

Seven Languages for Transformation

from *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work*

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Internal Languages

1. from the Language of Complaint to the Language of Commitment
2. from the Language of Blame to the Language of Personal Responsibility
3. from the Language of New Year’s Resolutions to the Language of Competing Commitments
4. from the Language of the Big Assumptions that Hold Us to the Language of Assumptions We Hold

Social Languages

5. from the Language of Prizes and Praising to the Language of Ongoing Regard
6. from the Language of Rules and Policies to the Language of Public Agreement
7. from the Language of Constructive Criticism to the Language of Deconstructive Criticism

From the Language of Complaint to the Language of Commitment

Language of Complaint	Language of Commitment
Easily and reflexively produced, widespread	Relatively rare unless explicitly intended
Explicitly expresses what we can’t stand	Explicitly expresses what we stand for
Leaves the speaker feeling like a whiny or cynical person	Leaves the speaker feeling like a person filled with conviction and hope
Generates frustration and impotence	Generates vitalizing energy
Sees complaint as a signal of what’s wrong	Sees complaint as a signal of someone cares about
Nontransformational, rarely goes anywhere beyond letting off steam and winning allies to negative characterizations	Transformational; anchors principle-oriented, purpose-directed work

From the Language of Blame to the Language of Personal Responsibility

Language of Blame	Language of Personal Responsibility
Easily and reflexively produced and widespread; comfortable to express	Relatively rare, in an ongoing way, unless explicitly intended; uncomfortable to express
Holds the other person responsible for gaps between committed intentions and reality	Expresses specific behaviors we personally engage in and fail to engage in that contribute to gaps
Frequently generates frustration, alienation, and impotence in speaker	Draws on the momentum of our commitments
Frequently generates defensiveness in others	Frequently generates productive conversation about both parties’ contributions to gap
Nontransformational; rarely goes anywhere; deflects our attention to places where we have little or no direct influence	Transformational; directs our attention to places where we have maximum influence
At best, raises questions only for others	Raises questions for oneself

**From the Language of New Year’s Resolutions
to the Language of Competing Commitments**

Language of New Year’s Resolutions	Language of Competing Commitments
Expresses sincere and genuine intentions	Expresses genuinely held countervailing commitments
Creates wishes and hopes for the future	Creates an inner contradiction or map of an immune system
But contains little power	Contains enormous (locked up) power
Intent is to eliminate or reduce the hindering, problematic behavior	Intent is to identify the source of that behavior
The problematic behavior is frequently regarded as a sign of weakness, or shameful ineffectiveness	Identifies a commitment to self-protection on behalf of which the problematic behavior is effective, consistent, faithful, even brilliant
Assumes that eliminating the problematic behavior will lead to the accomplishment of commitments or goals	Recognizes that merely trying to alter problematic behavior is unlikely to accomplish goals
Frequently attributes less effective change to other people, unanticipated obstacles, or insufficient self-control	Recognizes the complex, contradictory nature of one’s own intention
Nontransformational; rarely leads to significant change despite sincere intentions	Transformational; paradoxically increases the possibility of significant change by making clear the immune system that makes change so difficult

**From the Language of the Big Assumptions that Hold Us
to the Language of Assumptions We Hold**

Language of the Big Assumptions that Hold Us	Language of Assumptions We Hold
Automatically produced, without intention or awareness (the meanings to which we are subject)	Produced only with difficulty, creating space or distance between self and one’s meanings (the meanings we can relate to as an object)
Assumption inhabited as truths	Assumptions taken as assumptions
Creates a sense of certainty, that one’s perspective is reality	Creates valuable doubt, the opportunity to questions, explore, test, reconfirm or revise one’s assumption
Anchors and sustains our immune system [that prevents change]	Creates a pivotal lever for disturbing our immunity to change
Names the terms by which we would understand our universe to be catastrophically disturbed or violated (our “Temple of Doom”)	Makes the catastrophic consequences a proposition available for testing
Nontransformational; maintains the world as we have been constructing it	Transformational; changes the world as we understand it to be, and our sense of our possibilities within it

**From the Language of Prizes and Praising
to the Language of Ongoing Regard**

Language of Prizes and Praising	Language of Ongoing Regard
Creates winners and losers; draws energy out of the system	Distributes precious information that one's actions have significance; infuses energy into the system
Frequently communicated indirectly; said about person and not directly to him or her	Communicates appreciation or admiration directly to the person
Usually, global statements giving little if any information about what the speaker is valuing	Communicates specific information to the person about the speaker's personal experience of appreciation or admiration
Often characterizes the other person	Nonattributive; characterizes the speaker's experience, and not the person being appreciated
Frequently formulaic; glib	Sincere and authentic; more halting, freshly made
Nontransformational	Transformational potential for both the speaker and the person being regarded

**From the Language of Rules and Policies
to the Language of Public Agreement**

Language of Rules and Policies	Language of Public Agreement
Customary	Exceedingly rare, without leaderly intention
Intended to create order from the top down or the outside in	Intended to create organizational integrity (institutional fairness, attentiveness, and competence) from within
Institutionalized in written manuals or through implicit norms, with little or no discussion of the meaning of the rules and policies, and no experience of owning them or assenting to them	Shared understanding of their meaning and an experience of co-owning them and assenting to them
Frequently discussed only after there is a violation	Discussed and created before violation to establish a shared understanding and reference point in order to enhance personal and organizational learning when there is a violation
Violations are ignored or treated privately and as a matter of adjudication for problem elimination	Violations are treatable publicly as a resource for personal and organizational learning, by creating observable contradictions
Multiple interpretations frequently exist, and people tend to be unaware of this	Common understanding of the agreements themselves and their purpose
Creates a social vehicle for leaders or authorities to correct boundary transgressions	Creates a social vehicle for peers to correct boundary transgressions
"Corrected" individuals experience the organization's ability to control behavior--an ability they have no part in creating	"Corrected" individuals experience the organization's integrity, which they themselves have a hand in creating
Nontransformational; shapes behavior, not new meanings	Transformational for both the individual and the organization

**From the Language of Constructive Criticism
to the Language of Deconstructive Criticism**

Two Approaches to Conflict-Laden Communication

Attribute	Constructive Communication for Informative Behavioral Change	Deconstructive Communication for Transformative Learning
The effective communicator...	Gets the person to change	Creates a context for learning
Primary theater of activity	External: the actions or inactions of the other person	Internal: the meanings and assumptions of both parties
Who is at risk of learning?	Only the other person--and even then, only learning about what the communicator thinks or wants for the other	Both parties
How the other is seen	As a misbehavior, doer of actions	As a whole meaning maker or system whose actions or choices express some general belief, conviction, principle, theory
Who has the truth of the situation?	Communicator knows the truth	Neither necessarily; perhaps either, both, or neither
Who doesn't get it?	Other: "You are lost, missing something, overlooking, forgetting, never knew something which I am trying to find the kindest, most effective way of filling you in on"; "teaching" stance vs. inquirer's stance	Communicator: "I see what you are doing or not doing and, given my take, I don't get it"; genuine report of puzzlement (vs. criticism) and inquiry into how this can make sense
The essence of conflict is contradiction, and contradiction is...	A management problem in need of resolution	A rich resource for individual and organizational learning
Basic stances	"I'm right" or "You're wrong (but you'll get defensive, so...): how do I tell you the bad news? how do I get you to change?"	Respect for self ("I have a take on this and it <i>does</i> lead me to think you are 'wrong' here, but...")
	"Teaching" you	Respect for other ("You are also a whole person with your own take")
	"I'm setting you straight"	Active uncertainty; not paralysis and indecision, but holding of own view tentatively--"Given how I see things I'm puzzled" but seeking clarity, via honest inquiry (we both may change our minds): "Could you set me straight as to how I've got this wrong...?"

Deconstructive Propositions

There is probable merit to my perspective.

My perspective may not be accurate.

There is some coherence, if not merit, to the other person's perspective.

There may be more than one legitimate interpretation.

The other person's view of my viewpoint is important information to my assessing whether I am right or identifying what merit there is to my view.

Our conflict may be the result of the separate commitments each of us holds, including commitments we are not always aware we hold.

Both of us have something to learn from the conversation.

We need to have two-way conversation to learn from each other.

If contradictions can be a source of our learning, then we can come to engage not only internal contradictions as a source of learning but interpersonal contradiction (i.e., "conflict") as well.

The goal of our conversation is for each of us to learn more about ourselves and the other as meaning makers.