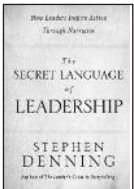




LEADERSHIP AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

BY ROBERT MORRIS



The Secret Language of Leadership

Stephen Denning

In his latest—and most valuable—book, *The Secret Language of Leadership: How Leaders Inspire Action Through Narrative* (Jossey-Bass, 2007), Stephen Denning develops in much greater depth several of the concepts and insights around storytelling that he previously examined in his best-selling book *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling*. The former World Bank executive also shares his thoughts about transformational leadership, explaining that he discovered that the secrets of leadership “lay not only in the stories that were being told but also in the way the leadership goals themselves were formulated. Leaders could also use other tools like frames, questions, offers, challenges, metaphors, reasons, and so on.” By using these tools to speak and act in new ways, anyone can lead a change initiative.

Denning explains how effective leaders in all business contexts take full advantage of four levels of discourse—*narrative, exposition, description, and argumentation*—to explain what needs to be accomplished, to describe what the probable consequences will be if appropriate action is (or is not) taken, to trace a sequence of steps or events within a process (e.g., causal relation-

ships), and/or to present a convincing argument (with evidence and/or logic). Through tips and examples, he helps readers to master these and other skills, which have almost unlimited practical applications.

Of special interest to me is what Denning says about the use of language when inspiring people to support efforts to transform an organization. He asserts that “sustained, enthusiastic change doesn’t occur by osmosis or extrasensory perception. If leaders’ inner commitment to change is to have any effect, they have to communicate it to the people they aspire to lead. True, the leaders’ actions will eventually speak louder than words, but in the short run, it’s what leaders say—or don’t say—that has the impact. The right words can have a galvanizing effect, generating enthusiasm, energy, momentum, and more, while the wrong words can undermine the best intentions and kill initiative on the spot, stone dead.”

Developing Fluency

These are among the issues that Howard Gardner addresses in his latest book, *Five Minds for the Future* (Harvard Business School Press, 2007). Gardner suggests that, to thrive in the world during the eras to come, people need to develop five cognitive abilities. Gardner refers to them as “minds,” but they are really mindsets. The *disciplined* mind enables us to know how to work steadily over time to improve skill and understanding. The *synthesizing* mind enables us to take information from disparate sources and make sense of it by understanding and evaluating that information objectively. By building on discipline and synthesis, the *creating* mind enables us to break new ground. By “recognizing that nowadays one can no longer remain within one’s

shell or one’s home territory,” the *respectful* mind enables us to note and welcome differences between human individuals and between human groups so as to understand them and work effectively with them. Finally, by “proceeding on a level more abstract than the respectful mind,” the *ethical* mind enables us to reflect on the nature of our work and the needs and desires of the society in which we live.

As Denning would explain, each of these five “minds” or mindsets has a “secret language” of its own. Those who would be leaders must become fluent in one or more of the languages that are most appropriate to the given objective, be it the creation of an entirely new art form or a coalition of healthcare organizations. He examines three key steps of language leadership (i.e., getting the audience’s urgent attention, eliciting desire for a different future, and reinforcing with reasons) before shifting his attention to six elements that enable the language of leadership to achieve its maximum effectiveness. These “key enablers” are articulating a clear and inspiring change idea; committing to the “story” of change; mastering the audience’s own “story”; cultivating narrative intelligence; telling authentically true stories; and finally, deploying the body language of leadership.

The last is vital because, as Denning correctly points out, “without the calm assertiveness of the body language of leadership, the verbal language of leadership will have little effect.” Indeed, although percentages vary from one research study to another, there is no doubt that during face-to-face contact, body language and tone of voice determine 85–90 percent of the impact.

In his previous books, Denning skillfully explains all of the elements

TEAM TIP

Denning’s book serves as a reminder that how you say something is as important as what you say.

of an effective business narrative. Now he has broadened his scope to examine how all four levels of discourse (including narrative) can help those whose objective is to explain what needs to be done, to inspire others to

become involved, to make the vision vivid and compelling, and finally, to make a convincing argument that will guide and inform collaborate initiatives. ■

Robert Morris (interlect@mindspring.com) is an independent consultant who is based in Dallas, specializing in high-impact executive development and organizational growth. He coaches individual executives and also works closely with groups of executives. Much of his time is committed to conducting workshops and seminars that focus on knowledge management, process simplification, and performance measurement.