

Creating Meaning Through Language

F r a n c e s B a l d w i n



“I had always thought we used language to describe the world – now I was seeing that is not the case. To the contrary, it is through language that we create the world.” —Joseph Jaworski¹

In consulting and coaching, one mark of effectiveness is the ability to convert the most relevant knowledge into practical applications within the context of the client or customer’s reality. How do we put knowledge (ours and theirs) to work? There are numerous factors to consider in answering such questions. This article will focus on just one—language. The language we use to frame our interventions is probably as essential as the strategy of the intervention. Yet, speaking and writing are such natural and spontaneous acts that we may take for granted the consequence of words. My purpose is to refresh awareness and stimulate conversations on the significance of our language.

I am finding that my current focus—to create environments conducive to learning and possibilities—requires thoughtful attention to language. More and more, I am convinced that people have the capability to create possibilities and solve their own problems. My role as a thinking partner, facilitator, and coach is to create the environments that reveal and utilize these capabilities. A part of my growing edge is to ensure that my language and behavior are congruent with this belief in the capability of others.

Making Meaning

As consultants, a key part of what we do is to make sense of things—to *create meaning* for ourselves and our clients. We observe, inquire, mirror, name, question, challenge, and reframe information and experience in order to make it useful. Much of our work is “in the moment,” so we move between modalities without a lot of attention to the need to differentiate our language.

Many things influence our pattern and choice of language at any given moment. We may be chewing on the meaning and implications of a new concept, so it becomes figural for us. Much like considering the purchase of a new Volkswagen car, suddenly there are many Volkswagens on the road catching our attention.

In addition to current interests, we are influenced by our mental models, which Peter Senge defines as “deeply internalized images of how the world works.”² These are powerful images that affect our behavior, what we see, and what we choose to guide others to see. These mental models determine how we frame our communications.

Framing, according to Fairhurst and Sarr, is the uniting of our thinking and our words.³ In the words of Robert Entman: “Just like a photographer, when we select a frame for a subject, we choose which aspect or portion of the subject we will focus on and which we will exclude.”⁴

So as we go about our lives and work selecting focus and assigning meaning we are actually creating reality for ourselves and for those with whom we interact. And others are using their mental models and patterns of framing to hear and understand our messages.

Sometimes we assume that when we use common language we are holding the same figure or picture. I once consulted to a large construction project, and about three times a year, before breaking ground and during construction, we would convene a meeting around the architectural model and discuss the concept. This allowed everyone involved—the various contractors, the owners and operators, even the future maintenance and safety folks—to refresh and ensure that we were all holding the same picture of the completed plant, how and why it would function.

Perhaps those of us working with processes and social systems also need occasionally to revisit our concepts to ensure that we are holding the same figure. Sometime new figures emerge based on experience or framing, yet the language is the same.

Setting and Purpose

With professional peers we often enjoy delving into the technical nuances of the behavioral sciences and how we apply those concepts to the real world of work. We have a tolerance, if not a hunger, for such dialogue. Using jargon, we explore, create, and hone ways of understanding and improving the performance of systems and making the world a better place. In such settings, theoretical language is not the only means of communicating, but it is quite acceptable.

Some of our clients use the same language and read the same literature. In other settings, however, such language will seem technical, academic and not useful. How do we sensitize ourselves to the differences, between and within settings?

I have had the privilege of working extensively in three client situations that taught me the importance of *framing ideas to suit the present culture and purpose*.

As a graduate student consulting to the U.S. Navy, I commuted from the university campus to military sites weekly. The contrast was quite phenomenal. I bounced back and forth between the theoretical and the practical, and both were important to my success as a student and as a consultant. The military placed a high demand on my conceptual resources. The practical field experience brought theories to life and enhanced my learning. One of the greatest challenges was the shift in language based on cultural differences. The military valued an “economy of words” and had its own language, jargon, and host of acronyms. Academic terminology that I was living and breathing at the university was not only out of sync at the military site; it potentially compromised my credibility and success as a civilian consultant. I learned quickly to make the adaptations “in the moment.”

Years later, as an internal OD consultant at Exxon Corporation USA, I encountered a similar situation—a strong organizational culture that required thoughtful and strategic adaptation of familiar language and learning a new language steeped in the world

My purpose is to refresh awareness and stimulate conversation on the significance of our language.

of engineering and the petroleum industry. Not to mention a new set of acronyms. This was not as simple as doing one's homework, even though that helped. I believe it was Kurt Lewin who stated that the best way to learn an organization is to try to change it.

Stepping out on trial and error was "the way."

A major difference between the Navy and Exxon USA was that within the corporation there were numerous subcultures. I could not assume the same posture in the research organization, where the exploration of ideas was the nature of doing business; as in the chemical organization, where a competitive environment required cutting edge approaches. And I had to assume yet another posture in the petroleum downstream business, where the wholesale customer base was fairly stable and tradition was valued. Moving between these subcultures meant shifting my assumptions and approach, and consequently, the framing of my communications.

A third experience was in Esso Chemical Europe. Working internationally makes one sensitive to the assumptions we make about language and how we introduce slang and cultural phenomena. I had not realized how much language is based in common experience such as commercials, fads, characterizations, literature, and theatre. When you work daily with groups and individuals from multiple cultures, you begin to feel as if you are always at square one; instead of a common set of norms/rules you are working at the interface of multiple norms. It can be awkward. While English was the language for conducting business, diverse norms such as the pace of speech, clarity, self-disclosure, regard for authority, and gender added a level of complexity. Also, the American business school models don't always translate well within international settings.

Lessons I learned about cross-cultural communications while working in Europe included these: avoid parochial terms, speak slowly and clearly, and stay open to learning. Isn't it interesting how applicable these lessons may be in any interaction?

Integrating Ideas and Concepts

From all of my experiences I continue to learn the importance of making concepts my own through trial and error (simply learning from unintended outcomes). I have learned that I must have a good grasp of principles if I want to apply them without losing the essence and meaning. Not only must I learn from experience; I must occasionally ask clarifying questions related to meaning and intent.

A strong grasp of principles enables me to

- express concepts using my words, while working from my figure (model). When I overuse a word it is an indication that I have not yet made it my own..
- use metaphor effectively. Aristotle said, "The greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor...since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of [the] similarity in the dissimilar."⁵
- engage clients in creating their own experiences
- "know one when I see one" —a concept or theory in action, that is

In the words of Senge and Kofman: "We invent structures and distinctions to organize the otherwise unmanageable flow of life. That organization allows us to operate effec-

As we go about our lives and work selecting focus and assigning meaning, we are actually creating reality for ourselves and for those with whom we interact.

tively, but it can become a tranquilizing barrier to exploration and creativity. The more efficient a model of the world turns out to be, the more it recedes into the background and becomes transparent. The more successful the model's strategies, the more the 'map' of reality becomes 'reality' itself. "6

We have acknowledged that much of our communication flows spontaneously. Fairhurst and Sarr state that "the time to exert influence over spontaneous framing is not when we are about to communicate." So how do we create awareness without blocking creativity and spontaneity? There are endless ways that people develop awareness, and nurture and refresh their minds, such as reading, travel, the arts, sports, fitness, meditation, prayer, yoga, Tai Chi. I will now briefly discuss reflection and meditation, because they are familiar.

Meditation and Reflection

The benefits of meditation and quiet reflection include increased awareness and the ability to feel refreshed, grounded, and centered, with an alert and open mind. These benefits support thoughtfulness and intentionality. Consistent practice in a structured environment creates the best and most sustainable results.

Another type of reflection occurs in the moment. "Reflection in action" is a conscious pause and self-prompting that one uses in the midst of activity. To employ this second level of thinking allows one to consider intention and choices even as we perform them. This type of reflection also requires practice. Many of us do it automatically and sometimes wish that we had "been aware of what we were doing."

I tried to think of personal tips on how to use reflection and awareness to support the framing of communication. Hopefully after reviewing the following you will recognize your own way of doing this:

- Ask yourself questions such as
 - What is my purpose?
 - What do I want to convey – what is my core message?
 - What is happening in the big picture? In this environment? To me? To others?
 - How else might I phrase my thoughts? What is a good metaphor?
 - What does the client need?
- Stay aware of your internal process and feelings. Focusing and quieting the internal noise help you discern even as you speak
- Trust that others are capable of understanding your message. When I think that they won't understand I tend to complicate my presentation.
- Practice simplicity. As a grade school teacher once told me, a real sign of intelligence is the ability to express complex ideas in simple, clear language.
- Decide when you want to evoke deeper thinking and when you want to convey a straightforward message.

Building and nurturing from the inside requires constant vigilance.

Building and nurturing from the inside requires constant vigilance. The outside world is fast and demanding. We can't control the slowing down of the outside world; we can slow our minds to make room for awareness and self-maintenance.

Creating Experience

One way of describing the work that we do in the behavioral sciences is to say that we create experiences that help people learn and establish fresh and workable options. Sometimes this is accomplished by reframing or introducing new knowledge and experiences and sometimes by simply clarifying the experiences that they are already having. Our technology allows us to create models, not unlike the construction example cited earlier, but mostly we create experience through our language.

The key message I want to share in this article is that in addition to the means, we must also have in our awareness the intent, the desire, to bring clarity, make meaning, and create new experiences for ourselves and our clients. People have such diverse life experiences and contexts. Sometimes we need to return to the models and see if our figures and pictures of reality are aligned.

One of my pet concerns is distinguishing between my data - as background for my use - and information that would be helpful to share. Sometimes we defeat a creative process by attempting to share "our data" in our language, rather than simply going about doing the work.

I hope that this article plants seeds of awareness and stimulates thinking and conversation about the impact of language on our effectiveness.

* * *

Notes:

1. Joseph Jaworski, *Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership* (Berrett-Koehler, 1996).
2. Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline* (Currency Doubleday, 1990).
3. Gail Fairhurst and Robert Sarr, *The Art of Framing: Managing the Language of Leadership* (Jossey Bass, 1996).
4. As quoted in "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Paradigm." *Journal of Communication* (1993).
5. S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry & Fine Art* (1951).
6. Fred Kofman and Peter Senge, "Communities of Commitment: The Heart of Learning Organizations," in Chawla and Renesch, *Learning Organizations: Developing Cultures for Tomorrow's Workplace* (Productivity Press, 1995).

Frances Baldwin is a leadership consultant and executive coach. who has spent most of her professional career in executive development for several public and private sector companies. For 13 years she designed and managed leadership development systems in Exxon Corporation (now ExxonMobil) in both domestic and European corporate headquarters. Frances is co-leading the 2004 Summer Program workshop ["When Women Lead from Within."](#)

Sometimes we need to return to the models and see if our figures and pictures of reality are aligned.