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EMPOWERING LANGUAGE

Language is our primary means of communication. It constrains our thinking, reflects our basic values, and is the most common medium for the exchange of our thoughts and beliefs. The language we speak allows us to convey certain thoughts and causes us to be confused about how to convey other thoughts. Indeed, language can prohibit us from grasping and understanding certain concepts and can make other concepts available to us. With its power as the central vehicle for communicating goals, thoughts, plans, instructions, requests, and so on, in business settings, language is perhaps the most important management tool we have.

Despite the central, pervasive role that language plays in management and leadership, management education often gives little thought or attention to how we can use language effectively. Some schools emphasize the importance of language in communications classes or in case discussions, but many apply few or no resources to the study and teaching of effective language use as it relates to practical managerial situations.

Would-be managers and leaders often, sometimes unwittingly, abuse effective language principles and, in so doing, undermine their ability to manage and lead. They may use phrases that they learned at home, at school, in their neighborhood, or in their work that are counterproductive to their attempts to motivate, explain, describe, or evaluate. When this happens, miscommunication, misunderstanding, and confusion at a minimum, can occur. At worst, misusing language can cause outcomes and effects exactly opposite of those intended. In short-term crisis situations or over the long haul, language can make or break a person's credibility and organizational effectiveness.

In the last quarter of the 21st century, "empowerment" as a concept and as a management technique has gained widespread attention. This interest stems, in part, from the growing realization worldwide that people—all kinds of people, including workers and employees—refuse to be enslaved and held powerless. On the contrary, during this period, we have observed around the world—on continents, in countries, and in organizations—people demanding to be seen, to be recognized, to be treated with dignity, to be listened to, and to participate in decisions that shape their lives.

This case was prepared by Professor James G. Clawson. It was written as a basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate effective or ineffective handling of an administrative situation.

We can conclude from the events of the 1980s and 1990s that people who live and operate within systems that hold them powerless and keep them from expressing and developing their talents, their opinions, and their abilities will eventually resist those systems and work to build new ones that allow them these rights. These new systems are said to "empower" those who live within them, but in reality, they are more accurately systems that simply recognize the power that the people already enjoy. We can speak, however, of an "empowerment process," a series of steps and events that distributes power more uniformly than before among the members of an organization.

Why should managers and leaders want to empower their people? The answer is both simple and complex. The simple response is that people who don't feel that they are sharing adequately in the power of an organization or institution will eventually restructure it. The process may take months, years, or decades to accomplish, but they will eventually find ways to redistribute the power more equally. In those restructurings, the old order is usually dismantled.

Thus, the interests of current leaders and managers lie in finding ways to share power in order to maintain it. The more you share power, the more you gain it; that is the paradox. The complexity is to figure out how to share power without giving it away utterly, and how to share it in ways that strengthen the institution rather than tear it down.

People can empower others in a variety of ways. They can impart knowledge, they can teach skills, they can express trust, they can give important information, and they can merely listen—and, by so doing, give power to the speaker to control the listener's time. They can also confer authority in recognized, legitimate titles and power through financial rewards.

Language plays a tremendous role in the process of empowerment. In leadership settings, effective language is empowering language. Empowering language edifies listeners; it leaves them with a larger sense of capacity, a larger view of the possible, a larger desire for achievement and growth, a larger boundary of influence, and a larger sense of self. In business, managers are learning more than ever before that the language one uses, the words one selects, the phrases one transmits—all make a big difference in whether or not a deal is done, a relationship is cemented or a commitment is realized. To the extent you use empowering language, you are likely to find that superiors, associates, subordinates, customers, and suppliers are more responsive and open to your influence.

In one sense, however, one person cannot empower another. People have as much power as they are able to feel and implement. The psychological makeup of a particular person whose will, sense of self, and mission are firmly established may not need any encouraging or strengthening. Conversely, in another person, the sense of self and its worth may be so weak as to render any attempt to empower and enlarge fruitless. Thus, the concept of empowerment must include both things that others do and things that the self does. In other words, while we may learn concepts, principles, and tools for empowering others, we may not be able to empower them unless they are ready, able, and willing to receive those efforts.

This note explores some principles of empowering language. Although not all aspects of empowering language can be discussed thoroughly here, the note will outline basic principles that

managers can practice and use daily in their communications at work and elsewhere. In addition, although the messages are also sent nonverbally, "language" here refers to the choice of words, written or verbal, by which we communicate with others.

Listening Versus Speaking or Preoccupied Thinking

The first, and sometimes the most powerful, way of empowering others in communications is to listen to them. When one listens—completely, genuinely, with interest, and without processing one's own agenda in the background—one sends a message to the speaker of caring, of respect, and of dignity. The message is: "You are important. You have something valuable to say. You have my attention." This message empowers speakers; it emboldens them and helps them have the courage to speak on, to speak honestly, and to speak powerfully.

Many managers and executives forget the principle that listening empowers. Somewhere along the line in their rise in the organization, they begin to believe that people lower in the organization do not have anything of value to offer, and they begin to listen less and less. The result of this is dangerous. It can lead a company into a bureaucratic morass. Jack Welch, chairman of General Electric Company, rediscovered the listening principle when he visited an executive seminar being held at the company's Crotonville (New York) training center in the early 1980s. As he responded to questions from members of the group, most of whom he did not know, he was struck with the candor, power, and usefulness of their insights and questions. He realized that the lower ranks of the organization held—bottled up—thousands and thousands of ideas that could greatly help the company. Welch also realized that he and other senior managers had lost awareness of the concerns and ideas that middle and lower managers and employees had about how the company could improve. In part as a result of this experience, Welch initiated an effort throughout the corporation that asked the business leaders of each major division to put themselves in front of groups of 50 or more employees eight to 10 times a year to hear what they had to say about how well the company was serving its customers and doing its work. His message was clear: management had to learn to listen again.

Unless you have a genuine desire to understand the speaker's point of view, listening will be difficult to do for more than very short periods. It is hard work to pay concentrated attention to another person for any time at all. Most of us slip into talking and telling, speaking about things with which we are comfortable rather than what the speaker wants to talk about. When we slip out of listening and into apathy or the search for an opening to give our own view, we send inadvertent messages to the speaker that what he or she has to say is no longer of any importance.

The well-known consultant and author, Steven Covey, has taught for 20 years that effective communications follow the principle: Seek first to understand, *then* to be understood. This principle reverses the basic communication pattern that most people, especially managers and executives, tend to use, namely, tell now and listen later, if at all. Executives are used to being listened to rather than the other way around. The consequence of speaking first and listening later is that peers and

subordinates sense that you value their comments less than your own, and this conclusion is disempowering. If you listen first, you will tend to be empowering the other person.

Accepting Versus Rejecting

When you accept what someone else has to say, you empower them. Conversely, when you reject what others have to say you weaken them. If you reject most of what people do, they will become uninterested in doing what you ask. This outcome can stunt their professional growth and handicap your ability to get work done through others. If you make sure that you accept a recognizable portion of what other people do, they will see that they can work acceptably to your standards, and this is empowering. The acceptance principle grows out of the demonstrated motivational principle that people will not try to do what they do not believe they can do. If your feedback is constantly and uniformly critical and negative, the people will stop trying. When they do, their powers to grow are greatly diminished.

Clarifying Versus Assuming

Clarity of communication has an inverted-U-shaped relationship to empowerment, as shown in **Figure 1**. If you under-specify a task, the subordinate may not understand what you want done, which is weakening. If you over-specify an instruction, you eliminate the discretion that a subordinate has in accomplishing a task, which is also weakening. Mid-range clarity that outlines the job, the standard of acceptance and the time frame allowed is the most empowering approach to subordinates. In addition, if an employee wants to discuss and negotiate these characteristics, presenting an opportunity to do so also empowers the employee. If you communicate the what, the when, and the quality standard clearly, most people can find ways to accomplish their assignments.

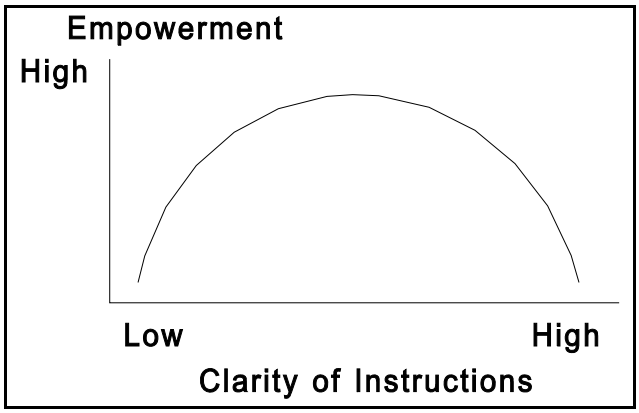

Figure 1

In some settings, such as negotiations, you may want your communications to be vague and nonspecific. In management discussions, however, obscure communication can be disastrous. Some argue that unclear communications allow the leader to capitalize on the resultant confusion; leaders can say vague things and then do what they want. This attempt to deceive, partially or completely, is a form of manipulation, and is disempowering. Manipulation weakens both the leader and the follower. At first, the follower is weakened because they are being manipulated into doing things they did not freely choose to do; second, the leader is weakened when the people find out, as they always do, that they have been manipulated, and their willingness to trust and obey or follow is greatly diminished or eliminated.

Empowering communicators speak clearly and clarify what they mean. Of course, this kind of communication requires that you be clear about what you believe and what you want. Without your beliefs and desires clearly in mind, you cannot be clear about what you want others to do. Gaining this kind of clarity may require long hours of self-analysis, thinking, meditation, and visioning. Some leaders are too "busy" to do this kind of work, and as a result, their communications are weaker.

Empowering communicators clarify not only what they mean but also what they think others mean. This desire to be sure of understanding by clarifying is akin to the listening skill; it communicates to the speaker a genuine interest in what is being said. In a clarifying mode, one uses phrases such as, "Did you mean to say that . . ." or "So you think that . . . Is that right?" to confirm understanding. Clarifying communications slows down the beginnings of conversations because one is constantly checking to make certain that the other one "got it" correctly—the way the speaker intended it. This approach often saves time at the other end of the conversation because both parties have a clear picture about the other's thinking.

Inviting Versus Ordering

Orders demean the receiver. They imply that the receiver is not intelligent enough or wise enough to make decisions about her or his own behavior. Of course, in crisis situations the group may need a leader to give orders. When you hear the whistling sound of an incoming artillery round is not the time to pause and discuss alternative behavioral options. Hence, giving orders often works in the short run. Most businesses don't have situations that require three- to five-second responses, however, yet many operate as if they were combat or quasi-combat organizations in which giving top-down orders is the most common method of communication. Because ordering works for a while, many come to feel that the practice is the fastest, most efficient—and indeed, the only—way to run a business. Managers find many reasons why this is "true." People (employees), they say, want to know who's in charge!

Yet each order carries with it the disempowering seeds of its own destruction. In addition to their content, orders carry the secondary messages, "Don't think, don't talk, don't give me a problem, just do what I say," and that is disempowering. Over time, those messages erode the receivers' commitment to the leader, the organization, and its purposes. When these orders violate a centrally held value of the receiver, he or she will sometimes rebel violently, surprising the order-giver and throwing the organization into chaos.

Orders have several common characteristics. They tend to rely on a coercive or legitimate power base rather than on reason or reward. Orders tend to omit reasons and leave little or no room for choice. They tend to ignore explanations of the general consequences (to the organization) often on the assumption that the receiver is not bright enough to understand or does not care or "need to know." Orders also carry with them implied specific (individual) threats. The order, "Do this!" also carries with it the implied, "Or else." The order-giver may choose to leave the "or else" ambiguous so that the receivers will project their own worst fears into the void and thus be "motivated" to

comply. While these characteristics are in part what make orders effective in the short run or in emergency situations, they are also disempowering.

The alternative to giving orders is inviting. Invitations empower because they carry a message of respect for the receiver. They leave the receiver his or her freedom to choose. In this sense, invitations are based on principles. A principle is a conditional truth with consequences. We can state principles in the form: If A, then B. The consequences of accepting or not accepting a principle-based invitation may be as serious for a receiver as those of an order ("If you choose not to join with us on this venture, you'll be working elsewhere, because this is the way we're going"), but the approach is significantly different. Invitations leave the receiver's self-esteem intact and, in fact, encourage them to exercise their decision-making skills and values, both of which are empowering.

Not all invitations are accepted; there is a difference between effective and ineffective invitations. Effective invitations have at least three parts: a rationale, a request (with both logical and emotional components), and follow-up.

To begin an effective invitation one must remember that the underlying power of invitations lies in their recognition of the right of the receiver to choose. Recognition of that right immediately suggests the need to explain to the receiver why the invitation is desirable either to the individual, to the organization, or both. "Because I said so," is insufficient, is based on legitimate power (not reason), and is disempowering. The receiver can only make a good decision when they have sufficient understanding of the rationale and the potential consequences of accepting or not accepting the invitation. This need for clarifying choice forces the inviter to be sure, and to be clear, on why the thing should be done in the first place. The rationale may be no more than, "I have a hunch." One hopes for more than that, but if that is the case, this information the receiver to assess whether or not the past performance of the inviter warrants confidence in the inviter's judgment. If the receiver believes in, trusts, and respects the inviter, a hunch may just be good enough to get an enthusiastic response. The rationale of effective invitations includes descriptions of the consequences of the choice. Thus, invitations are influential in part because they inform and request a decision.

The rationale of an effective invitation also includes an emotional/social component. The emotional/social component expresses the inviter's commitment to the invitation and to the receiver as the right person for the job: "I believe that *you* are the right person for this job, and I *want* you to do it!"

The second part of an effective invitation is a clear request. After describing the rationale, an effective inviter makes an explicit request. Instead of beating around the bush or diffusing the request in discounting language, the effective inviter makes the request straight out and waits for the answer. This moment is often poignant; there may be a certain electricity the air—an electricity that comes first from becoming vulnerable to rejection by making the request; second, from the realization that the receiver is about to reveal his or her true conclusions and feelings; and third, from the silence that hangs over both while the receiver considers his/her answer. Sometimes managers shy away from this moment of truth; it is too emotional, too charged, or too confrontational. The effective inviter realizes, however, that unless one can engage the receiver at

this level of emotional and personal commitment, they have not been able to engage the part of the person that will ensure high-quality and dependable work.

Making an explicit request requires clarifying the task. Sometimes people don't know what to do because they haven't been asked to do it. People are not mind readers. A manager may say, "Well, if you had initiative and an interest, you would have looked around you and seen what needed to be done and gone and done it. That's what I had to do when I was younger!" Clearly, taking the initiative to do what needs to be done is a good thing. But even that same manager would agree that if someone had given a little guidance along the way, their earlier efforts would have been much more effective.

Coaching and teaching are parts of the managerial role. Managers act as coaches, mentors, guides, and instructors whether they know it or not. Subordinates are constantly watching and concluding. The only question is whether or not a manager is teaching what they want to teach. An empowering manager takes an active teaching role, remembering that others cannot read minds and do not have the same experience or background as the manager does. Empowering managers assume that part of their job is to explain, to teach, and simply to invite a person to do something. We've all been to dances at which many of the people are standing along the walls. Many of those are standing there simply because they haven't been invited to dance. In organizations, we sometimes forget that we can simply walk up and make the invitation to a person to become more involved in a specific way. And, like invitations to dance, we sometimes shy away from this.

Finally, effective invitations require follow-up. There must be accountability for an inviter's credibility to be maintained. Without follow-up a receiver will soon reach the conclusion that the inviter is not serious, doesn't really care about the invitations they make, or, even, is just creating busy work. Follow-up has no substitute. A rare few will do all that they are asked to do on their own, but most people need, and appropriately so, an opportunity to give an accounting for the work they were invited to do. The social analogy would be calling up for a date, talking clearly and persuasively until the other agrees to go, and then not showing up; or going on one date and not calling back. The impact of either gaffe on the receiver is so strong that subsequent invitations are likely to be considered with contempt.

Follow-up may include coaching along the way—periodic checks to see how things are going, to solicit questions, to clarify objectives, to review rationale, and so on. In this way, the task becomes a team effort rather than a sink-or-swim exercise—in which, by the way, more people sink than necessary.

Here is a sample invitation to illustrate the basic elements: "Our delivery record is poor. We are consistently behind on shipments and seem to be constantly scurrying about to fill rush orders that are also either barely on time or slightly late. Our competitors don't seem to be wrestling with this serious problem. We need someone to pull together a team and find out why this is happening and recommend what we need to do to fix the problem. I know that you have a full plate and that you are very busy already, but I've considered this carefully and have come to believe that you have

a set of talents and abilities that make you the *best* person at the moment to handle this job. If you agree, I will want to have a report in my staff meeting in two months. Will you do it?"

Of course, more details could be described—how much time the job will take, what the latitude is for inviting others to participate on the team, how long before a progress report is needed—but the three basic elements (rationale, request, and follow-up) are there.

Descriptive Language Versus Judgmental Language

Judgmental language usually weakens the receiver. Judgmental expressions are evaluative statements that categorize a person in terms of worth. Even when judgments are positive they can leave with the receiver an ominous sense that one is being watched and evaluated, which can be debilitating because the receiver may wonder what the next evaluation will be. In this way, judgments, especially constant judgments, tend to disempower people.

Consider the dynamics of conclusion making:

> We see an event. Immediately we compare our view of that event with our own internal list of the way things should be—the expectations, the beliefs, the assumptions, and the values that we all carry around with us in our heads and hearts. If the event matches what we think should have occurred, we conclude that things are as they should be and we are not concerned. If, on the other hand, we perceive a gap between what we see and what we think we should see, we have a problem; something's not right. This awareness of things being okay or not okay is a conclusion.

If we focus on the assumption side of this dynamic, we tend to produce conclusions that are judgments. When we focus on the observation or event side of the dynamic, we tend to produce conclusions that are descriptive. In part this has to do with seeing the world more heavily through our own biases or being more open to the realities as they are; people vary on this dimension. (For more information, see the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator.)

Sometimes we jump to conclusions. We quickly reach an assessment of "okay" or "not okay" based primarily on our assumptions and a brief observation. These conclusions tend to be judgmental in nature. If these hasty conclusions motivate our behavior, our speech, our body language, or our facial expressions, we usually communicate an evaluation or a judgment.

Judgments put people in boxes in our minds and, reinforced sufficiently over time, in others' minds. People told enough times that they are stupid will often come to believe that they *are* stupid, whether they are or not.

When conclusions are based on descriptive data rather than judgments, they can empower and elicit changes in others' behavior. Being able to distinguish between evaluative and descriptive statements is an important step to learning how to use empowering language. **Figure 2** shows some examples of negative judgmental statements. The judgmental nature of these statements is hurtful to the receiver. Moreover, they tend not only to exaggerate but also to simply be false. Who can say that another person doesn't have any drive? Perhaps we just haven't found the aspect of life that motivates that person. Judgmental language presumes that the speaker can and does see the absolute truth, which is seldom the case. We each see from our vantage point, a platform built by years of experience and training as well as by position in the organization and access to data. Again, if we focus on our biases, we tend to produce judgments; if we focus on the external data, we tend to produce descriptions.

That was stupid!
You are obnoxious!
You should know better!
You'll never be able to do that.
You don't have any drive.
You are ambitious.
A good manager wouldn't do that.
That's the worst one I've seen.

Figure 2. Examples of negative judgmental statements.

Descriptive language is more powerful in conveying both negative and positive than is judgmental language. Descriptive language presents events as objectively as possible and minimizes overtones and undercurrents of evaluation about value. This language does not preclude a description of consequences, for all behavior carries with it consequences. We will have more impact on people, however, when we describe events and the results or consequences of those events than we will if we pre-judge the events. Descriptive language seeks to approach an event with a camera's viewpoint; it sees what it sees and reports exactly what it sees, making no statement about its value or lack thereof. When that judgment is left to a joint conclusion-making process, the listener is much more likely to be receptive, to learn, and to choose to change behavior.

Do not misunderstand. The point is not that there is no good or bad in the world or in subordinates' behaviors. The point is that your ability to manage and to effect improvement will be enhanced if you use descriptive rather than judgmental language. Descriptive language is empowering; it teaches; it strengthens; it clarifies. Judgmental language puts people on the defensive and weakens them.

Here is an example of descriptive language in communicating a need for change.

> In our meeting this morning, you made the statement that, quote, 'Women have no right coming to this meeting.' When you made that statement, several people in the room, including myself, were offended. I think your ability to work with those people has been somewhat diminished. They are likely to be much more cautious around you and less likely to work closely with you when the business demands it. I'd like to talk with you about that. Okay? Do you see what I am talking about?

In this example, the speaker is confronting a colleague on a comment made earlier in the day. The feedback the speaker is giving is current, descriptive, mindful of consequences, and encourages

joint problem solving. Although this feedback may engender some defensiveness on the part of the receiver, it is surely less violent and debilitating than if the speaker had said, "You sexist! How could you do such a thing?! You don't have the sensitivity of a hibernating snake in mid-January!"

Figure 3 contains a column of judgmental language and a sister column of descriptive language. Several of the corresponding entries have been left out so that you can practice phrasing judgmental and descriptive comments. See if you can do that.

Judgments	**Descriptions**
1. That was stupid!	In our meeting, you commented that the boss was ill-prepared.
2.	You said that an exponential curve is flat.
3. You're a racist!	
4.	Your presentation had the enthusiastic support of at least 75% of the room.
5. Where's your drive, man?!	
6.	When you look down, speak softly, and don't move your hands, people will tend to think you are shy or lack self-confidence.

Figure 3. Exercise for distinguishing judgments and descriptions

Affirming versus Disconfirming

Empowering language affirms; it leaves receivers with a sense of self-worth and the reaffirmation that their existence and their work are valuable. Affirmations are statements that acknowledge another person's existence, rights, values, and preferences. Affirmations restate what may have become overlooked or taken for granted.

Because the language of affirmation has been written about in a variety of settings, sometimes in careless ways, and is used in various settings for humor, some people discount the very mention of the word "affirmation" as psychological jargon or the offshoot of light-weight thinking. Don't throw the baby out with the bath water. People like to feel good about themselves. When you use language that genuinely and accurately contributes to another person's sense of well-being, you affirm and empower that individual. Superficial use of the technique by making frequent statements like, "I value your humanity" or, "You have a right to be here and take up space" usually trivialize and even undermine the principle that affirmations strengthen people.

Completions and Accountability Versus Incompletions and No Accountability

Incompletions are draining. An incompletion is something we have promised to do, either to ourselves or to others, and have not yet done. They suck energy and attention from the present and the future. They crowd our minds, dampen creative thoughts, and drag us into the past. When we give instructions or make invitations, we are initiating an activity that for a while will be an incompletion. If we don't follow up on the commitments we request, those unresolved requests pull our subordinates' focus and energy away from other activities. They linger in the back of the mind like drain holes that draw thought and energy.

I don't mean that all jobs, certainly not major capital projects, for instance, have to be done immediately. Some things take considerable time and require persistent effort over long periods of time. One cannot get bread to rise immediately. A certain patience with and tolerance for incompletions is essential to a productive life. We can create shorter-term completions, though, that allow us to regain a sense of forward motion. Life itself may be seen as the ultimate incompletion, in that it is not over until we die, but few of us feel a sense of disempowering anxiety because it is not complete or over. We can identify and accomplish portions of large tasks, and the achievement of those milestones are empowering and energizing.

Obviously, there are two ways to finish incompletions: we can throw them away or complete them. There are implications for these two strategies for both individuals and for working relationships. Occasionally we all need to do some personal and professional housecleaning, to examine the undone projects at home and at work and either finish them or make a new choice not to carry them anymore. This re-assessment takes time and courage; it may not be easy to let go of outdated and dried-out goals, projects, aspirations, hopes, start ups, or dreams that somehow never got off the ground, and move on to something more productive and immediate.

In managing personal incompletions, we usually have only ourselves or close friends to help us manage them. One way to start is to go to the closet and throw out all of the clothes that you haven't worn in the last year. This may provide a symbolic start to identifying the things that are incomplete in your life and are gnawing at you, day after day. When you feel that incompletions are draining you, you might review what they are and reassess whether or not they are worth doing at this point. If not, don't do them, throw them away! Beware, however, again, of throwing the baby out with the bath water. Discarding established relationships or routines that have worked well and given life some regularity and stability for the sake of the thrill of newness is not what we are talking about here. Cleaning out personal incompletions is a remarkably empowering experience. One gets the feeling of again being in control, of exercising preference, of renewal, of choosing rather than responding to a life structure. In the same way that we can remove physical incompletions (like fabric never sewn, wood never worked, shoes never worn), we can remove psychological incompletions by saying what has been waiting years to be said or by renegotiating relationships.

In organizational life, we can do much to help subordinates manage their incompletions. Managers should make certain that each assignment, each invitation, each request, each instruction is followed up. Requesting a report, reviewing the results, and offering a note of, "job well done" or

"here's the next step" are important markers that remove the feeling of incompletion and empower one to move on. Managers who, for whatever reason, ignore the follow-up are putting energy-draining spigots on their people and organization and hampering their effectiveness. People who are given assignments that are never followed up on begin to collect worries, "Will my boss ever ask about that? Maybe, maybe not. Should I continue working on it? Maybe, maybe not." As managers, remember that keeping incompletions to a minimum by having regular checkpoints and milestone reports is an important part of empowering your subordinates.

Truth Telling Versus Manipulation and Lying

In my experience, no topic creates more heated discussion than truth-telling. I remember one seminar where people from the same industry (but different companies) were literally shouting at each other across the room and pounding on the tables about whether or not one could or should tell the truth in business. Some argue that if you tell the truth, the rest of the world will take advantage of you and run you out of business. Others argue that if you don't tell the truth, your customers (suppliers, financiers, etc.) won't come back a second time. Business, they say, is a social phenomenon built on the foundation of honesty and trust.

In this kind of confrontation, participants will often move to some lighter (safer?) issue in an attempt to defuse the discussion. "Consider," they say, "when your spouse comes out with a new suit of clothes and asks if you like it. You look and think 'That's ugly!' What do you say? The truth will hurt!!" As you consider your own answer to this question, I encourage you to think about the long-term as well as the short-term effects. Not telling the truth often leads to deeper and deeper misunderstandings that can lead to catastrophic resolutions later on. My thesis here is that telling the truth is freeing and empowering while lying is counterproductive, hurtful, and disempowering. Lying, like an incompletion, is draining. Enormous energy goes into remembering, substantiating, buttressing, and re-establishing half-truths, part-truths, and non-truths. It is much better to be at peace with the facts and not have to be constantly concerned about reconstructing them.

There is no growth in lying, no long-term power in deceit. Only by dealing with reality can people understand who they are and how others see them, and then make decisions that will deal with reality. When managers build organizations or teams around them that filter and bend the truth for the sake of comfort or fear (or whatever), they lose their ability to compete, to grow, to improve, and to become stronger.

Truth, however much it may hurt in the short run, is empowering. I remember a conversation with the senior vice president of a major New England insurance company who, in receiving new assignments, was given oversight of the physical facilities of the company. After a short period, the vice president concluded that the man in charge of the buildings was not doing a good job. He reviewed the manager's file and discovered a path of lateral transfers and demotions throughout his career and concluded that the man had been transferred around the company for poor behavior and performance at least half a dozen times. After several attempts to coach the man, the VP finally brought him in and told him that he was being released for poor performance—that he was *not* going

to transfer him somewhere else in the company and continue the pattern that other managers had established of not dealing with the truth: poor performance. The man was outraged and left in a huff. Two weeks later, he returned to say, humbly, that he'd been thinking it over and wanted to compliment the VP. "You're the first person in my career," he said, "who has had the courage to tell me the truth. I think I can do better, and I'd like a chance to prove that to you." They reached an agreement on a probationary period, and the fortunate result was that the man performed well.

If you agree that telling the truth is all very well, we have to then address the question, "What is the truth?" Sometimes we think we are telling the truth when we are only giving half of it. The whole truth may be "I don't want to tell you right now." Or "I care about you more than I care about the kind of clothes that you wear." Or, "If you really want my opinion, I'll give it to you, but if you want me simply to confirm whatever you're doing (or wearing) regardless of what I really think, be clear about that before I answer."

Truth-telling and its variations can easily become a complex and convoluted subject. What is truth? Is it what one person sees; what another sees; a composite of all? (Consider Kipling's poem about the five blind Hindus grasping parts of the elephant and each describing it differently.) Although we may not be able to answer the question of what truth is in the ultimate sense, for our purposes here, truth is what a person sees and understands. It may not be true in some absolute sense, but to that person, it is true. The measure of honesty is to speak and act in concert with what one knows or sees. When people do otherwise, they fragment themselves, compromise their understanding, become incongruent in their communications, and in so doing, weaken themselves and those with whom they work. Deceit weakens our character and our ability to perform, and that is disempowering. Truth-telling is empowering.

Instructing Versus Expecting

Not all requests can be invitations; sometimes we have to give instructions. Empowering instructions include, like empowering invitations, explanations of mid-range specificity. Giving instructions that leave the subordinate some latitude for making choices about how to accomplish the task are more empowering than simply expecting the subordinate to figure out what needs to be done. The principles outlined in the section on invitations above also apply to the continuum from instructing to silent expectations. In general, lack of instructions accompanied by high expectations are disempowering while mid-range instructions are more empowering.

Passion Versus Indifference

Another aspect of empowering communication is passion. When we invite, instruct or tell a truth we see with passion, the commitment we feel is communicated to the listener and can ignite in them a similar passion or commitment. To tell a truth we see without passion is like trying to sell a good product without careful thought for the packaging. While you cannot sell fluff in a fancy package, you can't successfully sell substance in a brown paper bag. When leaders and managers

communicate their visions, their expectations, their strategies, their goals, and their invitations with passion, they open the door for like response from the listeners.

Caring Versus Indifference

Respect is built on one person's recognition of the talents and abilities of another person. When the talented person then shares their abilities with the observer, the message that accompanies that sharing is "You are worth my time and teaching. I care about your growth and your work." This message, "I care for you," builds a sense of safety in the relationship, which leads to trust. If a person is both talented and genuinely concerned for our welfare, we develop trust in that person—trust that they will not harm us. Our defense mechanisms go down. We become more open to their influence and suggestion.

Caring is often thought to be inappropriate for business. Caring managers, some think, cannot make the tough layoff decisions or keep their emotions out of their analyses. Yet caring builds trust in relationships. One can certainly conduct business by working with colleagues at arm's length emotionally, but these kinds of relationships build a business that is primarily mercenary in nature and unlikely to tap into the inner reserves of commitment and dedication that all people have.

Caring managers can be tough and can make hard decisions. Caring and effectiveness are not mutually exclusive. Mental toughness and emotional strength can lead to strong relationships between management and labor. Their absence can lead to internal adversarial relationships that siphon off company energy and customer focus.

The language of caring, being able and willing to communicate, "I value you and care for you," is best transmitted by behavior. Words to that effect ring hollow when time, conversation, and empathy are lacking. When you communicate by your behavior *and* your words that you care for the individuals (*as opposed to* the "work force" in the abstract aggregate), you empower those others. They get a sense of self-worth, recognition, individuality, and a sense that they have value to add to your efforts. When you communicate either uncaring feelings or apathy towards others, their defenses go up and they distance themselves, as you have, from the relationship.

Commitment Versus Indifference

A key challenge in life is to recognize and accept our individual responsibility for who we are and what we do. Many spend their lives attempting to affix responsibility for their actions to others—parents, siblings, teachers, administrators, co-workers, or foreigners. The way we use our language either reinforces our willingness to accept responsibility for our thoughts and behaviors or undermines it.

Perhaps the most obvious method of detecting these tendencies in yourself is to listen for your use of "I" statements—sentences that use the first person, singular as the subject. "I" statements clearly place the speaker as the one from whom the rest of the comment is to flow, whether it be opinion, observation, statement of belief, or question. Use of "I" statements reflects an emotional comfort with being held accountable for your own views. Structures that avoid "I" statements are a means of diverting attention and accountability from the speaker.

Some common diversions are:

1. Framing statements as questions: ("Don't you think that we should," . . . when the clear truth is, "I think that we should . . .");
2. Judging: ("He doesn't know what he's doing" when the truth is, "I don't think he knows what he's doing");
3. Premature conclusions: ("The fact is Larry isn't doing his job," when the truth is, "I don't think Larry is doing his job.");
4. Discounting: ("Well, I didn't get this assignment until late last night, so I don't know how good this is going to be," when the truth is, "Regardless of the circumstances leading up to this presentation, this is my best shot. I'll let the presentation stand on its own merits."; and
5. Citing other (even anonymous) people: ("Well, somebody said that we'd lost $1,000,000 on that deal," when the truth is, "I heard that we lost $1,000,000, and I'd like to find out if that's true, and if so, what we can do to prevent that from happening.)"

In each of these cases, the more direct, the more empowering language for both speaker and listener is to use "I" statements as outlined.

"I" statements are useful in most of the other elements of empowering language already discussed. In making invitations, for example, we can recognize our own wants explicitly by noting, "I want you to do this. I think you're the right person for this job. Will you do it?" In giving instructions, "This is the way that I learned to do it. You may find other ways, but this one works well for these reasons. . . ." In stating commitments, "I believe this is the right way to go for these reasons. . . ." In truth telling, "I don't feel that the whole story is coming out here, and I'd like to postpone a decision until we can be sure we have the key and relevant facts." In expressing caring, "I am concerned about those people," or, "I am concerned about your career direction. Can we talk about that?"

Practice the emotional courage and accountability that comes with taking responsibility by using "I" statements regularly. Think about what you say, and ask yourself if you are making attributions to others or to the situation that really belong to you. If so, use an "I" statement to try to get closer to the truth and to language that will free you, strengthen you, and leave your colleagues clearer about on where you are without weakening them.

Conclusion

Language, along with our gestures and expressions, conveys our thoughts, feelings, and conclusions to others. The choice of a word or phrase can either empower or belittle others. When we use neutral or weakening language, we erode our own managerial effectiveness and the willingness of others to lend their best efforts to our goals and objectives. When we choose to use empowering language we are more likely to get high quality and dependable work from our co-workers. Thinking carefully about how we communicate with others, assessing the impact of our communications, and practicing the elements of empowering language outlined here can help us give others a larger sense of self-worth and of value in their abilities than they previously had. This effect is good for relationships and good for business.

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