

Ministry Insight: Language Matters

by Bill Hybels

If someone had tried to tell me thirty-five years ago that my effectiveness as a leader would often hinge on something as “inconsequential” as word choice, I’d have rolled my eyes and written them off. “As long as I can convey an idea in general terms that everyone can understand,” I would have said, “I’ll do just fine.”

And I would have been dead wrong.

The truth is, leaders rise and fall by the language they use. Sometimes whole visions live or die on the basis of the words the leader chooses for articulating that vision.

When you put the right words to a vision or a principle, it becomes axiomatic. It begins to live! It becomes memorable and powerful. It becomes weight bearing, and eventually everyone around you champions it. They defend it with vigor. They give to it and pray for it. Around Willow Creek Community Church I can say “Hire tens” to a senior leader or talk about “the umbrella of mercy” with volunteers or rave that a recent event was an “only God” moment to a member of the congregation, and they get what I’m saying immediately. It’s like speaking in shorthand — “insider” language that deepens community and creates clarity and a special sort of solidarity.

The very best leaders I know wrestle with words until they are able to communicate their big ideas in a way that captures the imagination, catalyzes action, and lifts spirits. They coin creeds and fashion slogans and create rallying cries, all because they understand that language matters. Axioms bolster a culture and steady it against the winds of change. Choose the right words and you’ll set up everyone you lead for a level of effectiveness you never thought could be achieved.

Strange though it may seem, I often take long walks around our campus in search of one key word for a leadership talk I’m working on. One word. I’ve been known to devote an entire transatlantic flight to nailing a *single sentence* for an important vision talk that I need to give to Willow. Sound psychotic to you? The point I’m making is that words really do matter. And leaders must pay the price to choose the right ones, because when they do, the payoff is huge.

Willow just went through a massive strategic planning process. It took us a year and a half to do it, but I know the benefits will far surpass whatever time and energy we devoted to getting it right. Our ministry leaders and senior staff met repeatedly to talk about what was firing them up and what they believed God wanted our church to look like in coming years. The conversation kept coming back to three key values: evangelism, discipleship, and compassion.

With that solved, many of our leaders were relieved. *Finally!* They thought. *We know exactly what God wants us to focus on!* But those of us with a few decades of leadership under our belts knew that our work had only begun. We knew that if we wanted to raise congregational enthusiasm for our strategic plan, we were going to have to search for words that would grab the hearts and minds of our people and move them to action.

It was a task that proved every bit as difficult as discerning the key values in the first place. But after dozens of iterations, we landed on the right words. For example, we didn’t want to talk merely about evangelism; instead, we said that we wanted to “raise the level of risk” in our attempt to point people to faith in Christ. Willow has always been a risk-taking church, a characteristic that motivates the entrepreneurial spirit so pervasive in our congregation. To think that after thirty-three years, our church would be riskier than it had ever been got people amped up fast. Thankfully, our “raise the risk” description instantly elicited people’s very best energy, something we’d desperately need if we hoped to mobilize our entire congregation toward higher levels of evangelistic engagement.

Next up was discipleship, but we didn't want to talk merely about discipleship. Instead, we chose to do something we'd never done in the history of our church. We built an apology right into the verbiage of our strategic plan. We said to our congregation, "As it relates to discipleship, in the next three years, we're going to *rethink* how we coach people toward full devotion to Christ." It was a confession of sorts. We were admitting that we should have been doing better at challenging Christ-followers toward full devotedness, and so we promised we'd marshal the best ideas and tools and resources and make improvements going forward. "Rethinking" implied both honesty about our effectiveness or lack thereof, in the past, and intentionality regarding the future. We were going to turn over every stone to help move believers boldly toward complete maturity in Christ. And the congregation loved it.

Then came compassion. But instead of just saying we were going to "be compassionate," (big yawn), we said we were going to "unleash unprecedented amounts of compassion into our broken world." When people heard that phrase during Vision Weekend, they applauded for sixty seconds straight. We had struck a deep chord with the congregation, mainly because of the careful selection of just two words, "unleash" and "unprecedented."

Raise the risk. Rethink. Unleash. Even the cadence of the terms was important to our leadership team as we thought through what language to use. At the risk of piling on, let me say it again: language matters!

I try to apply the same rigorous approach to message titling as well. One time I worked with a concept for six months before I was finally able to label it.

I kept explaining to people a sense of "spiritual angst" I was feeling over things like extreme poverty and the HIV/AIDS pandemic and patterns of racism that still exist in this country and around the world. Listeners didn't latch onto that term, so I tried another: "It's like a sense of *divine frustration*." Blank stares came back at me. Something was obviously amiss. Those two words just didn't connect with people. *Spiritual angst* and *divine frustration* didn't arrest people in the same way the actual concept was arresting me. I kept at it and kept at it until finally, I landed on the phrase *holy discontent*. Once that label showed up, people went nuts. Finally, they could relate. Instinctively, they knew what it meant. And instantly, they wanted to know more. I was asked to give that talk all over the world, and it eventually became a book. Ah, the beautiful by-product of choosing the right words.

In one-on-one conversations, I exercise this same discipline. If I need to have a significant conversation with a colleague, I write down my thoughts in a journal before I ever step foot into the meeting room. The other person is probably going to remember only a few sentences from our conversation, so I want to work hard to select accurate phrases of note.

For instance, if a serious problem exists with an underperforming staff member — especially if that person has been confronted by others before my meeting with them — I might look at them and say, "This is your 911 call. What we're dealing with right here, right now, carries with it the top level of urgency and importance. If this behavior does not change — *immediately* — you'll be asked to leave our staff. This is what I want you to remember when you walk out of the room today. Nine-one-one . . . are we clear?"

We usually are.

In other situations in which the other person may *believe* the stakes are high when in fact they are not, I will relieve them early in the conversation by saying, "This subject is important, but please understand me: we are not in an emergency here. There are no blinking red lights, no wailing sirens, and no secret agents cleaning out your office while you're in here. Are you with me?"

"What I *am* saying," I continue, "is that over a reasonable period of time your manager and I need to see dramatic improvement in this area. The only thing I'm after today is your strong commitment to improvement. Deal?"

Language matters! The right words will make vision talks soar. Carefully chosen phrases can make strategic plans sound like rally cries. Do the work, and you'll experience the payoff.

Excerpted from Axiom by Bill Hybels (Zondervan, 2008).