Spanish-speaking traveler journeying through Latin America will have little trouble communicating effectively (except perhaps, in Brazil, where Portuguese is the official language). But that same traveler trekking through Asia will struggle to understand others and to be understood.

When traveling for leisure, language differences can be part of the adventure. But not for leaders, who can face similar challenges within their own organizations as they strive to effectively manage a multigenerational and multicultural workforce, collaborate across organizational silos, and when the time comes, make the transition to leading at the next level.

Like the traveler in an unfamiliar land grappling with a language barrier, a leader can be just as disoriented if the organization doesn’t have a common leadership “language”—a set of leader behaviors that transcend, and are reinforced at, all levels. Such a language, which is reflective of a dynamic leadership culture, is critical to helping leaders succeed. But more importantly, it creates the most productive and engaging work environment so their organization is better able to meet its most pressing business needs.

We aren’t talking about a language based on strategy, business plans, or operations, but a language that speaks to how people interact as they perform their jobs. It’s a language of empathy, involvement, trust, sharing, and support.

**Leadership development**

Being a leader has never been harder given the growing complexity, the need to do more with less, the volatility and uncertainty that define leadership roles, and the state of the economy. A recent study of middle managers by Development Dimensions International
A Leadership Language in Action

Edmonton, Alberta-based Capital Power recognized the need for a common leadership language and consistent leader behaviors. To make them a reality, Development Dimensions International helped the organization implement integrated leadership development programs to create a unified leadership culture.

Capital Power has programs for new and emerging leaders, veteran managers, and senior managers that all introduce and reinforce the same concepts. These include the need to treat others with respect, listen and respond with empathy, coach effectively, and build trust.

“It just makes sense that our senior-level leaders need to be equipped with the same language, same models, and same concepts as the leaders who report to them,” says Angela Bourbonnais, an HR business partner with Capital Power. She points out the value in the company’s senior leaders being able to support, coach, and provide feedback using an approach familiar to and embraced by lower-level leaders.

The leaders themselves have embraced the language and the culture it reflects. As one program participant describes its impact, “I have so much more confidence and I think I am taken more seriously and [treated] with a good deal more respect because, quite frankly, I think I communicate better.”

(DDI), The New Reality of Mid-level Leadership, confirms this: Just 10 percent feel “well-prepared” to meet the top challenges they think they’ll face in the next two years. And leaders are struggling as they transition into their roles.

In our soon-to-be-released 2014 Global Leadership Forecast, just 57 percent of new leaders reported having information about the competencies or skill areas needed to succeed as a leader. This isn’t surprising since the same study also reveals that only 13 percent of organizations report high levels of consistency in their programs focused on leadership talent.

A common leadership language can help to alleviate this unease by addressing what leaders at all levels need to do: Collaborate and get things done through others. Indeed, critical leadership activities such as coaching, giving feedback, and resolving conflicts are most effective when everyone is using a core language that sets norms for discussions and ensures all employees are hearing and experiencing a consistent, highly engaging work environment.

What a leadership language sounds like

According to DDI’s Driving Workplace Performance Through High-Quality Conversations, an effective common core leadership language addresses what leaders at all levels need to do to be effective, which is engage in successful interactions. Although the types of interactions differ by level, all are defined by a leader’s ability to address others’ personal needs.

The language should be tied to a strong leadership culture based on a core set of values, including showing others respect, even in tough situations; listening to people and demonstrating that you hear them; attaining mutual trust—trusting and being trusted; promoting ownership and accountability for one’s work and responsibilities; and providing and receiving support to achieve goals. Good leaders also need to be able to approach each interaction in a way that will make sure it achieves its intended goal and be able to both give and receive feedback effectively.

If this values-based language sounds like
it’s based on common human decency, it is. It facilitates a degree of authenticity and transparency that resonates with others. (“A sense of trust—and transparency—with management” was one of the themes that emerged in an analysis of Glassdoor’s 2014 Employee Choice Awards survey, which identified America’s Best Places to Work.) But it’s also about leaders aligning with business goals—whether those goals are executing strategy, driving innovation, or promoting employee engagement.

No organization can hope to achieve its business goals—and according to Bersin & Associates, nearly three-quarters of all leadership teams fail to achieve business goals—if all of its leaders aren’t on the same page, behaving consistently and taking the same approach to interacting with others.

A common language makes leaders more effective by minimizing communication gaps and language barriers between generations, regions, or cultures. It also facilitates the creation of a leadership brand and enables leaders to become brand ambassadors who bolster and sustain the culture.

In the global DDI workforce study Lessons for Leaders From the People Who Matter, we found that 98 percent of employees were “motivated to give my best to my manager” when working for a supervisor who recognized them appropriately, provided support without taking over, involved them in decisions, listened, took time to explain rationale for decisions, and maintained their self-esteem.

Establishing and reinforcing a common core leadership language begins and ends with how leaders are developed. Frontline leaders need a core set of leadership skills so they can have effective interactions and get the most from their people. Leaders at higher organizational levels need these same skills, too, so they can be effective in their own interactions and also reinforce and support the leaders who report to them. These skills need to be developed, applied, and reinforced across the entire leadership pipeline if a common language and culture that facilitate achieving business results are to emerge and stick.

Inconsistent development
Many organizations unintentionally muddle their leadership brand. Rather than reinforce a common core leadership language at all levels, they do something like this: The organization’s frontline leadership development program trains core leadership skills, such as coaching, performance management, and change management. Then, for the middle level, the
organization has a different program to develop the specific skills needed for execution, including driving innovation and change management—a different skill set than the frontline leaders develop.

Meanwhile, senior-level leaders go through an executive program to hone their strategic skills—another wholly unique skill set—or work with an executive coach on their personal derailers. An equally common scenario is one where just one or two levels of leaders are developed while the others don’t benefit from any type of development program.

As a result, leaders at different levels—to say nothing of those working in different functional areas, such as finance, marketing, or IT—behave and get things done differently. These differences in leader behavior breed frustration and inefficiency and also can distract leaders and employees from the need to focus on executing strategy and realizing business results.

Getting started
If you want to start building a values-based leadership culture in your organization and establish a common leadership language, four steps are critical.

Focus on what leaders need to do. There is no shortage of leadership models around which you can build your organization’s leadership capability. But not all are created equal—some emphasize innovation, some efficient decision making, and some coaching. Whatever framework you use, make sure it’s one that supports more effective interactions. After all, that’s what leaders need to do most to get things done.

Draw clear connections between leader behavior and the execution of business strategy. Leaders need to see that developing skills and focusing on their behavior isn’t in addition to the goals and objectives they are charged with achieving. Rather, this is how they can achieve them. The areas that the right leadership culture can beget—agility, execution, and innovation—are all about business objectives.

Begin at the top. As challenging as it sometimes can be to set in motion, the execution of a strategy has to begin at the executive level. The same goes for transforming your leadership culture.

Your senior leaders must make a commitment and take accountability. Then—and only then—can that commitment and accountability be successfully cascaded down through the organization. The bottom line: If the executive suite isn’t willing to live the leadership culture, no one else in the organization will.

Commit for the long term. Nobody likes or responds well to the infamous “flavor of the
“month” approaches to leadership development. When there is an underlying belief that the organization is likely to abandon a framework midstream and introduce another one, people will be hesitant to buy in fully.

If you want your leaders to become engaged in living your culture, they need to see—and have it continually reinforced—that the organization is committed to having its leaders behave in a specific manner. Like any meaningful and lasting transformation, transforming a culture takes time.

The same language at every level

From entry level to executive, people have the same personal needs: respect, involvement, job ownership, and trust. Although the context of the conversations may be different, the leadership skills and behaviors—that is, the language of leadership—to meet these needs are the same.

Organizations that develop and reinforce a common leadership language across all levels and functions will strengthen their leadership pipeline. And their business strategies won’t get lost in translation.

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