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MOTIVATING LANGUAGE THEORY

Effective Leader
Talk in the Workplace

Jacqueline Mayfield
Milton Mayfield



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Introduction

Abstract This chapter gives an overview of our book and motivating language's role in leadership and the workplace. Motivating language theory provides a framework for understanding effective leader communication. It classifies all major leader-to-follower communications into one of three categories: meaning-making, empathetic, and direction-giving language. Leaders use meaning-making language to convey cultural knowledge, values, and vision, and connect follower and organizational goals. Leaders use empathetic language to provide followers with emotional support and guidance. And leaders use direction-giving language to clarify the steps to attain the organizational vision, goals, follower job tasks, and reward expectations.

Keywords Motivating language theory · Leadership · Communication
Organizational culture · Emotions · Task clarity · Rewards

This book reaches out to everyone who wants to know more about effective and ethical leader spoken communication. Why does such language matter, what is it, what's the best way to use it, and how does it affect others? We will respond to these questions and others with a journey through motivating language (ML). Motivating language is a compass that seeks to align follower aspirations with organizational vision using leader talk. Simply put, ML helps leaders to better connect with their followers and improves follower and firm well-being. To help you understand how ML fulfills this mission, our introduction gives an

overview about why ML matters, what it means, and its influence on organizations and their employees. The introduction also lays out this book's architecture.

Too often communication is implicit in leadership behavior, an elephant in the room. That is to say that effective leader communication is assumed to be important, but its definition is hard to grasp, and its application is not strongly emphasized. Effective leader communication ushers in positive results for the organization and its stakeholders, including employees. Researchers, managers, aspiring leaders, students, and other observers have long wondered about what successful leader communication entails, especially spoken words.

Talk is a vital part of what most leaders do (We adopt Neck and colleagues' definition of leadership as "a process of influence for directing behavior toward accomplishing goals" (Neck et al. 2016, p. 4)). A leader's work is often accomplished through talk, accounting for up to 80% of their time (Mintzberg 1973; Van Quaquebeke and Felps in press; Wajcman and Rose 2011). Plus, most of this oral communication happens with followers (Tengblad 2006; Van Quaquebeke and Felps in press).

When speaking with subordinates, language bridges leader intent and purpose. In fact, leader talk transmits signals which can arouse follower motivation—"observable changes in the initiation, direction, intensity and persistence of voluntary action" (Kanfer et al. 2017, p. 339). Simply put, motivation is our drive to contribute. All humans possess this need, and it can be enhanced or diminished through communicative exchanges, especially those which entail a more powerful other, including the words that a leader says to a follower (Van Quaquebeke and Felps, in press). Motivation, the resulting psychological state, is translated by followers in their attitudes toward work, their relationships with leaders, their capabilities and initiatives, and in their job performance.

Yet despite this important role, guidelines for how effective leader communication works are often fuzzy, general rules of thumb, even glib. We were inspired to clarify these ambiguous rules by our own private sector organizational experiences. In these settings, we were often puzzled by just what leader talk was trying to accomplish, or worse yet, by its absence when sorely needed. To our knowledge, there are few evidence-based road maps for leaders who want to speak mindfully in order to advance the best interests of followers and the organization. Motivating language helps to fill this gap by giving a systematic, research-tested model that covers all forms of leader-to-follower speech.

So where does motivating language come from and how is it defined? Much of this question will be answered in this book's first four chapters, but here is a brief summary. Motivating language was originally called *motivational language* by its founder, Dr. Jeremiah Sullivan (1988). This scholar recognized that leaders' spoken messages could spark employee motivational states. Drawing on this insight, Sullivan asserted that most managers fail to use the full range of language or do not use it strategically. These missteps limit the motivational potential of their talk. For guidance on how to address this shortcoming, he turned to linguistics theory and reinterpreted it for organizational contexts. Sullivan's conversion was also firmly rooted in management and social sciences theory and can be captured in three types of leader talk: direction-giving, meaning-making, and empathetic language.

Here is a brief sketch of each ML facet, all of which will be much more detailed in the remainder of this book. Direction-giving language emphasizes the steps to attain the organizational vision, goal setting, giving clear task parameters, informational transparency, and articulating reward contingencies. This form of talk dominates in most organizations. Next, meaning-making language explains organizational vision and culture, often informally and by using stories or metaphors. This form type of speech also lets a follower know that her or his work is valuable and how it contributes to a bigger picture. Meaning-making language informs the follower about how personal goals can be integrated into purposeful work. The last ML facet, empathetic language, is least commonly expressed and sends messages of genuine caring for a follower's well-being. These oral messages include civility, empathy, compassion, and positive emotional support for a follower. Figure 1.1 gives a diagram of all three ML facets, also referred to as ML dimensions in this book.

Researchers have made much progress since the initial model's introduction. ML now has a robust and valid scale, the motivating language scale (MLS), that draws on follower perceptions. Compelling studies using the MLS and other qualitative methods suggest that ML has significant and positive links with many important workplace outcomes including—but not limited—to employee engagement, job satisfaction, self-efficacy, performance, creativity, innovation, perceived leader competence, intention to stay, voice, lower absenteeism, and effective decision making. While most of these studies are cross-sectional, correlational, and have dyadic or individual levels of analyses, there are notable exceptions. A few researchers have captured these ML relationships at multiple organizational levels, over extended periods of time, and uncovered

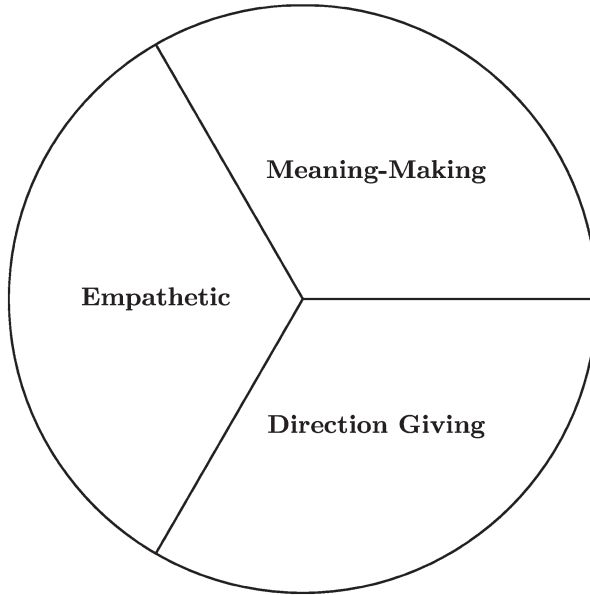


Fig. 1.1 A graphical representation of motivating language’s three facets. This figure has been released under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) license by Milton and Jacqueline Mayfield. For full information go to <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

causal evidence. What’s important here are the implications that organizational culture can frame ML. (Framing refers to influencing others’ attitudes toward something [Conger 1998; Jian and Fairhurst 2017], often through communication practices). Thus, high or low ML use can be systemically embedded throughout an organization.

Other scholars have even extended the scope by showing that motivating language can encourage desirable results via written communication in virtual teams (Wang et al. 2009). As for potential cross-cultural applications, ML investigations are not limited to the USA. Although US settings are prevalent, scholars have or are actively exploring ML in Japan (Kunie et al. 2017), Mexico (Madlock and Sexton 2015), Taiwan (Fan et al. 2014; Wang et al. 2009), Australia (Sarros et al. 2014; Luca and Gray 2004), Turkey (Özen 2013, 2014), Kuwait (Alqahtani 2015), Poland (Wińska 2010, 2013, 2014), and China (Zhang 2009) as well.

It's vital to note that ML's positive influence is only fully realized when the four following assumptions are met. First and foremost, the leader must walk the talk. Leaders' actions must match up with their words. A recent study supported the presence of such behavioral integrity with ML use (Holmes and Parker 2017). Secondly, leaders must appropriately integrate all three dimensions of ML to reap optimal benefits. Thirdly, even though the normal scope of motivating language is confined to leader talk, followers must accurately perceive these intended ML messages. And fourthly, as conceptualized by Sullivan, motivating language refers to almost all important work-related forms of leader-to-follower speech.

The preceding overview will be expanded in our book. We have designed a structure that begins with why leader talk matters in Chap. 2. In this chapter, we confront the dilemma of *What does oral leader communication really mean?* by giving a full background on motivating language theory (MLT) and its influence on employee and organizational well-being. Then in Chaps. 3, 4, and 5, we tackle each dimension of motivating language, their connections with existing research, and their implications for practice. The following chapter, Chap. 6, explains why coordinating the three ML dimensions is critical, and how this skill is reflected in practice. Furthermore, the roles of moderating factors such as national culture will be explored in the integration of ML dimensions. Next, in Chap. 7 our book highlights the benefits and practical implications of motivating language that are drawn from evidence. Chapter 8 takes motivating language up to the organizational level by showing how it can boost strategy and be implemented on a broader platform. Chapter 9 lays out the measurement of motivating language, its generalizability, and potential causality. We again discuss cross-cultural extensions here. In Chap. 10, we focus on future directions for ML research and practice. Finally, Chap. 11 integrates motivating language into the bigger context of a positive communication culture, lays out training and development applications, and offers concluding thoughts.

All of these chapters describe motivating language in support of our book's overarching goal: to present a systematic, understandable program for optimizing leader spoken language that benefits both employees and their organizations. This goal is targeted for both research and practice. For both audiences, we strongly believe that ML is not an inborn trait. Somewhat akin to emotional intelligence, it can be learned, and ML training possibilities will be discussed in Chap. 11.

We now welcome you to a journey through motivating language and sincerely hope that it inspires you as much as it has us.

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