

the many languages of leadership

Corporate America knows the language of doing and measurement. It knows the language of action steps, best practices, productivity, benchmarks and Six Sigma. Some of the highest levels of corporate America, however, are lacking an ability to be fluent in the multiple languages of leadership. These languages are not typically learned in business schools but acquired through experience, openness and maturity.

Executives promoted into positions of leadership must realize that they are being promoted into a conversational role where they are responsible for stimulating and maintaining on-going dialogue with multiple stakeholders and within relationships. More and more, executives need to be fluent in the language of relationship, not only within their companies but also with their clients, markets and brands. This is a learned language that requires practice in listening and speaking.

CEOs and those in leadership positions are expected to lead in times of affluence and in times of difficulty. Success requires a competency in communication that is not learned in textbooks. Genuine communication that gets results and empowers others to grow professionally and commit to the organization is based on a real connection to employees, clients, customers and stakeholders. Genuine communication comes from “courageous conversations.” David Whyte, a poet hailing from Yorkshire, England, describes a “courageous conversation” as follows: “I suppose it’s good to go to the root of the word ‘courage’ which comes from the old Norman French ‘coeur’ meaning heart. I suppose a courageous conversation is a heart-felt one. And a heart-felt conversation is one that needs to happen. I often say that a courageous conversation is the one you should be having.”

We are all masters of avoidance. But as a leader, you cannot afford to be so. Modeling

the ability to have courageous conversations teaches others to do the same. And the outcome will be an organization that promotes innovation, welcomes new ideas and is constantly growing and adapting to its environment. As in all things that require courage, there are dangers.

Can you indeed enter into a conversation for which you do not have the language? The Austrian born philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote, “The limits of my language are the limits of my world. All I know is what I have words for.” How then should one enter the conversation of leadership and inspiration? What does it take to have a courageous conversation, fraught with all its dangers?

There is no real conversation without vulnerability. Implicit in courageous is “coeur,” a vulnerable place within all of us. Leaders who ask for “wholeheartedness” — creativity, adaptability, loyalty and commitment — must then speak the language of the heart in order to connect to and inspire those qualities in those they lead.

The invitation for a courageous conversation calls for the leader to accept diverse perspectives and to nurture openness to having their beliefs, assumptions, ways of doing business and policies challenged. Most CEOs genuinely do not want to be challenged. It feels personal, an attack to one’s identity. Yet, for many, this is what is required to turn the tide for their company. What does it take? It takes an individual that is committed more to being the best *for* the



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company than to being the best *in* the company. It takes an individual with a strong sense of him/herself that has the capacity to create an environment for honest feedback and the ability to distill the information received. It takes a self-aware individual who is as powerful in an attitude of what the Buddhists call “beginners mind” as they are comfortable in their technical competency. But first and foremost, it takes a courageous conversation with yourself.

There are many ways to nurture the “courageous conversation” in yourself.

1. Regularly attend learning events that are on subjects outside of your domain of knowledge or experience. Participation in these jars us into questions we may not even know we need to ask and allows us to see from alternative perspectives.
2. Periodically, detach from your position to cultivate the person in that position. Whether this is through a hobby, community service or a personal interest, cultivate

all of who you are as a means to learn many languages, in particular those aspects of yourself that you do not “invite” to work.

3. Maintain a sense of curiosity and inquiry about the world around you: not only the world you inhabit daily but the global world of the human race. We spend so much of our day in advocacy and not enough in inquiry.
4. Hire the best people, individuals who are highly competent in their domain but also interested in the many aspects of the world around them and diverse, fluent in many languages — the language of music, poetry, sports, art, Nature, education, philanthropy, etc.
5. On a daily basis, ask yourself if you inspire others to such a level of commitment and wholeheartedness that they share “courageous conversations” with you and with each other.

A workshop I recently attended in New York sponsored by Miriam’s Well and delivered by Whyte, posed five “frontier conversations” for executives.

1. What is the conversation you are not having with the unknown future?

How much of your time is spent putting out fires and how much of your time is spent thinking about the future and beyond? Can you envision the impact of current actions on the future of your organization? What is the legacy you wish to leave? Can you anticipate trends and obstacles?

2. What is the courageous conversation you are not having with your customers or the societies of which they are a part?

Are you so fearful of bad news that you are not willing to ask the questions that will involve your customers in your future success? Have you coached those who have the most access to your customers to engage in these conversations?

3. What is the courageous conversation you are not having between the different divisions of the company?

As the saying goes, the right hand does not know what the left hand is doing. Are all areas of your organization aligned behind the mission of the organization and in conversation with one another, working with and helping one another?

4. What is the courageous conversation that you are not having in your leadership team — people that you phone everyday, that you e-mail everyday and that you see everyday?

Have you given your leadership team permission, explicit and implicit, to have these courageous conversations? Are you having meaningful conversations with them or merely having them report results? Are you inviting them to contribute the best of who they are?

5. What is the courageous conversation that you are not having with yourself, in your own heart and mind, with your partner, your children or loved ones?

This may be the most important conversation of the five. If you are not attuned to your own well-being — emotionally, intellectually and spiritually — you will not be able to enter into heart-felt, genuine, courageous conversations with others. The primary conversation on which all others rest is the conversation you have with yourself.

Through some personal journey, you have become the leader of an organization and a group of people. Think back on the conversations that brought you to this place. How many took courage and persistence and belief in self and others? If you are committed to the journey of leadership, know that it is long and fraught with joys and struggles. Even as you achieve the highest position in your organization, you still have a way to go. As Whyte so eloquently expresses in his poem, *The Journey*, “you are not leaving, you are arriving.” You are constantly arriving.