their engrained framing lenses, so they can recontextualize (reframe) their leadership challenges in such a way that new ways of being and acting are the norm, providing them with new possibilities (previously unavailable) for exercising effective leadership. Language and human “being” are inseparable. As succinctly stated by Charles Gerkin:

Language constructs world. To have a world, to live in a world, means, for humans, to inhabit a time and place in which a certain language is connected with experience to give meaning to that experience.... Whenever any event occurs in our lives, be that so small an event as stubbing one's toe on a crack in the sidewalk, or so large and significant an event as entering into a marriage or contracting a dreaded disease, it does not become an experience to us until language is attached to the event and it is given meaning (Gerkin, 2005).

The performative function of language conveys its ability not just to communicate information or label things but also to bring about change. Heidegger reminds us that we do not just speak language; language also speaks us. Language opens the world up to us and, in so doing, it is language that speaks, not human beings. Said otherwise, language does not describe the world we see—we see the world language describes. “It is not we who play with words,” he notes, “but the nature of language plays with us ... long since and always” (Heidegger, 1968).

Thus, what is distinctive about human “being” is that the world that shows up for us is (in large part) constituted in, shaped by, and accessible through language. Access to our life/world is achieved through (granted by) language. This fact has enormous implications for leadership because when you are being a leader and exercising leadership you will be functioning in the sphere of language. Guignon says it this way, “We can never encounter a world as it is in itself, untouched by the constituting activity of linguistic schematizations.... On this constitutive view, then, the language in which we find ourselves generates the template through which we come to understand ourselves and the world” (Guignon, 1983).

Language, however, is far from perfect. It divides the inseparable whole into component parts, grants identity to each part, and names that part with a word. “Things” in the world come into being only once we have labeled them

with words. Yet, language does not describe the world we see—we see the world language describes. In the words of Collier and Toomey, “Words are not windowpanes through which we view objects in the world. Language cannot be cleansed of its ambiguity (Collier & Toomey, 1997).

Because human beings are informationally closed systems there can be no direct transfer of information between them; we are only in touch with our internal experiences and everything we know is personal, private, and generated by ourselves (Robinson, 1991; Raskin, 2016). We can only ever talk of our own experience; knowledge does not move from the outside world to inside a person. It moves from inside out. What is outside triggers internal processes from which we create our own internally generated understanding and meaning-making.

Leader and leadership, then, are social constructs that live in language. What leadership means to one culture is likely to be different from its meaning in another culture. According to Anderson and Goolishian, “language is a social creation, ... an active negotiation or attribution of meaning and ... a local phenomenon that is constantly evolving.... Human systems exist only in the domain of meaning and intersubjective linguistic reality... Humans, then, can be defined as language-generating, meaning-generating systems engaged in an activity that is intersubjective and recursive” (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988). Without this capacity for speaking and meaning-making, leadership would not be possible.

Leader and leadership are only as effective as the language we have for them. While all human beings appear to be capable of pre-linguistic interpretations only by way of language can we talk about our challenging issues. At a young age we must come to terms with language in order to understand the world. In Wittgenstein’s words: “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world” (Wittgenstein, 1961).

Why do we need robust dialogue and exemplary leadership in the first place? Because we must be ever cognizant of both the virtuous and errant sides of being human and having language at our disposal—of our capacity for compassion and commitment that makes effective leadership feasible in the first place and of our capacity for in authenticity and injustice that makes it essential. In the words of Stephen Hawking:

“For millions of years, mankind lived just like the animals. Then something happened which unleashed the power of our imagination. We learned to talk and we learned to listen. Speech has allowed the communication of ideas, enabling human beings to work together to build the impossible. Mankind’s greatest achievements have come about by talking, and its greatest failures by not talking. It doesn’t have to be like this. Our greatest hopes could become reality in the future. With the technology at our disposal, the possibilities are unbounded. All we need to do is make sure we keep talking (Hawking, 1993).

Who will call the shots, the language or the speaker?

5. Conclusion

Every organization is, most fundamentally, a labyrinth of conversations that occur, often automatically, day in and day out. Language is the leader’s most important resource but it is far from perfect—it can be vague, inaccurate and subtle. Leaders must 1) be as clear and concise as possible with their messages; 2) encourage dialogue at all levels of the organization, and 3) use transformative language to invent new futures. Good leaders use stories to create linguistic distinctions that extricate people from their entrenched worldviews. While the symbolic (representational) role of language is essential, the real power of language resides in its constitutive capacities. Futures are created in language and rewritten in language.

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