

BOOK REVIEW: *HOW THE WAY WE TALK CAN CHANGE THE WAY WE WORK*



Jim Saveland

The wildland firefighting community lives a repeating story. Sooner or later, disaster strikes and firefighters lose their lives in the line of duty. An investigation follows; causes are determined and remedies suggested. For a time, there is increasing vigilance for safe operations, but the vigilance declines over time. At some point, disaster strikes again and firefighters lose their lives. The question arises, does anything ever really change? Do we ever really learn anything?

Transformational Learning

How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work: Seven Languages for Transformation (Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, 2001), by Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, examines obstacles to desired changes. As the authors point out, “people tend to say ‘How can we *break down* resistance—our own or that of others? How can we *overcome* our defensiveness? *Reduce* our fear?’ And so on.” The authors invite the reader into a new and deeper understanding of our being, one that is more respectful of resistance and consequently more supportive of individual and organizational change.

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short-term solutions, the authors focus on the deeper, underlying changes in the way individuals and groups make meaning. The book is for people interested in the possibility of their own transformational learning, as well as for people interested in supporting the transformational learning of others—an increasingly necessary feature of effective leadership.

As a student of conversations, I have noticed that learning conversations often start by acknowledging and respecting silence. Another important ingredient in setting the stage for learning conversations is what I call “removing the fixer”—overcoming the urge to fix others’ problems. *Seven Languages for Transformation* confirms the need for both ingredients to creating a supportive environment for transformational learning.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part introduces four new languages as tools for personal learning:

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; and
4. From the language of big assumptions that hold us to the language of assumptions that we hold.

Part 2 introduces three more languages that serve to maintain and continuously improve the skills developed in part 1. These are social languages, with important implications for leadership:

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; and
7. From the language of constructive criticism to the language of deconstructive criticism.

Part 3 speaks to how we can practice and develop all seven languages. The book takes a novel approach to the subject of why “our own genuine aspirations for change—personally and collectively” lead to “so little lasting change actually occurring.”

Personal Languages

Commitment. Complaining, wishing, and hoping are the familiar modes of television talk. As the authors point out, the language of complaint is hardly conducive to personal learning and reflective leadership. Still, complaints do contain the seed of transformation, for “we would not complain about anything if we did not care about something.”

The idea is to use the energy in the language of complaint as a “gateway” for expressing personal commitment. The language of commitment does not simply dismiss the complaint, but rather “goes with the complaint, honors it, and invites the complaining person to follow the forward momentum that is implicit in the complaint.” From personal experience in the martial arts, I recognize this as the language of aikido.

Personal Responsibility. The authors also propose replacing the language of blame with the language of personal responsibility, a subject I have written about in connection with the South Canyon Fire (Saveland 1995). When we first stop blaming others, we tend to shift the blame to ourselves. But personal responsibility goes beyond placing blame. As the authors point out, responsibility “involves more than taking the blame or debugging the system. It involves being able to learn from the behaviors we identify, to learn from the story we tell on ourselves.” I think of blame and reflection as being on opposite ends of a continuum. When we see our reflection in a mirror or other reflective surface, we are better able to see ourselves.

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Competing Commitments. Next, the authors explore why noble aspirations—what they call “the language of New Year’s resolutions”—often lead to little change. We all share an immunity to change, often unconsciously. Where we see a need for change yet fail to achieve it, we tend to blame other people or unanticipated obstacles. We fail to see that “it may be nearly impossible for us to bring about any important change in a system or organization without changing ourselves (at least somewhat).”

In other words, our commitment to change is often canceled by “another commitment we hold that has the effect of preventing the change.” What we are doing, the authors point out, is merely protecting ourselves, a normal human motive. In fact, self-protection is “a crucial act of self-respect.” The trick is to become aware that we are reacting in this way to the challenge of change—to become aware of our own competing commitments.

Assumptions. The authors go on to argue that we are enthralled by “Big Assumptions”—the assumptions that we take to be true. “If we are certain we know how the world works—and this is how a Big Assumption operates; it creates certainty—why would we even think to look for a different reality?” We all have support communities of “colleagues, willing partners, people

we can talk to” who reinforce the languages we use. Our Big Assumptions give rise to our competing commitments, thereby anchoring the whole immune system.

The authors recommend a four-step process to overcome our big assumptions:

1. Observe ourselves in relation to the big assumption;
2. Actively look for experiences that cast doubt on the big assumption;
3. Explore the history of the big assumption; and
4. Design and run a safe, modest test of the big assumption.

Our language communities embed us in “not just one Big Assumption but several.” However, we can turn our “nest of Big Assumptions” in a positive direction if we use it as “a home for hatching new life, new forms, new ways of making meaning that—if nurtured—one day take wing.”

Social Languages

Ongoing Regard. The regular expression of genuinely experiencing the value of a coworker’s behavior is what the authors call “the language of ongoing regard.” It has two aspects: appreciation and admiration. Most organizations bestow formal praise and prizes—a practice rife with problems (Kohn 1999)—but undercommunicate the genuinely positive, appreciative, and admiring experiences of their members.

According to the authors, three qualities strengthen one’s communication of ongoing regard:

1. Being direct—that is, delivering appreciation or admiration directly to the person rather than to or through others;
2. Being specific; and

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3. Being nonattributive—that is, describing the speaker’s experience rather than the person’s attributes.

The nonattributive quality is perhaps the most difficult to practice. We tend to jump from our perceptions of others to conclusions about their character, thereby passing judgment. As the authors point out, “If we characterize people, even if we do so quite positively, we actually engage—however unintentionally—in the rather presumptuous activity of entitling ourselves to say who and how the other is.”

Public Agreement. The Ten Standard Firefighting Orders and the Eighteen Situations That Shout Watch Out can be examples of public agreements. The authors take a fresh look at the purpose of such agreements. “We do not think the value of shared agreements is to *prevent* violations,” they say, “but to *create* them.” Then, violations are considered with curiosity in an organization’s “classroom,” not used to trump up charges in its “courtroom.” Public agreements are not used to “give the troops their marching orders” or to “cast out sinners”; instead, they become a way for “responsible people to collectively imagine a public life they simultaneously know they would prefer and know they will, at times, fall short of.” Falling short of public agreements is a learning opportunity for oneself and an opportunity for group reflection about competing commitments and Big Assumptions.

Deconstructive Criticism. We all know the value of constructive criticism, even though most organizations fail to deliver it well. Constructive feedback is specific, supportive, problem solving, and timely; destructive feedback is vague, blameful, threatening, and pessimistic. But constructive feedback is not enough. As the authors point out, “many a relationship has been damaged and a work setting poisoned by *perfectly delivered* constructive feedback!”

Constructive feedback rests on the assumption that the provider—say, a supervisor—has the only correct view of the situation. The supervisor is privileged to (1) say what the employee is doing wrong, (2) offer help, (3) suggest a solution, and (4) give a timely message. The employee’s role is to listen, accept, and gratefully receive.

Constructive feedback presumes that the supervisor has “super vision.” The authors see this assumption as counterproductive to learning, because “we have little, if any, reason to check ourselves if we assume we are right.” They propose instead engaging in a conversation “with the same criticism in mind” but knowing that “we may not be totally right or may even be wrong.” That turns our endeavor from finding “clever ways to help the person see it our way” to exploring “what’s been happening and whether our criticism is warranted.”

The authors thus propose a third alternative to destructive and constructive criticism. The idea is to break down the “barriers to learning” behind constructive criticism by retreating from “a truth-claiming relationship.” “We call this stance a deconstructive one because its central intention is neither to tear down nor build up but instead disassemble, and the object of attention is not first of all the other but our own evaluation or judgment.”

The language of deconstructive conflict is not about making conflict disappear. It can work well yet lead to even greater conflict. “We exercise all the languages for the purpose of making our work settings richer contexts for learning,” the authors conclude. “The kinds of change we are looking for are transformational. They go to the roots. They are not about fixes at the surface.”

Carrying on the Work

The seven languages for transformation allow us to focus on what the authors call “our inner contradictions and Big Assumptions” rather than using them as prisms for viewing reality. That, in turn, facilitates “mental development and transformational learning.” A good way of deepening “a productive relationship with our inner workings” is by building support communities that regularly use the seven languages. As the authors point out, “The seven languages are intended to be a steady supply of oxygen to keep the flame burning for as long as our learning may need.”

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Leaders can further the languages by designing conversational space. “When you create a place for something,” the authors note, “it is remarkable how much more likely the thing is to occur.” The authors try to expand our limited conception of leadership and learning. Leadership is not about “the leader ratcheting up his volume of attaboys”; instead, it is about “creating channels or contexts” for “relatively rare forms of speech at work.” “Perhaps we need leaders who are able both to start processes of learning and to diagnose and disturb already existing processes that prevent learning and change, the active, ongoing immune systems at work in every individual and organization.”

Next Steps

Can changing the way we talk actually reduce the likelihood of future fire fatalities and improve our individual and organizational performance? I think so. But there is only one way to find out: Try it. That’s what a group of us is planning to do in the USDA Forest Service’s Intermountain Region. We will get together every other month to practice with the seven languages and experiment with other reflection exercises. You are invited to join us.

Changing the way we talk can be a tremendous step in the right direction. However, more must be done to develop “situational aware-

ness” (see, for example, Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Gallwey 2000; and Heckler 1990). But that is beyond the scope of this book review.

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