



The Energy of Conversation

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The Language of Business

Written by David Finney

Can the selection of a single word over another be the difference between a business succeeding and failing? Patrick Butcher, the finance director of National Rail was once quoted as saying “Yes, we had a hundred year winter. But we can and should do better”. Not ‘will’ but ‘should’. There is a sense of guilt and an element of resignation about the statement and it provokes the question: if it was used in a company meeting would it inspire attending staff to make the change?



“We need to radically alter our business model’ has a different energy and leaves the audience more assured of the speaker’s intentions. This was part of a talk delivered by former M&S CEO Sir Stuart Rose at a leadership awards ceremony in 2011. Coaches know too well the importance of choosing the right words when phrasing questions for their clients. They need to keep their language ‘clean’ and their agendas ‘clear’ to allow clients to express themselves freely, gain empowerment and take responsibility. They are also aware that an effective ‘challenge’ can alter mind-sets.

Coaches can help contemporary business leaders determine where their communication style sits on a scale that has the provocative goal-setting of Sugar at one end and the ‘quiet leadership’ of Branson at the other. Charles Handy – in his legendary Donut Principle – advises managers to make it absolutely clear to staff the difference between tasks that have to be done in a specific way and tasks which allow for individual expression and creativity. ISO - the international quality standards organization – makes this distinction using the word ‘shall’ (mandatory) and ‘should’ (best practice – i.e. is optional) and this is fairly clear for companies to follow.

Employees need to know where they stand, how much freedom they have and probably also want to be a little ‘wowed’ in team talks from their leaders. As we move from the Information Age to the “Conceptual Age” of Dan Pink which he talks about in his book “A Whole New Mind”, this will be all the more critical. As with all areas of leadership, it is a question of balance and the language of business is a forever evolving protocol that we are still learning.

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