



The Language of Leadership

To paraphrase Frederick Nietzsche*, as humans, we are often prisoners within the house of language.

No matter how we “think” in any given moment, it is largely our use of “language” that will define our workplace interactions and the impact that we have upon others.

That is of course, unless all of your team members are psychic?

It is critical therefore, that leaders and managers are especially mindful of the language that they use for understanding and then communicating their own strengths and weaknesses, as well as those of others.

Better understanding your own strengths and weaknesses in simple terms that you can then relate to others is a very useful first step.

Observed behavior is a window into individual and team performance, but the dynamics of that behavior need to be clearly articulated between people with a common language to actually have any real value (or influence on positive change).

Rob Goffee, Professor of Organisational Behaviour at London Business School, sums up the importance of self-knowledge as a key leadership trait as:

"Leaders who can be trusted are self-aware and know what differentiates them from their colleagues. They are not afraid to reveal their weaknesses and know how to adapt their style to different situations."

It takes courage and self-confidence for leaders to acknowledge their own weaknesses. If “authenticity” in leadership is what you truly seek, then to make those acknowledgments is the only way.

When sharing individual and collective strengths and weaknesses the language used needs to achieve succinct honesty whilst also being non-threatening. This helps leaders to accelerate the team development process and avoid “beating around the bush”.

During a recent series of team and leadership development programmes for the United Nations we used the The Belbin Model (a favoured tool of ours) to achieve better understanding.

The Belbin Model and its profiles and reports were used to good effect with the UN, who also use the model globally themselves, to help transcend boundaries that can arise within teams when gender, nationality and cultural barriers may be present.

An individual Belbin profile clearly identifies and names the clusters of behavior that are impacting team and organizational culture using an easy to grasp “Team Role Language”. This places a clear focus on the observed behaviours that leaders and teams can then actually work with.

Belbin’s 9 Roles occur in myriad combinations and are influenced by numerous factors including the professional, personal and cultural experiences that are unique to each person. The “Team Role” language is then used to define clusters of behavior and their impacts in way that can readily be discussed in the context of actual workplace challenges.

Importantly, the core drivers, symptoms and outcomes of how a person’s Belbin profile will impact the real world team dynamics are common to all humans.

The Team Role Language thus works readily across all cultures (be they departmental, organizational or even national) to facilitate rapid understanding of behavior so that it can be better discussed and managed.

The key is to make the “day to day” language around inter-personal behavior elegantly simple enough for people to use, and thus it’s far more likely to transfer to real world.

When leaders identify and then address behavioural issues occurring at work, they can facilitate better outcomes by leveraging people’s actual strengths, and also better managing their weaknesses.

Humans are emotional creatures though, and so we will still drive each other nuts at times irrespective of our levels of self-knowledge. If we truly understand what underpins this though, and have a common language for discussing it, then there is far less potential for harmful misunderstandings to occur.

The emotional fuel for unnecessary friction can be reduced or removed by having open conversations that address each other’s strengths and weaknesses.

Any failure by leaders to clearly address workplace behaviour and its impact, or to do so using only vague and “buzz wordy” language, can lead to those “lost in translation” moments.

Ambiguity around how workplace behaviour is actually unfolding can leave unstated tensions to fester, damage relationships, reduce employee engagement, lower morale and ultimately lead to poor performance.

A lack of clarity and authenticity about what's actually happening in a team from a behavioural perspective will not help to build an effective team.

Important behavioural interactions need to be better defined and understood to help minimize unnecessary misunderstandings and enhance capability.

Clarity around behaviours can also serve to make those "difficult conversations" far less difficult.

When people can communicate succinctly with one another about what works well for them, what doesn't work for them and how things can improve in the same terms much tension, anxiety and wasted time can be averted.

Charles Handy, the established "management guru" also puts it rather well.

"Managers who only oversee what other people do, do not add value and are therefore an expense and an expendable luxury. Managers who perform as team leaders and facilitators do add value, but they need a "language" to communicate their own and other people's behavior – this is what the Belbin Model provides – it is our training objective."

When properly interpreted and used, individual and team Belbin reports are a powerful enabler for leaders and managers to build upon their own strengths, and to allow their teams to do likewise.

We are all capable of adopting a common language to make life easier at work, we all just need to make the effort to learn it.

To learn more about the Model and how we make use of it for team and leadership development visit www.TeamRolesAustralia.com.au .

*The Nietzsche quote:

"We have to cease to think, if we refuse to do it in the prison house of language; for we cannot reach further than the doubt which asks whether the limit we see is really a limit."

Friedrich Nietzsche

The original quote from Friedrich Nietzsche is often "jazzed up" by authors to use the term "prison house of language". A more faithful translation is apparently: *"We have to cease to think when we refuse to do so under the constraint of language; we barely reach the doubt that sees this limitation as a limitation."*

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