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YOU MUST START WITH LEADERSHIP

It was the night before a critical company town hall and Rick, the CEO of a struggling manufacturing company in New Jersey, was wondering what to say to his employees. For many years, his company had been recognized as an efficient, tightly run business. They had always been proud of manufacturing in the U.S., and of their ability to turn a profit while doing so. They had also built incredibly strong relationships with their customers. But over the last three years, things had been going downhill for Rick's business. His competitors outsourced production and were able to drive their costs down. Rick's major customers valued their long-standing relationships and were at first unwilling to switch to the now-lower-cost competitors. But over time the gap between Rick's prices and his competitors widened, and even long-standing, loyal customers began to defect.

To respond to these pressures, the leadership team – made up of Rick, his Chief Operating Officer, his Chief Financial Officer, and a few of his Vice Presidents – had begun a relentless “productivity optimization drive” to “close the margin gap and improve the value proposition.” Yet, a full year into the “strategic initiative,” Rick and his

leadership team were frustrated that their efforts were not bearing any fruit. They realized that the company's middle managers and front-line workers were not buying in to the plan. They knew this because these employees were increasingly vocal in their criticism of the strategy, which they saw as taking the company away from relationship-building and toward cost reductions. Around this time, a tenured manager confronted Rick on the manufacturing floor. Pointing a finger at Rick, he said, "I've been here 20 years. This company was built on relationships with customers – not trying to drive costs out. We need to stay focused on our relationships. They'll be there for us forever as long as we take care of them."

Rick's CFO had put together some slides that had numbers showing loss of market share, departure of key customers, and forecast of margin gaps, but Rick knew the slides wouldn't resonate with his employees. The night before the meeting, he went to sleep wondering what he was going to say.

The next morning Rick arrived at work and went to the cafeteria where the town hall meeting was being held. The company's 500 employees packed the room. Rick strode to the front of the room. He felt the tension and anxiety in the crowd. The slides prepared by his CFO were loaded into the projector. He began to speak.

"Good morning. I've got slides here but I'm not going to use them. Instead, I'd like to tell you a story. Growing up, my parents ran a small hardware store. Relationships with the community were everything, and my parents built their reputation on service. Then a big box store arrived and slowly my parents' business started to feel the pinch. It wasn't surprising – this giant store could sell many products for less than it cost my parents to purchase them wholesale. It was a hard lesson for my parents to learn – that relationships are only valuable when price is comparable. My story has a happy ending. Spurred by the arrival of this giant competitor, my parents forced themselves to change what they sold and strike better deals with their suppliers. They were able to reduce their prices to a level where the relationships they had mattered. Today, that big box store is still there – but my parents, who are in their 70s, have carved out a niche and still enjoy working to this day."

Rick paused.

“I know we all value our customers and are committed to serving them well. But, like my parents found out, it won’t matter if we can’t also continue offering our customers pricing that is competitive. Our customers value their strong relationships with us – but there will come a point where they will cross the street to our competitors despite those relationships. That’s why we need to pull together now . . .”

As Rick spoke, he could see that his audience was paying attention and listening to what he was saying. He could see that his story was resonating with his employees. In the days that followed, the positive responses he received told him that his words had changed a lot of minds and had done what he wanted them to do: create the unity in the company that was required for change.

Why was Rick’s talk effective? Because he was able to translate the technical knowledge he had (margin compression, market share, productivity gap, etc.) into clear, powerful language. Because he was able to take a dry business case and present it as a personal story that was meaningful to both him and his audience. Because he was able to show empathy for the employees in his audience and validate the legitimacy of their views while still challenging them to adopt new beliefs. In short, Rick was effective because he used the language of leadership.

Moments like the one Rick created don’t happen by accident. They are the result of a deliberate choice to speak as a leader, of extensive preparation to ensure the message is clear, and of careful selection of words that will ensure that the message resonates with the audience.

Over the course of my career and in researching this book, I have come to firmly believe that language can be a tremendous tool for individuals who wish to influence and inspire others, just as Rick did that morning at his company’s meeting. When speakers make the conscious choice to choose words that enable them to lead (and to avoid those that may undermine their ability to do the same), they are using the language of leadership, and the results are powerful.



WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?

Before we look at the ways we can use the language of leadership, we must first step back to discuss what it means to lead, and why the link between leadership and communication is so fundamental.

There is no one model for leadership. In your life and your career you have undoubtedly worked for or with people who you would describe as leaders. Some of them may have even been your manager (if you are lucky!), but many others are individuals whom you have wanted to follow.

Some leaders are big-picture thinkers, while others are detail-oriented. Some leaders are hands-off delegators, while others dive in and work side by side with you. Some leaders are big personality extroverts, while others have a quieter style that draws you in. In the example above, Rick was a personable, human leader. He sought to connect on a genuine, individual level with his employees to build understanding and unity.

Given these differences, it's important to define what is common among leaders. So here it is:

A leader is someone who inspires others to act.

That's it. Leaders are able to create believers who accept and act upon their ideas. They are able to do this not dictatorially but inspirationally. And they are able to achieve this regardless of their skills, level of education, or title, and regardless of the industry in which they work.

So if you inspire others to want to take action, you are leading. It's that simple.

Implicit in this definition is that the following three things which are often *associated* with leaders do not actually *make you* a leader:

- **Your personality does not make you a leader.** A big personality does not make you a leader (though it may make you charismatic) any more than a reserved personality holds you back from being one.
- **Your title does not make you a leader.** Audiences may be more inclined to listen to you if you have CEO or something

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impressive in your title, but they will feel no compunction to follow you because of what is printed on your business card.

- **Your direct reports do not make you a leader.** Just because you have many people in your organization who must act on your direction does not mean they will choose to follow you; those managers who rely on organizational clout soon find their people leave for other teams or other organizations.

If you can inspire others to follow – to act upon your ideas – you are leading. At The Humphrey Group we believe this ability to lead is not something you are born with but rather something that you can and do purposefully develop. Choosing to lead is a choice and carries with it benefits and challenges. The work of leading is just that – work – and it requires deliberate practice before it becomes instinctive and second nature.

In my role as an executive coach, I help our clients develop one of the most crucial skills that leaders use: the ability to communicate with others.



THE LINK BETWEEN LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNICATION

Communication is the only way that leaders can and do inspire others to act. As a leader, you should consciously approach every interaction as an opportunity to influence and inspire your audiences. You must persuade others to act on the ideas you believe in during your phone calls, meetings, presentations, formal speeches, and in all the interactions that make up your day-to-day. Your power is derived not from your title, but from your ability to influence and inspire others to act.

When I spoke to leaders in my interviews, the importance of communication was a common refrain. Here are a few examples of what I heard:

Susan Uchida, Vice President of Learning at the Royal Bank of Canada, described it this way:

Communication is a critical tool [for leaders] because it's the way you connect with people and you inspire them and it helps them understand

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what your perspective is, and it helps them . . . translate it to their own beliefs [rather] than their own actions. So, the choice of words, the style of communication really can be very meaningful.

Here's Dane Jensen, CEO of Performance Coaching, a Toronto-based leadership development firm. Dane, a former management consultant, had this to say about leadership:

Leaders get other people excited about reaching their full potential. [Communication] is how you ply your trade as a leader. It is the way you connect with another human being.

Here's Bruno Sperduti, Executive Vice President, Rental Management at FirstService Residential:

Leadership is about creating an action, changing behavior toward a goal . . . [and] words create actions in the first place. [Leadership] has to be all about communication.

Leadership *is* all about communication. Leading by example is essential, but actions without words limit your ability to reach your audiences. It's your words that help your audience understand the ideas and beliefs that shape your actions.

Creating believers – the true task of leaders – requires a day-in-and-day-out commitment to thinking clearly and persuasively, and sharing this thinking with others. Every conversation is an opportunity not merely to inform but also to inspire. Here's what the author and motivational speaker Simon Sinek says in his book *Start with Why*:

Great leaders . . . are able to inspire people to act. Those who are able to inspire give people a sense of purpose or belonging that has little to do with any incentive or benefit to be gained. Those who truly lead are able to create a following of people who act not because they are swayed, but because they were inspired. For those who are inspired, the motivation to act is deeply personal.¹

So if you want to lead, your focus must be on shaping the beliefs of your audience because this is the step you must take to create a long-term commitment to action. But how do you do this?

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An ideal starting point is to begin thinking consciously about your communication – and how others around you are communicating. What words do you use when you want to shape the beliefs of those you wish to inspire? In short, what exactly is the language of leadership?

**START BY CONSCIOUSLY LOOKING AT
LANGUAGE THROUGH THE LENS OF
LEADERSHIP**

Sometimes it's important to stop and reflect on the language we use to communicate. How you do this depends entirely on your perspective. If you were assessing the effectiveness of an expert, you might choose to evaluate his ability to convey knowledge with clarity. If you were to assess the effectiveness of a grade-seven teacher, you might evaluate his ability to hold a room of 30 children with short attention spans and engage them in learning. If you were assessing the effectiveness of a motivational speaker, you might look at how much energy he could bring into a room.

But if you were assessing leaders, there could be only one litmus test: Does the way they communicate inspire their audiences to act? And, do the words they use to communicate their ideas help or hinder their ability to lead others?

**SUMMARY**

Rick could have stood up and droned on about “KPIs” (Key Performance Indicators), talked about “Six Sigma manufacturing strategies,” or discussed “margin compression.” He chose instead to focus on leading inspirationally by telling a story that would resonate with his listeners and help them understand both what their company was facing and the path they needed to follow. He told his story not with corporate-speak but with language that was plain and powerful.

Leadership – the ability to inspire others to act – is not an innate ability. It's not the result of a big title or an advanced degree. Rather, it is a skill that is developed over time and honed in every interaction.

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As you read through this book, I ask you to do so with this mindset. Now, with that in mind, let's look at jargon and its implications for your goal of leading every time you speak.



NOTES

1. Simon Sinek, *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action* (New York: Portfolio, 2011), 8.

<http://www.pbookshop.com>