

Good leaders immerse themselves in the culture of modern corporate terminology

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The French language draws us into the sensuality of the French people while also lifting the veil on a way of life. To become involved with the language is to have respect for the culture, behaviour and practices, encouraging speakers to experience France first hand. So why does language of the corporate world have the opposite effect, not only unnecessarily cluttering the business space but also casting a burdensome shadow over its inhabitants, convincing them to disengage, walk away and disrespect corporate evolution?

The answer is clear: executives today have so much on their plate. The skill of operating a business seems to be sliding down the ladder of importance, overpowered by:

- new and deepening regulations
- increasing yet essential intangibles of social media, quality and loyalty measures
- unexpected events such as sudden economic downturns or terrorism rise to the top through reactive necessity, and even
- the ever-increasing corporate terminology and lexicon.

If a leader is to take the people to the future, how can this be achieved when corporate terminology is not understood? As a true and credible leader would never ask someone to do something they are ill-equipped to do themselves, how can leaders continue to provide direction without assistance and terminology colliding?

To connect your people with the business, a leader will need to use a language of relevance and simplicity. Applying terms above the people's heads will only serve to separate and confuse, making them feel powerless. We need to be flexible in our approach and style.

For example, what could be the difference between:

We are launching our performance management system this week.

A new priority in our company will be an awareness of how we do our jobs

The term "performance management system" sounds quite evolved yet evokes vastly differing definitions, depending on who you ask. Clarify your intention first and then perhaps even give your own performance management system a unique and customised name to ensure it does not get swallowed up into the land of generic definitions.

What could the difference be between:

We will be engaging with a change management vendor to drive the process during the next level of installation

With our new system, we will have to adopt different practices and work in a new way.

The term "change management" provokes visual images of million-dollar consultancy projects, yet this does not need to be the case.

What could be the difference between:

You need to show more resilience.

Why are you allowing conditions to leave their mark on you?

Resilience – referring to the ability to recover quickly from difficulties – is a great example of a corporate term that may not even directly translate into other languages. Ensure the corporate language you adopt can be understood by all.

Is corporate terminology becoming so complex that in itself it is playing the role of "separator"? Is there an expectation that each and every person should be familiar with today's corporate lexicon, and if not, they are labelled as behind the times?

Well, to examine this further, let's look at what today's successful leaders do when terminology lands on their desk.

a. They research it, feel it, explore it; they slice it apart, digest its intention and re-craft it to suit their needs

What this means is that a leader should at least know what language is being used in today's corporate world, and should honour it by giving it the recognition it deserves. At the very least, take note of how the new terminology is being used and where it is showing up. Beyond this, try using it to see if employees can gain from its use.

A past leader of mine once read the latest leading management book, which spoke of people taking a conscious decision if they are "on the bus" during change. He was keen to use the new term, and even though we knew he had borrowed the term from somewhere, we understood his message, as it aligned with the simplistic nature of his current lexicon.

b. They release it slowly, piece by piece

What this means is that a language will organically grow if it feels right for the environment, and it's the people who will decide. Just as a baby chokes if he eats the whole cake, new corporate terms need to be drip-fed, piece by piece.

When resistance occurs in corporations today, it's an open invitation not to eradicate it, but rather jump right in, understand what it needs or wants and provide that. For those at the head of organisations – the best tip for survival today is to welcome new terminology and practices initially, understand the intent behind them and then simplify, customise and use your own version of a corporate language freely. Now is not a good time to put heads in the sand; the weight of increasing corporate terminology may become all too burdensome.

Debbie Nicol, managing director of the Dubai-based business en motion, is a consultant on leadership and organisational development, strategic change and corporate culture.



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