

Inspiring others: the language of leadership

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Executive Overview

While we have learned a great deal about the necessity of strategic vision and effective leadership, we have overlooked the critical link between vision and the leader's ability to powerfully communicate its essence. In the future, leaders will not only have to be effective strategists, but rhetoricians who can energize through the words they choose. The era of managing by dictate is ending and is being replaced by an era of managing by inspiration. Foremost among the new leadership skills demanded of this era will be the ability to craft and articulate a message that is highly motivational. Unfortunately, it seems that few business leaders and managers today possess such skills. To make matters worse, our business culture and educational system may even discourage these skills.

Conger examines why these skills are so critical and what the new language skills of leadership will be. He looks at how leaders through their choice of words, values, and beliefs can craft commitment and confidence in their company missions. He also explores the importance of rhetorical techniques such as stories, metaphors, and rhythm to generate excitement and enthusiasm about the leader's message.

Article

From the recent attention that the subject of leadership has received, we know that one critical role of effective leaders is to be skillful craftsmen of their organization's mission. We also know that of equal importance is the ability to communicate their missions in ways that generate great intrinsic appeal.¹ A leader must not only be able to detect opportunities in the environment but to describe them in ways that maximize their significance. This ability to describe is captured by the simple story of two stone masons who, while working on the same project, were asked what they were doing. The first replied: "I am cutting stone;" the second: "I am building a great cathedral." The latter was able to describe his work in a more far-reaching and meaningful way. Work for him had a higher purpose. Leadership today must embody this same ability—the capacity to articulate an organization's mission and communicate it in ways that inspire. Sadly however, this capacity depends upon skills that have been largely neglected by the business world.

Why the neglect of such important abilities? In part, it is because our business language confines itself to more rational, logical approaches. There is a tendency to avoid emotional expressiveness for instance. The emphasis instead has been on more static presentation skills often using charts and graphs rich in quantitative measures to convey ideas. The speaker's tone and message convey only a limited range of energy and emotion. The very concept of an executive as a rhetorician and inspiring speaker seems a radical departure from these conventions of business behavior. Even management researchers have only recently begun to highlight the important link between language and leadership.² Yet the world around us has changed radically. The ability to transform an organization by dictate is a way of the past. A more educated, more intrinsically motivated workplace demands that executives and managers recast their image more in the

light of an effective political leader. They must learn to sell themselves and their missions—to 'stump' for their cause—and this depends on highly effective language skills.

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These are skills which I believe can be learned. One of ancient Greece's greatest and most persuasive orators was Demosthenes whose first public speech was so feebly delivered and tortuous that his audience laughed him out of the Greek assembly. As he walked home disheartened and resigned to his inability to speak, an actor named Satyrus caught up with him and gave him a lesson in how to deliver a speech. Demosthenes then made himself an underground study where he stayed for weeks at a time practicing his oratory away from the distractions of the world. He cured a stammer by speaking with pebbles in his mouth and his shortness of breath by shouting out poetry while running uphill. With these efforts, he eventually acquired the ability to hold an Athenian audience spellbound. While this is perhaps an extreme pathway to effective speaking, there is a language of leadership that can be learned by using certain practices and techniques.

This "language of leadership" can be broken into two distinct skill categories. The first is the process of defining the purpose of the organization in a meaningful way. In essence, this is the leader's message. This process is called "framing." The second skill is the leader's ability to use symbolic language to give emotional power to his or her message. This is a process of "rhetorical crafting." While the message provides a sense of direction, rhetoric heightens its motivational appeal and determines whether it will be sufficiently memorable to influence the day-to-day decision-making of an organization. To use an analogy, we might think of holiday times when a gift's wrappings are often as impactful as the gift itself. Let us begin with the notion of framing.

The Notion of Framing

We know from research on transformational leaders that crafting and communicating an inspirational vision is critical to their success. The way in which a leader describes the future purpose of his or her organization is, in essence, the vision.³ In the simplest terms, a leader can choose to say "I want us to build X number of products by this year and return so much on our assets" or "I want us to revolutionize the way people see and act in the world through the use of our products." Both statements are defining a purpose, though with very different meanings. Both are distinct ways of "framing" an organization's purpose—one around quantitative measures, the other around a grander purpose. Frames then are essentially snapshots that leaders take of their organization's purpose. In a larger sense, frames also provide a map for action. If we believe and describe the world as flat or square, we will "frame" our understanding of reality through that perspective and act accordingly. For example, we are less likely to go sailing toward the horizons of the earth than someone who sees the world as round. Simply "framing" or wording an opportunity in a particular manner influences our perceptions of its outcomes. In one research study, participants were told of a project having an 80 percent chance of success and of another project having a 20 percent chance of failure and then were asked to choose one. Inevitably they chose the former, yet both outcomes are the same.

When describing an organization's mission or state of affairs, a leader is essentially framing it to interpret reality for followers. Compare, for example, Steven Jobs' comments to the staff of his new computer company NEXT:

"... we wanted to start a company that had a lot to do with education and in particular, higher education, colleges and universities. So our vision is that there's

a revolution in software going on now on college and university campuses. And it has to do with providing two types of breakthrough software. One is called simulated learning environments. You can't give a student in biology a five million dollar recombinant DNA laboratory. But you can simulate those things, you can simulate them on a very powerful computer. It is not possible for students to afford these things. It is not possible for most faculty members to afford these things. So if we can take what we do best, which is to find really great technology and pull it down to a price point that's affordable to people, if we can do the same thing for this type of computer, which is maybe ten times as powerful as a personal computer, that we did for personal computers, then I think we can make a real difference in the way the learning experience happens in the next five years. And that's what we're trying to do. . . . [and] one of my largest wishes is that we build Next from the heart. And the people that are thinking about coming to work for us, or buying our products or who want to sell us things, feel that, that we're doing this because we have a passion about it. We're doing this because we really care about the higher educational process, not because we want to make a buck, not because, you know, we just want to do it to do it".⁴

You will notice that Steven Jobs does not describe his company's vision as building X number of computers by a certain date or achieving a certain annual growth rate or simply expanding into a particular market. Rather he constructs and frames the strategic goal of NEXT as revolutionizing the educational system of a nation. Contrast this description with the goals of a senior executive who is also describing his organization's mission for the next year:

"Good morning, and welcome to our sixth annual management meeting. As in the past, the purpose of the meeting is to review and discuss the overall objectives for 1985 . . . I am certain 1985 will be another successful year. The goals are high and consistent with prior year's objectives. As in the past, our principal objective will be to accomplish our sales goal while limiting price off promotional activity. Control of operating expenses throughout the company will be the key to successfully reaching our profitability goals—especially in view of the economic environment in which we are presently operating. Last week we presented the operating and capital budgets to the corporate staff for approval. I am pleased to report that the budgets were generally approved and the corporation has made available up to \$39 million of capital to support the growth and improve the profitability of the Beverage Division. This is an increase of approximately \$7mm over last year's capital budget of \$32mm and is, indeed, an expression of confidence in the ability of the management of this division to cultivate and exploit the potential of our various markets. We have an obligation to prudently employ this capital to those areas of the business where it will be most productive and profitable for both the short term and more importantly the long term. Incremental and profitable case sales are expected where developmental capital is invested. Each manager will be responsible for generating a 20 percent return on all developmental capital invested. . . ."

He goes on to additional descriptions of budgeting and human resource issues. What we see is a straightforward exposition on the company's operating goals, budgets, and policies—devoid of a more visionary and emotionally appealing purpose and instead focused more on static operating details. Also the language chosen is mechanical, and emotional content is largely absent. A stark contrast with Job's more inspiring and visionary framing of his company's mission. Yet Jobs could have framed his mission as simply producing a better personal computer or enhancing company revenues and profitability. Instead, he casts the mission in a societal contribution frame. NEXT becomes a vehicle for altering the landscape of education.

Effective framing of an organizational mission will ensure emotional impact particularly in terms of building a sense of confidence and excitement about the future. A regional telephone company undergoing separation from its parent organization, AT&T, during deregulation was experiencing great anxiety over the accompanying loss of revenue and product support from its parent. There was a serious concern that the company would essentially fail to perform effectively in the new deregulated environment. The company president carefully reframed the organization's future from one of great uncertainty and turmoil to one of unusual and highly promising opportunity by describing the organization as being on the cutting edge of new service and product opportunities. A colleague commented on the impact of this perspective, "His vision is that in spite of all that has happened to the business, the future is a positive one. Take the best from what we were to innovate to be even better and unburden those things that could be cumbersome. The vision builds a sense of security. When the world seems to be falling down on us, he says we are a strong, viable company with opportunities we never had before."

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To create a meaningful frame for an organizational mission, values and beliefs are an essential component—especially those that reinforce commitment and provide guidance for daily actions. Their selection is crucial since they are the mechanical guts that power the vision's acceptance and accomplishment. By selecting and amplifying specific values and beliefs, the leader further frames interpretations of events, problems, or issues as they relate to the vision.⁵

Amplifying Values

If we think of values as the states of being or modes of conduct that are worthy of promotion and protection, then value amplification is simply the process of identifying and elevating certain values as basic to the overall mission.⁶ We know from research on transformational leadership that at the core of effective leadership is the creation of values which inspire, provide meaning for, and instill a sense of purpose in an organization's members.⁷ When describing the organization's mission, a skillful leader will select values or stories that illustrate values that have strong appeal to subordinates and justify their activities in highly acceptable ways.

If we turn to Martin Luther King and his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, we can see clearly the importance of framing a mission around certain values.

"... When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be granted the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, which has come back marked "insufficient funds." But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds . . .

So I say to you, my friends, that even though we must face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed—we hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal. This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning—'my country 'tis of thee; sweet land of liberty; of thee I sing', land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride; from every mountain side, let freedom ring—and if America is to be a great nation, this must become true."

Though his speech addressed the black man's plight in America, King purposely framed his mission's description around values that had great meaning for white Americans. For example, at the time of his speech, he had discerned a growing positive shift among many whites toward his position. In addition, the Congress was considering President Kennedy's Civil Rights Act of 1963. Sensing the possibility of support from society at large (and a nationwide television audience for his speech), King choose to reach out to white America, framing his struggle in values central to them. This decision contrasted sharply with his earlier, more scolding approaches to white society. To make his appeal effective, King drew on lines from the song "America"—lines that white Americans had sung as school children, and quotes from Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and the Declaration of Independence—lines that white Americans had recited as school children: "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." King's inference was that if Americans truly believed in their country and its values, then they must also believe in civil rights: "If America is to be a great nation, this must become true." By framing his movement's values in terms of the nation's values and their protection, King heightened the significance of the black man's struggle for every American. By carefully framing his mission in this way, he maximized its potential acceptance by mainstream Americans.

Business leaders may use similar techniques in framing their own organization's mission. In this case, the analogy with a social movement is quite appropriate, for the more potent business leaders transform their organization's missions into pseudo-social movements. For example, Mary Kay Ash, founder of the Dallas-based Mary Kay Cosmetics Company, ties a set of values around equal rights for women to her cosmetics company's mission:

"My objective was just to help women. It was not to make a tremendous amount of sales. I want women to earn money commensurate with men. I want them to be paid on the basis of what they have between their ears and their brains and not because they are male or female."

Her company's mission is, in part, a social movement for women. Mary Kay also draws upon Christian values as a centerpiece for her company's mission. She will frequently say: "Our company motto is: God first, family second, and business third. In that order, everything works, and out of that order, nothing works." In company talks, she continually draws links to these values—even to the most mundane of company activities:

"Back in the days of the Roman empire the legions of the emperor conquered the known world. There was, however, one band of people the Romans never conquered. These people were the followers of the great teacher from Bethlehem. Historians have long since discovered that one of the reasons for the sturdiness of this folk was their habit of meeting together weekly. They shared their difficulties and they stood side by side. Does this remind you of something? The way we stand side by side and share our knowledge as well as our difficulties with each other at our weekly unit meetings."

In his turnaround of Chrysler, Iaccoca framed part of the company's mission around the preservation of the basic American values of the free enterprise system, entrepreneurship, and protection of America's jobs. The need for a government bailout was described as pivotal to that mission:

"We were asking (the government): Would this country really be better off if Chrysler folded and the nation's unemployment rate went up another half of one percent overnight? Would free enterprise really be saved if Chrysler failed and tens of thousands of jobs were lost to the Japanese? Would our free-market system

really be more competitive without the million-plus cars and trucks that Chrysler builds and sells each year?" . . . we explained (to the government) that we're really an amalgam of little guys, we're an assembly company. We have 11,000 suppliers and 4,000 dealers. Almost all of these people are small businessmen—not fat cats. We need a helping hand—not a handout."

It is an appeal to values of free enterprise—"would our free-market system really be more competitive . . ." and entrepreneurship ". . . all of these people are small businessmen—not fat cats." In essence, what Iaccoca does so skillfully is turn the argument to his advantage.⁸ The government's loan is an opportunity to reinforce and strengthen American's competitive position in the world and to reaffirm the government's commitment to entrepreneurship and small businesses. To do otherwise is to rebut the guiding values of the society and Chrysler's missions—making it difficult to say "no." In framing an organizational mission, a leader must then select guiding values that have deep intrinsic appeal for their organizations and constituents—these will provide a powerful *raison d'être*.

Belief Amplification

Belief amplification is the second technique for framing activities and the organization's mission. While values refer to the goals that the leader or organization wishes to attain or promote, beliefs are the ideas about which factors support or impede actions taken to achieve those desired values. There are four basic belief categories that are important to organizational leaders in framing their missions and activities related to them: 1) the mission's or task's importance, 2) its root causes or need, 3) stereotypes about antagonists of the mission (both within the organization and externally) and 4) the efficacy of the organization to succeed.⁹

The Mission's Importance

As mentioned earlier, beliefs about the importance or seriousness of the leader's mission are a primary focus for leaders. Sometimes to maximize impact, leaders describe or exaggerate the current situation as intolerable and then frame their future vision as the only viable and most attractive pathway. A speech by the president of a data processing consulting company illustrates how one leader communicated this belief to his employees:

Today the world is moving very rapidly towards decentralized data processing. There is a shocking rate of change. It is critical for us to understand this because the IBM salesman may soon know more than we will. In 1981, 1.9 percent of the total personal computers sold were made by IBM, today 21 percent. The challenge is very obvious. We must rechart our direction. Do not be fooled by our success to date. Our techniques which once were avant garde are now accepted . . . The traditional DP knowledge base has matured. Now this information is available in books. Others have copied us. We must rechart our direction. Our task now is to move into immature products like pc's (personal computers) and distributed computers. The market for knowledge in these areas is huge . . . For example, I cannot emphasize enough the critical role that pc's are playing. In 1982, the Bank of America had 500 of them; by 1984, they had 5000 . . . You have a real challenge not to become obsolete in the next three years with the growth of pc's and the move to decentralized data processing. You individually need to get yourself immersed, consumed by that marketplace . . . Your role is to keep our firm at the leading edge as we have done before. Because if we fail to innovate over the next three years, we will have a timebomb on our hands . . . The way we will stay winners is by contributing to the body of knowledge. We must be consumed by the process of delivering quality ideas, advice, and results to our clients. Our strategy is and must be intellectual leadership in the management of computers."

We see this leader driving home to staff his perceptions of a rapidly changing world filled with serious competitive challenges. A picture of dire consequences is painted if the company does not continue to innovate and specifically address emerging niche markets (pc's and distributed computers). He powerfully conveys the seriousness of the firm's future mission and as an outcome provides motivational energy for the organization.

The Need for the Mission

The second dimension of beliefs concerns why the mission has arisen in the first place. Mary Kay's explanation that her company exists to help women homemakers is an example. Jobs speaks about the need that he feels NEXT will fulfill as he reflects on an earlier experience:

"I felt it the first time when I visited a school and I had like the 3rd and 4th grades in a classroom one time, and they had a whole classroom full of Apple IIs and I spent a few hours there and I saw these 3rd and 4th graders growing up completely different than I grew up, because of this machine . . . And here was this idea (the Apple computer) taken through all these stages resulting in a classroom full of kids growing up with some insights and fundamentally different experiences which I thought might be very beneficial to their lives, because of a germ of an idea a few years ago".¹⁰

The need for the NEXT computer company then is based on the belief that computers play an integral and highly positive role in education. To achieve strong intrinsic appeal, the mission's basic purpose must speak to deeply held values that serve a larger purpose or aim towards realizing the potential of employees.

Antagonists of the Mission

Stereotyping about antagonists of the mission is important for generating commitment and cohesion. Often beliefs about antagonists provide models of what the leader's organization is not and so define by contrast. For example, an article recounting a speech by Steven Jobs to the Boston Computer Society in 1984 captures this use of an antagonist to build commitment to the leader's mission. It begins with a description of Jobs approaching the speaker's podium carrying with him a small beige case. The audience is aware that within the case is the company's new MacIntosh personal computer, Apple Computer's \$15 million response to IBM's recent entry into the home computer market:

Taking an aggressive stance behind the podium, Jobs smiles, his face suddenly illuminated on the giant rear-projection screen mounted behind him. For anyone familiar with the MacIntosh sci-fi commercial—a take-off on George Orwell's 1984 . . . there is an immediate and delicious irony: instead of Big Brother's (read Big Blue's [IBM]) intimidating visage staring down from the wall, here is Steve Job's. He begins to speak.

"The year is 1958, and a small company has succeeded in perfecting a new technology. It is called xerography. IBM has the opportunity to acquire rights to the new technology but elects not to. Thus, Xerox is born." Jobs reads on like a hyped-up Edward R. Murrow delivering a condensed history of post-chip technology: 1968—Digital Equipment Corporation introduces the first viable minicomputer, and IBM dismisses the market; 1978—Apple jumps into the home-computer field, IBM ignores it; 1981—IBM finally brings out its own personal computer (hisses from the bleachers) and quickly dominates the trade news. Building to his main thrust—that MacIntosh represents a new wave of home hardware—Jobs can't resist overreaching. His company, he posits, is "the last force

for freedom" in the marketplace. The implicit threat: Fight IBM to the last bare desktop or surrender to the forces of evil.¹¹

By implicit assumption, Apple embodies the opposite qualities of an IBM. It must be a quick-to-market, entrepreneurial and freer-thinking organization. These play on the core cultural values of the organization itself heightening the potency of their meaning.

Apple is also portrayed to the world and its employees as the embodiment of these American values inducing positive regard from the audience.

Efficacy of the Mission

Finally, beliefs about the efficacy of the organization are critically important. In essence, they build confidence in the entire mission. A leader will draw analogies, for instance, to earlier proven successes to confirm the likelihood of the current mission succeeding. So when Fred Smith, the chief executive of Federal Express, describes why his Zap Mail project (a facsimile service) will succeed despite early failures (although it did ultimately end in failure), he offers this justification:

When you're trying to do something that's never been done before, it's really sophistry to think you can project out in the future a set of numbers and have reality correspond to that. We started Zap Mail off under one set of circumstances and assumptions, and predictably those assumptions were all wrong. It was very similar to the situation in the express business. We started that off with a series of assumptions that were totally erroneous, and it was only when we threw all of those away and really started the television campaign that got to be very famous . . . that the thing really ramped up."¹²

In this case, Smith is drawing a direct link between the slumping Zap Mail project and the company's core express business which ultimately proved highly successful. Both started out with the wrong assumptions, he argued, yet express mail eventually succeeded. The problems with Zap Mail he is arguing are part of the natural progression of an ultimately successful product. He even uses the word "predictably" to assure the listener that indeed this is a very predictable process. The key to success is simply television advertising—implicitly he is saying that this is all that is needed to ensure Zap Mail's success. So he portrays the reality of the Zap Mail project as hopeful and attainable. We know today that, in the end, Zap Mail did prove to be a costly failure raising an important ethical issue concerning the potential misuse of these practices.

In conclusion, framing is the leader's interpretation of his or her organization's purpose with accompanying values and beliefs. It is an opportunity for leaders to construct an appealing and motivating force for change and transformation in their organizations. But framing is only the first step. For while the leader's message is critical, the process by which it is communicated appears to be just as significant. We know from research in political science that it is not uncommon for two leaders to present the same message and yet receive different responses.¹³ The style of verbal communications is a critical distinguishing factor in whether the message will be remembered and endorsed. This is where the art of rhetoric enters the language of leadership.

Rhetorical Techniques of Inspirational Leaders

A leader's words often assume their greatest impact as symbols rather than as literal meanings. Apart from an appeal to emotions and ideals, inspiring leaders use a number of rhetorical techniques such as metaphors and analogy or different language styles or rhythmic devices to ensure that the symbolic content of their message has a profound impact.

Metaphors, Analogies, and Organizational Stories

Metaphors and analogy draw a relationship of likeness between two things—often very unlike things—and are used for vividness, clarification, or to express certain emotions or interpret reality. For example, by a figurative comparison with a pool of water, John F. Kennedy conveyed the need for politicians to temper themselves through more intellectual influences: “. . . the political profession needs to have its temperature lowered in the cooling waters of the scholastic pool.” Earlier, I drew an analogy between gifts and their wrappings and the processes I am describing in this article. The power of metaphor and analogies comes from their ability to capture and illustrate an experience of reality by appealing simultaneously to the various senses of the listener. As we will see, there is an appeal to the emotions, to the intellect, to imagination, and to values. This variety of stimulation ensures a more vivid experience for the listener.

Mary Kay Ash commonly employs metaphors in her talks. One of her more popular metaphors is of a bumble bee which she uses to describe the reality of the women who work for her. “You see,” she begins, “a bee shouldn’t be able to fly; its body is too heavy for its wings. But the bumblebee doesn’t know this and it flies very well.” Mary Kay explains the message of this metaphor: “They (women) come to us not knowing they can fly. Finally, with help and encouragement, they find their wings—and then they fly very well indeed.”¹⁴

If we put ourselves in the listener’s position, it is likely that as we hear this story we will visualize an oversized bee that is flying with grace and speed. The listener then goes through a mental process of deciphering what the message means to them on a visual, cognitive, and emotional level. There is often a moment of puzzlement trying to decode the message—this ensures that the listener is both stimulated and concentrating on the speaker’s message. In this case, the metaphor presents a paradox—something that should not fly but does. The listener then interprets this paradox in terms of herself. For Mary Kay’s audience, the bumblebee metaphor eloquently captures the dilemma of the North American housewives to whom Mary Kay is appealing. These are individuals who have been child- and house-bound with little sense of their ability to build a successful career and to develop financial independence. By joining the Mary Kay organization, the metaphor is saying that women can achieve a sense of freedom through their own Mary Kay cosmetics business. They can develop their own “wings.”

The metaphor also suggests that it is others’ expectations that have kept housewives unaware of their “wings” and their ability to fly. Mary Kay is essentially saying: “You can fly. Others have told you that you are not constructed for success only because they do not know the true powers hidden within you.” The message brings the locus of control to within the person: “You already have this ability within you. You do not need to search for it.” In this case, a simple metaphor is able to convey a powerful, uplifting set of messages. We see the importance of linking metaphors to audience concerns or needs.

Lee Iacocca has also been particularly adept in the use of metaphor and analogy. In explaining a decision to cut his salary to one dollar, for example, he employed the war metaphor of a commander joining his troops in the trenches:

“I didn’t take one dollar a year to be a martyr. I took it because I had to go into the pits.”

He then draws an analogy to the family:

“I call this equality of sacrifice . . . It wasn’t the loans that saved us, although we needed them badly. It was the hundreds of millions of dollars given up by

everybody involved. It was like a family getting together and saying "We've got a loan from our rich uncle and now we're going to prove that we can pay him back."

He implies that he and his fellow Chrysler workers are all members of a common family working hard to prove their worth. By invoking this analogy of himself and Chrysler as a family, he attempts to create strong identification between himself and the average Chrysler worker. He interprets the hardships that Chrysler employees must experience as necessary to help the "family." This rhetorical tactic effectively plays on emotions associating the Chrysler situation with traditional family values. By tying the company crisis to a positive analogy, workers are provided with a rationale for their difficulties and the motivation to prove their worth as a "family" to "Uncle" Sam.¹⁵

Why are metaphors and analogies so powerful in communicating ideas and goals? And are they more powerful than arguments supported by logic and statistics? These are important questions since corporations and MBA programs encourage the latter—carefully planned managerial presentations supported with a wealth of statistical information. And while such presentations are critical to effective decision-making, this style has become so engrained that managers use a similar format in speeches, in pep talks to their organizations, and in discussions with customers and analysts. Leaders, especially the more inspirational ones, appear to more often use such forums to "orate" and to convey their messages through metaphors, analogies, and stories.

There are two streams of research that support and explain the greater impact of metaphors and analogies over rational discourse. The first comes from the field of speech communications where research shows that these devices appear to excite the imagination of the listener and create consecutive states of tension (puzzlement—recoil) and tension release (insight and resolution).¹⁶ The listener is not a passive receiver of information but is triggered into a state of active thinking as they puzzle over the meaning of the story and attempt to make sense of it usually in light of their own situation. This process is so engaging that it fosters listener attention and interest.

In addition, studies from social psychology explain why these rhetorical devices are a more persuasive and effective means of communicating ideas.¹⁷ It has been found that people treat statistical summaries as if they were uninformative. This type of information appears to lack impact because of its abstract, colorless nature. In contrast, brief, face-to-face comments have been found to have a substantial impact on decision-making. It might be concluded that information is used in proportion to its "vividness."

Stories, for example, convey more vividly the values and behaviors that are important to an organization. For example, in one organization, I commonly heard a particular story repeated in company interviews that reinforced the necessity of being able to cope with the unexpected. The story went like this: An MBA candidate was being recruited by the firm. At the end of a day of interviews, he had met with everyone except the company's charismatic president. Up until this point, there was a clear consensus that the young man should be hired. At 5:30 p.m., he met with the president who promptly asked if he would join him with another manager for drinks. Off they went to a nearby bar at which point, the president called his wife and the wife of the manager to join them for dinner. The MBA preceded off to dinner having yet to begin his interview with the president. Dinner ended at midnight—still no interview had been conducted. The president then asked the recruit to his home for the actual interview. The young man balked with surprise, saying he was tired and needed to return home. Needless to say, he was not offered the position. The company president and others repeated this

story often to illustrate that the qualifications needed by the company included a willingness to "roll with the punches" and "to go the extra mile" that his organization's mission demanded. The story was a far more powerful and vivid means of illustrating what the leader saw as important values and behaviors than simple statements on his part that employees should be willing to demonstrate greater commitment. You may have noted that I have also used stories throughout this article to convey ideas and capture the reader's attention such the one about Demosthenes.

Stories or metaphors are most potent when they invoke meanings or symbols that have deep cultural roots, and as a result, elicit stronger emotions.¹⁸ If we return to the Steven Jobs speech to the Boston Computer Society, we see that through his story and allusion to Apple as the "freedom" and IBM as the last force for "Big Brother," Jobs calls upon several important cultural myths and symbols. For one, he invokes the story of David and Goliath—the underdog forces of good (Apple) which must fight and triumph against the giant forces of evil (IBM). The listener, at some level, cues into emotional associations—feelings of positive regard for Apple, its difficult task, and its courage. Negative feelings are fostered towards the giant IBM that attempts to crush this positive force. The "big brother" references to George Orwell whose book 1984 enjoyed widespread popular appeal among Job's generation also triggers audience associations with a menacing giant (IBM) who is seeking omnipresent control. It is the classic struggle between the forces of good (Apple) and evil (IBM). The word "freedom," it is assumed, invokes historical associations with the American revolution and the nation's fight against British domination—again, the theme of the underdog triumphing over tyrannical forces. Through these important stories and myths, Jobs is able to build within his audience a set of favorable emotions toward Apple and negative associations with IBM.

Gearing Language to Different Audiences

In addition to the use of metaphors, the level of language used—whether elevated or colloquial—is important. A colleague of one inspirational executive I studied described this ability: "He could just tune in with any group; he could charm senior people and could be at home with a new college graduate . . . His message depends on the audience. He has a clever way about this. He has an excellent speech writer. He would say, 'Here's how I would like the message.' When the talk was completed, it always contained the right message for that audience. He and his speech writer could tune in on any audience."

Stories or metaphors are most potent when they invoke meanings or symbols that have deep cultural roots, and as a result, elicit stronger emotions.¹⁸

It appears, however, that the ability to speak on a more colloquial level is particularly significant and conducive to creating appeal. Franklin D. Roosevelt, for example, consistently employed colloquial language and 'folk' imagery to convey his ties to the person on the street. In fireside chats, for example, he would use sports analogies: "I have no expectation of making a hit everytime I come to bat." He consistently tailored his public talks to the "man in the street." But why might this be such an effective technique?

A high status individual such as an executive is expected to use an elevated style of language. When unexpectedly the everyday language of a plant worker is used, it may create a special positive response. A sense of equality with someone so elevated may at times produce a sense of affection and admiration.¹⁹ In one case, a senior manager described the charisma of his boss to me: "He would go into the plants and tour them, talk to the employees—'tell me what you're doing today' . . . He's skip levels downward just to get a comfort feeling, a name, a face. People really felt comfortable with him. They felt he understood them. He could relate and speak at their level. That was an important part of what attracted people to him."

Other Speech Techniques

Another component of rhetoric is related to sound, such as repetition, rhythm, balance and alliteration. While such techniques have been largely restricted to religious and political leaders, the possibility of their use by business leaders should not be overlooked. A certain rhythm can often mesmerize an audience. In his speeches, Roosevelt often employed alliteration—the repetition of initial consonant sounds in two or more neighboring words or syllables. In describing the leadership of the Depression, he states:

Those who tilled the soil no longer reaped the rewards which were their right. The small measure of their gains was decreed by men in distant cities . . . Individual initiative was crushed in the cogs of a great machine.

The message was heightened by alliteration as shown by the letters (r-,r-,r-,d-,d-,i-,i-,c-,c-).²⁰ This creates an attention-holding rhythm.

Martin Luther King was a master of repetition and rhythm. An excerpt from his famous "I have a dream speech" captures his abilities:

So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado. Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California. But not only that. Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia. Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee. Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi, from every mountainside, let freedom ring. And when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and hamlet, from every state and city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children—black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Catholics and Protestants—will be able to join hands and to sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: 'Free at last, free at last; thank God Almighty, we are free at last.'

King moves into repetition of the key phrase "let freedom ring"—over and over—at a progressively louder tone—closing with repetition of a second phrase "free at last." Repetition and rhythm, in this case, impact the listening audience in two important ways. First, King is able to create a song-like crescendo much like a combination of a symphony and Negro spiritual. This mesmerizes, captures attention, and builds emotional commitment to the message. Second and more important, he is able to leave his audience with one critical idea "they are to be free." Repetition ensures recall. Unlike the written word, speech is more difficult to comprehend. Once spoken, the speaker's words are gone except for the listener's abilities to remember them. If the speaker makes numerous points, the listener is not likely to recall them all. The listener must be able to understand the speaker's ideas. The problem is that the listener has little time to pause for reflection. Repetition focuses the listener on the key ideas and drives them home.

Finally, paralanguage or the sound of speech is an additional important factor in effective communications. Through appropriate paralanguage, one can communicate an image of self-confidence and power. For example, when speakers are nervous and lacking in confidence, they speak at a lower volume and make more numerous speech errors such as incomplete sentences, long pauses between words, omitted portions of words or sentences. A more confident style will avoid these mistakes.

Recent research has also found differences between what are perceived as powerful and powerless styles of speech resulting from paralanguage and the use of certain words. The powerless style includes speech hesitations as "ah," "you know," and "uh;" polite phrases like "please" and "thank you;" questioning voice tones at the end of declarative statements; and hedging phrases as "I think," "I

guess," "kinda." The powerful style lacks these qualities and instead portrays the speaker as more assuming, more goal-directed, and straightforward. In a study of these two styles, it was found that study participants rated speakers using the powerful style as more potent and attractive and more credible.²¹

Conclusion

I believe that we have only just begun to appreciate the power of the spoken word and its role in transformational leadership. The demands of this language of leadership will mean that executives and managers must begin to break from their traditional modes of communicating and move to more expressive, more inspirational forms. Needless to say, the first step must be the formulation of an organizational vision that is meaningful. This is, in itself, a complex process as we know from recent research.²² But once such a vision is formulated, the language of leadership plays a vital role in its acceptance and accomplishment. Guidelines to ensure a more impactful message are as follows:

If one is speaking about company strategy, listeners must actually believe the speaker possesses such knowledge and strategic expertise.²³ Do not attempt to appear as a knowledgeable expert in areas where your audience knows you are not.

1. Frame your organization's mission around intrinsically appealing goals and draw upon values and beliefs that have positive, culturally important meanings for your organization. Do not describe the company purpose as solely X amount of profitability, X amount of revenues, and X amount of return-on-assets. Rather draw appealing links to the broader societal contributions of the organization and sincerely endorse and incorporate these. While this prescription may seem simple; it is in reality a difficult task. Employees and customers will detect when such links are not based upon the deeply-held and realistic assumptions of the leader. The leader's true beliefs in his or her organization's purpose are a cornerstone to becoming inspirational and are achieved only after significant periods of exploration, reflection, and effort.
2. In descriptions of the organization's goals, incorporate the positive values that are deeply held by the organization and society at large by *using stories* to illustrate these guiding values in action within the organization and the marketplace.
3. Remember to highlight the key belief categories mentioned earlier when framing descriptions of the organization's mission. They are: 1) the significance of the mission, 2) why it has arisen in the first place, 3) key antagonists, and 4) assumptions about why it will succeed.
4. In general, employ more analogies, metaphors, and stories when speaking. Keep your message simple and focused and repeat it consistently.
5. When communicating to company audiences, experiment with various rhetorical techniques. Seek out coaches who can assist you with paralanguage, the selection of appropriate metaphors, voice intonation, and so on. Get feedback to determine which aspects of your style need greater attention and which seem to hold audience attention.
6. Allow your own emotions to surface as you speak. If you are feeling truly excited about a particular activity or goal, show it. If you are deeply concerned about competitive threats, show it.

Two additional points are worth noting. One—you, as a speaker, must be perceived as credible and possessing a measure of expertise otherwise your message is unlikely to be believed. If one is speaking about company strategy, listeners must actually believe the speaker possesses such knowledge and strategic expertise.²³ Do not attempt to appear as a knowledgeable expert in areas where your audience knows you are not.

Second, and more important, is the issue of ethics. Language skills can be misused. For example, leaders may present information or anecdotes that make their visions appear more realistic or more appealing than they actually are. They may also use their language skills to screen out problems or to foster an illusion of control when, in reality, things are quite out of control.²⁴ The gift of language has its potential dark side as witnessed with Adolf Hitler and his powerful ability to

communicate. As listeners and members or organizations, we must be on guard for such abuses.

In closing, it is important that business leaders see their role as "meaning makers." They must pick and choose from the rough materials of reality to construct pictures of great possibilities. An effective leader's persuasion is of the subtlest kind, for he or she must interpret reality to offer images of the future that are irresistibly meaningful. In the choice of words, values, and beliefs, you as a leader "craft" reality to ensure commitment and confidence in the mission. Rhetorical techniques of metaphors, of stories, of repetition and rhythm, and of frames all help to convey ideas in the most powerful ways. They ensure that strategic goals are well understood, that they are convincing, and that they spark excitement. If you as a leader can make an appealing dream seem like tomorrow's reality, your subordinates will freely choose to follow you.

Endnotes

¹ See for example B.M. Bass *Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations*, (New York: Free Press, 1985); W. Bennis and B. Nanus, *Leaders*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1985); J.A. Conger, "The Charismatic Leader," (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1989); J.P. Kotter, *The Leadership Factor*, (New York: Free Press, 1988); H. Mintzberg, *The Nature of Managerial Work*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1973); and T.J. Peters and R.H. Waterman Jr., *In Search of Excellence*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1982).

² See especially W. Bennis and B. Nanus, *ibid.*; J. Martin and M.E. Power, "Truth or Corporate Propaganda: The Value of a Good War Story," in L.R. Pondy, P.J. Frost, G. Morgan, and T.C. Dandridge (eds) *Organizational Symbolism*, (Greenwich, Conn: JAI Press, 1983); and L. Pondy "Leadership as a Language Game," in M.W. McCall, Jr. and M.M. Lomardo (eds), *Leadership: Where Else Can We Go?* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1978).

³ See W. Bennis and B. Nanus *Leaders*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), and A. Zaleznik, "Managers and Leaders: Are They Different?" *Harvard Business Review*, 1977, 15(3), 67-78.

⁴ J. Nathan, *Entrepreneurs: Viewers Guide and Transcript*, (Waltham, Mass: Nathan Tyler, 1986), 6-7.

⁵ For documentation of value and belief amplification, see D.A. Snow, E.B. Rochford, S.K. Worden, and R.D. Benford's "Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation," *American Sociological Review*, Aug. 1986, 51, 464-481.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ See particularly W. Bennis and B. Nanus *Leaders*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1985); P. Selznick, *Leadership in Administration*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1957); and A. Zaleznik, "Managers and Leaders: Are They Different?" *Harvard Business Review*, 1977, 15(3), 67-78.

⁸ F. Westley and H. Mintzberg, "Profiles of Strategic Vision: Levesque and Iacocca" in J.A. Conger, R.N. Kanungo, and Associates (eds.) *Charismatic Leadership*, (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1988). Iacocca quotes are from L. Iacocca, and W. Novak, *Iacocca: An Autobiography*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1984). Unless cited, other article quotes are from research interviews that I have conducted.

⁹ D.A. Snow et al., *ibid.*

¹⁰ J. Nathan, *ibid.*, 12.

¹¹ The source of this quote is an article by J.P. Kahn "Steven Jobs of Apple Computer: The Missionary of Micros," *Inc.*, April 1984, 83.

¹² J. Nathan, *ibid.*, 29.

¹³ A.R. Willner, *The Spellbinders*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

¹⁴ R. Tunley, "Mary Kay's Sweet Smell of Success," *Reader's Digest*, Nov. 1978, 5.

¹⁵ F. Westley and H. Mintzberg, *ibid.*, 192-193.

¹⁶ M.M. Osborn and D. Ehninger, "The Metaphor in Public Address," *Speech Monographs*, 29, 1962, 228.

¹⁷ The seminal studies on the psychological impact of these rhetorical practices were conducted by E. Borgida and R.E. Nisbett, "The Differential Impact of Abstract vs. Concrete Information on Decisions," *Journal of Applied Technology*, 1977, 7(3), 258-271; J.W. Bowers and M.M. Osborn, "Attitudinal Effects of Selected Types of Concluding Metaphors in Persuasive Speeches," *Speech Monographs*, 1966, 33, 147-155; and M.M. Osborn and D. Ehninger, "The Metaphor in Public Address," *Speech Monographs*, 1962, 29, 228.

¹⁸ For a fascinating discussion of the potency of metaphors that invoke cultural roots, see A.R. Willner's *The Spellbinders*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

¹⁹ A.R. Willner, *ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

²¹ The original findings concerning these two styles were made in courtroom settings. See B. Erickson, E.A. Find, B.C. Johnson, W.M. O'Barr, "Speech style and Impression Formation in a Court Setting: The Effects of "Powerful" and "Powerless" Speech," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 1978, 14, 266-279. See also B.R. Schlenker, *Impression Management*, (Monterey: Brooks/Cole, 1980), for an in-depth discussion of research on language and impression management.

²² See W. Bennis and B. Nanus, *ibid.*, J.A. Conger, *ibid.*, H. Mintzberg and J.A. Waters "Of Strategies, Deliberate and Emergent," *Strategic Management Journal*, 1985, 6, 257-272; J.B. Quinn, *Strategies for Change: Logical Incrementalism*, (Homewood, Ill.: Richard D. Irwin, Inc., 1980), and F. Westley and H. Mintzberg, *ibid.*

²³ B.R. Schlenker, *ibid.*

²⁴ For an examination of the misuses of

language and communications' skills by leaders and managers, see particularly J.A. Conger, *ibid.*, G. Salancik and J. Meindl "Corporate Attributions as Management Illusion of Control," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 1984, 29, 238-254; C.R. Schwenk "Information,

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