

## Wages of Words

Mickey Connolly

Historically, flawed human interactions have plagued most efforts to accelerate collaborative achievement. Sophisticated as we humans like to think we are, many of our reactions are surprisingly primitive. The core of the human brain, it turns out, is geared for the predator-meets-prey world of the savannah and reacts with the same aggression and fear when faced with a challenge or derogatory remark.

Every uttered word makes an impression and causes a reaction. Leaders ignorant of the wages of words produce accidental impact, often damaging their own purposes. Leaders who understand and respect the power of words produce far-reaching benefit with minimal time, stress and effort.

### Failed Words: Government

Even career politicians who are trained in the art of diplomacy fall victim to communication blunders that lead to unforeseen consequences. For example, the impact of the phrases, "Axis of Evil," (President Bush in referring to Iraq, Iran and North Korea) and "They are Old Europe," (Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld referring to France and Germany), on the War in Iraq and the current state of U.S. international relations include the following:

- The North Korean Foreign Ministry referred to "Axis of Evil" as "little short of declaring a war." Since then, agreements have been broken, meetings canceled, and nuclear risks have increased.
- France and Germany became even bigger obstacles to international support for U.S. policy.

We can find similar gaffes in past administrations, (e.g., the Clinton administration offers many), but these few make the point: words can wreak havoc.

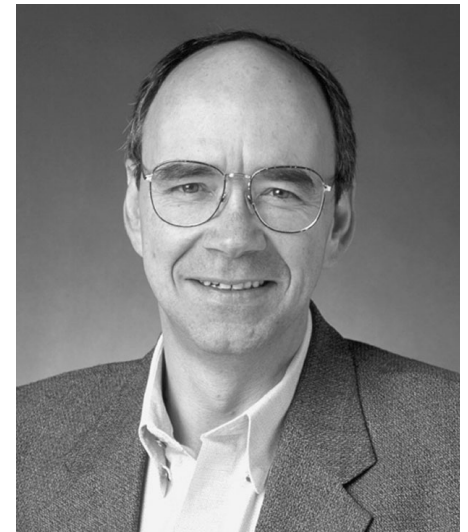
### Failed Words: Business

The same holds true for corporate executives who often pepper their day-to-day dialogue with aggressive and confrontational phrases in discussions and negotiations with prospective merger partners or employee groups, as well as with suppliers and even with government regulators.

When Roger Smith was CEO of General Motors in the 1980s he spoke of transforming GM into "the 21st Century Corporation." When accounting for poor business results his words undermined the transformation he was seeking. Nuckles and Nohria in their book, **Beyond The Hype**, said that typically Smith externalized GM's problems: disappointments were because of "a dramatic shift in customer demand, high interest rates, a deteriorating economy," or "excessive and costly government regulations."

By portraying the causes of difficulty as external to GM, Smith increased complacency, slowed the culture shift, alienated savvy GM employees and lost the support of the board of directors.

In late 2002, Michael Capellas took the helm at MCI. If he intended to re-establish the credibility of his embattled company, he fell short in a recent MCI conference call. October 2003 *Fast Company* offers an explanation of Capellas' delay in developing ethical standards and an ethics training program. "It has been an interesting balance



in...developing this program of finding the correct balance between the science of ethics and the practical execution that comes in the field."

Practical execution is somehow separate from ethical behavior? The result of Capellas' words is a derisive article in a major business publication including the sarcastic question: "It is hard to do the right thing, isn't it?"

In November of 1998, Daimler Chrysler became a reality. CEO Juergen Schrempp had proclaimed the combination of Daimler Benz and Chrysler a "merger of equals." Two years later Schrempp was quoted in the *Financial Times* as saying he always intended to control Chrysler but that Chrysler would only agree to a merger, not a takeover. "We had to go a roundabout way but it had to be done for psychological reasons." Less than one month later, the wages of these words began to be paid.

*continued on page 2*

## Wages of Words

*continued from page 1*

Several lawsuits were filed that accused Daimler Chrysler of deceiving stockholders. Billionaire Kirk Kerkorian, one of the disgruntled accusers, even cited the *Financial Times*' article as a prompt for his concerns. As of this writing, Daimler Chrysler has agreed to \$300 million in payments to settle some of these claims, and the Kerkorian suit is still outstanding. Add to this the legal fees, negative media attention and internal distraction, and Schrempf's statements paid high wages.

But the workplace and diplomatic landscape does not have to be a blood-covered plain ruled by the law of "eat or be eaten." People can work productively together if they recognize that they have a common goal. The path to that goal is authentic communication.

Such communications can be strikingly absent from most management discussions. In its place are communications and behavioral patterns that hinder reaching organizational goals. Many executives and leaders trivialize the power of conversation. They fall into a common trap: they think communication issues are "soft," unlike the supposedly more important "hard" issues of technology and measurement.

Leaders need to remember that every collective undertaking, for profit or otherwise, can be successful only if the people involved truly believe they have a common purpose and common bond.

We have found it highly productive to accept these three axioms:

- All human beings have purpose, concerns and circumstances.

"Every uttered word makes an impression and causes a reaction. Leaders ignorant of the wages of words produce accidental impact, often damaging their own purposes. Leaders who understand and respect the power of words produce far-reaching benefit with minimal time, stress and effort."

- If someone perceives that you are unaware or disrespectful of his or her purposes, concerns and circumstances, he or she will consider you a threat. And he or she will actively avoid, resist and undermine any significant threat. This creates waste.

- If someone perceives that you are aware and respectful of his or her purposes, concerns and circumstances, he or she will join you in conversation. He or she will share information, co-invent solutions, and move into action. This creates value.

Our study of effective communicators reveals principles and practices that any leader can put to work.

### Eight Rules of Reception

#### 1. Find common ground first

Do not begin by focusing on differences. What facts matter to everyone? What

purposes and worries do they have that you can respect (even if you do not approve of their methods)?

The Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel featured discoveries of what the adversaries cared about in common, and those discoveries were crucial to the outcomes. A tip: when you describe the future you have in common choose words your counterparts/adversaries use passionately and repetitively.

#### 2. When you get resistance, do research

In the face of resistance, if you attempt to convince the other side that it is wrong you increase the resistance. Ask:

- "For you, what is important about this?"
- "What are some of the facts and events that you think we should take into account?"
- "Is there anything you can teach me about this issue that will help me resolve it?"

#### 3. Speak FOR much more than you speak AGAINST.

Speak for purposes rather than against people. Propose more often than you oppose. If you focus on what you do not want, you are like a running back in football who looks for tacklers rather than holes to run through.

Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech is a profound example of speaking for more loudly than against.

#### 4. Disarm fear and serve purpose

Our brains are hyper-sensitive to threat. Anyone who attacks your purposes or

*continued on page 3*

## Wages of Words

*continued from page 2*

dismisses your fears triggers ancient “fight, flee, freeze” responses. Be sure to voice your respect for the purposes and fears of your audience.

A tip: If you say, “I disagree,” after you hear someone’s comment they are unlikely to embrace your next point. “I disagree” triggers defensive fear rather than interest. Eliminate “I disagree” between their comment and yours and you will be far happier with the reception.

### 5. Let the facts speak

Share the facts before you share your interpretation of them. If you give your deductions first the audience considers your facts as self-serving. Ask people for their conclusions regarding the facts at hand. You will be surprised how frequently they are responsive to your concerns before you even voice them.

### 6. Provide ways to contribute

All people want to be valuable. If you lead change management initiatives, it is important to offer chances to contribute. Contrary to popular comment, people do not fear change. What we fear is failure. We only resist changes that threaten us. Give people a chance to contribute, and insecurities will subside; support will soar.

### 7. Give choices, not ultimatums

If you resort to ultimatum you better have absolute, dominant power. Ultimatums trigger overt and covert resistance. A better tactic: offer a clear set of choices that include implications and consequences. Sponsor the natural human longing to choose freely.

Richard Holbrooke’s negotiations in Bosnia and Kosovo included scenarios

“Leaders need to remember that every collective undertaking, for profit or otherwise, can be successful only if the people involved truly believe they have a common purpose and common bond.”

that allowed the various factions to confront a variety of futures and choose the best one possible.

### 8. Make clear, precise requests

Once you build a foundation with rules 1-7, ask for clear action. Do not hint or allude. President Reagan in Berlin, after speaking for the ideals of freedom and democracy (rather than against Gorbachev), said, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall.”

A clear request for action provokes acceptance, rejection, or a counter-proposal. At worst, you have a better idea of where they stand. At best, you move ideas into action.

The wages of words is action. If you observe the Eight Rules of Reception you will provoke more valuable action than most leaders in the world. \\\



**Mickey Connolly,**

Co-Founder, Conversant, Inc.,  
Boulder, CO

Co-Author, *The Communication Catalyst*

Reproduced with permission of the Association for Corporate Growth.