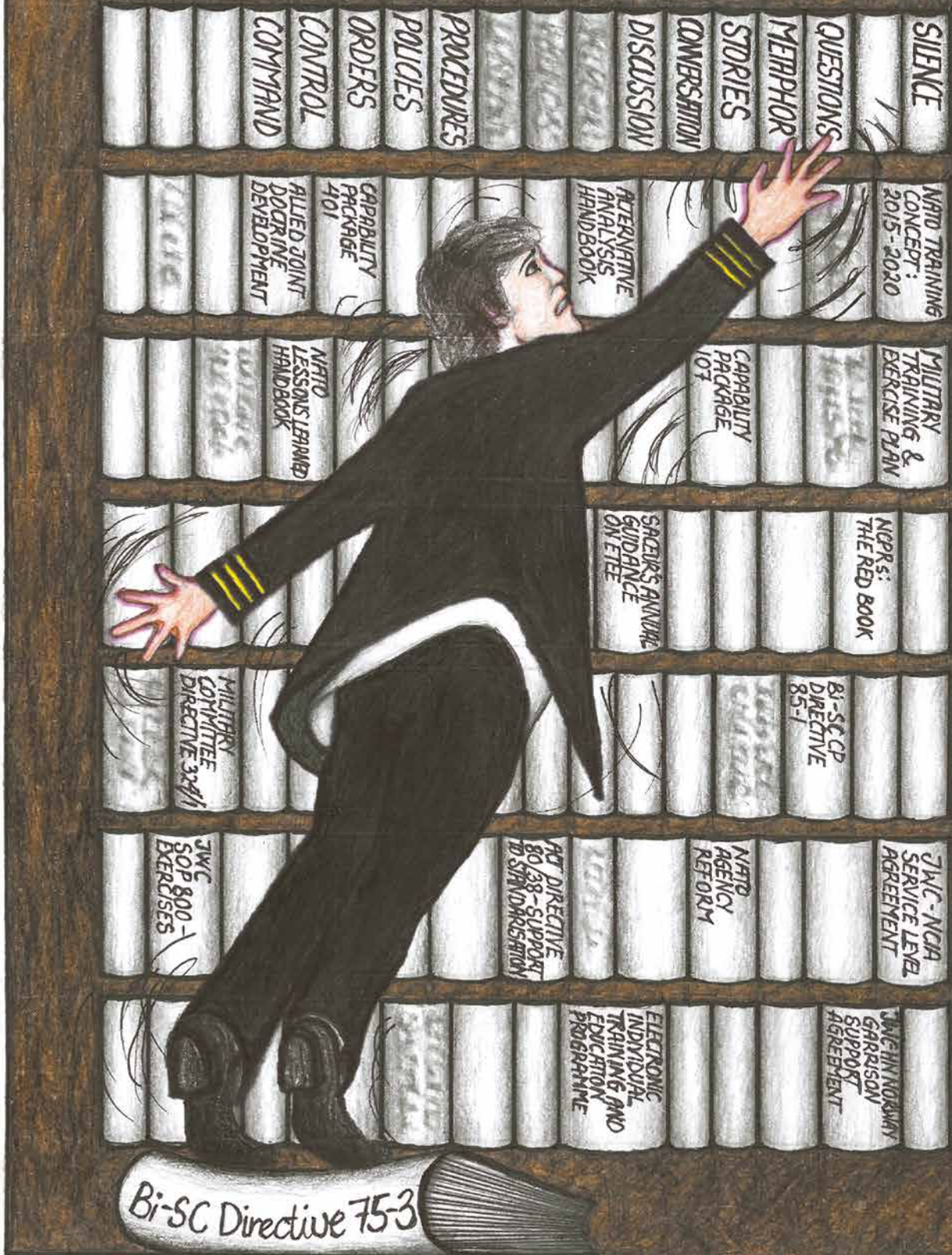


THE LANGUAGE OF LEADERSHIP



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THE LANGUAGE OF TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

*Want to be a more effective transformational leader?
You might make a start by (re)learning a language.*

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SMC4 Division
Joint Warfare Centre

Introduction

According to Colonel Wesley Fox⁽¹⁾, there are six essential traits that exist within an effective leader; they should be caring, motivated individuals who have a personality and they should be knowledgeable, committed people who communicate. A swift trawl through popular leadership offerings would reveal many other traits such as integrity, courage, respect, honesty, decisiveness, tolerance, tenacity and the list goes on. Now, if you think that these attributes only apply to the senior management level then you might want to skip this article and move on. If you are ready to consider that these leadership behaviours can, and should, pervade all levels within an organisation⁽²⁾ then please continue. The article is framed in this way; that the JWC is full of leaders and one way in which leadership is enacted is in the way we choose to communicate.

The language in everyday use within an organisation is influenced by many things; the organisation's heritage and role, its demography and organisational maturity. The most pervasive influence of all though is the leadership paradigm under which the organisation operates. Western industrialised leadership development through the last 70 years or so reveals that the prevalent language of leadership

reflected the context of the times. This evolution describes leadership through a production line context; through a period defined by an increasingly educated and liberalised workforce and into the highly decentralised knowledge worker age we find ourselves in today.

Industry is not the only sector that is influenced by changing operational environments. Over a decade ago strategic defence planners were predicting that military organisations would be responding to a similar form of organisational decentralisation. The emergence of the "strategic corporal"⁽³⁾ and "Network Enabled Capabilities"⁽⁴⁾ predicted a drastic reduction in hierarchical structures as a consequence of decentralisation, as knowledge, "sense"⁽⁵⁾ and decision-making drifted towards the edge of the network.

Those strategists got one thing right: there is an ever increasing amount of data being generated, connected and "relationalised" into information, before being contextualised into knowledge, which needs to be assessed prior to decisions being taken. Indeed there are times when it seems that we are drowning in information and yet still people complain that they just don't know what's going on. Organisations are increasingly called upon to understand,

consolidate and communicate from within highly ambiguous, complex and dynamic conditions; and to do so in less time, with fewer resources and across a larger spectrum. Information systems enable data and information to be generated and connected at the "speed of light" but knowledge and wisdom only run effectively at the "speed of thought". Today's information environment is rank indifferent; it is instantaneous, unfiltered and omnipresent. If we are not to become immobilised under the pressure of all this information it requires that we all need to become much better at understanding and creating "sense"⁽⁵⁾ in our organisations. Many corporations have chosen to deal with the prevailing challenges by creating an environment where all staff have the opportunity to participate in leadership. They have evolved into a transformational leadership setting and this evolution is reinforced and communicated through transformational language.

Transformational leadership: *"leader behaviours that transform and inspire followers to perform beyond expectations while transcending self-interest for the good of the organisation."*⁽⁶⁾



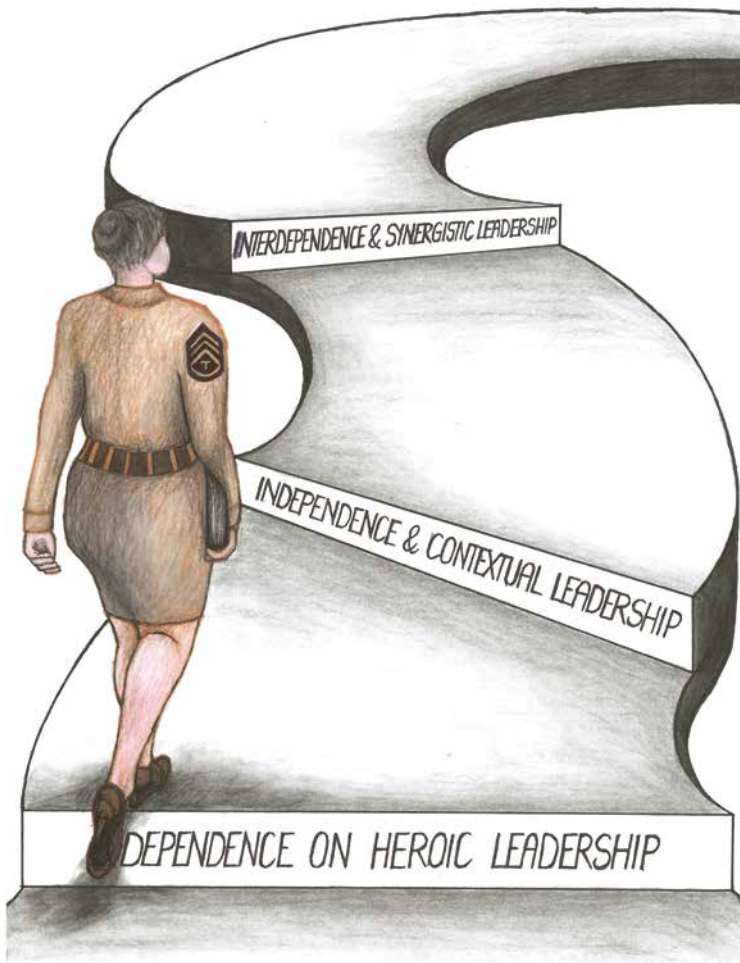


ILLUSTRATION GRY HEGE RINALDO

THE EVOLUTION OF LEADERSHIP

Commercial leadership language has made the transition from an era influenced by "trait theory" – where leaders were seen as larger than life characters, strong, visible, charismatic personalities, through to "situational theories" – where leaders are able to flex to meet the demands of both the context and the followers and more recently by "interdependence leadership" – leading from a position of collaboration, curiosity and engagement.⁽⁷⁾ Organisational language made the same journey.

Interestingly, industry has been highly effective at embracing organisational language from us. In their pursuit of a competitive advantage they use what works best. Their business language mimics the military; they refer to "winning the hearts and minds, getting off your high horse, closing ranks, marking time" and more recently I have heard commercial companies refer to "putting boots on the ground", a direct metaphorical translation from the war in Iraq. Their language is rich with military metaphor. Still, where appropriate, they have made significant divergences too. One of those diversions has been in the greater adoption of "transformational leadership" and its associated language.

Transformational leadership and language

Transformational language engages, empowers, influences and inspires followers to higher levels of personal performance. Higher levels of individual performance leads inevitably to enhanced organisational capabilities, organisational learning⁽⁸⁾ and growth. These descriptions reinforce the point of view that leadership, "engaging, empowering, influencing and inspiring", does not only relate to the formally nominated leaders in the organisation. Leadership is not necessarily based on rank or grade but is something that all staff have the capacity and permission to practice. "Leadership is not something few can be appointed to by other people, like being named manager. It is an inner decision to adopt a stance, an orientation toward the world."⁽⁹⁾

This should not be seen as a threat to those in authority; rather an enabler,

a decision support capability. It does not attempt to wrestle responsibility from those in senior managerial positions. Transformational leadership is a model that has the potential for all of us to help our organisation, and ourselves, learn.

If we really are the type of organisation which adopts an innovative and collaborative spirit that values the contributions of every single person, that supports our fellow colleagues whenever and wherever we can, that is inclusive by default and where we are accountable to create and sustain shared meaning, then the question becomes how might we communicate, as leaders, and what methods and language norms might be likely to prevail?

The transformational power of questions

Questions are an invaluable leadership tool. Used mindfully they not only demonstrate value to the person you are

addressing; they also help us to remain open and curious rather than being critical and judgemental. Asking questions can make "not knowing" a virtue rather than what some might consider as a weakness. Once an organisation embraces questions as a "sense making"⁽⁶⁾ tool, insights can emerge and insights are the catalysts for transformation. An organisational culture that can ask questions of its mission, aims, goals and processes strengthens both individual and organisational learning. It has the ability to improve organisational alignment, problem solving and decision making. It also enhances collaboration and teamwork. Questions help to empower staff by strengthening their own self-awareness and building self-confidence⁽¹⁰⁾ so that they are better able to understand, decide and act in line with an organisation's goals rather than needing to wait to be told what to think, what to do.

During his command of the USS





"Once an organisation embraces questions as a sense making tool, insights can emerge and insights are the catalysts for transformation." Photograph by JWC PAO.

Benfold, at the time one of the most complex and advanced warship in the fleet, Commander D. Michael Abrashoff⁽¹¹⁾ helped shift the mind-set of the crew on board that led to a dramatic shift in performance. He took his vessel and crew from receiving one of the lowest performance assessments in its class, to one of the highest performing ships in the fleet. When asked how he did that, his response was "with questions, questions to everyone." He had conversations with every member of his crew and during these 15-20 minutes sessions he asked three simple questions: "What do you like best about this ship? What do you like least? What would you change if you could?" He listened carefully to their responses, he listened to understand, to see the responses as though looking through their eyes, and he then acted upon the sense he had made from the information and insights he received. A word of caution though, simply adding a question mark to the end of a sentence is not enough and "all too often it seems we ask questions that alienate and disempower rather than collaborate and empower our subordinates."⁽¹²⁾

At a senior decision briefing recently, a question formed in the mind of our Commander; he wanted to know if the analysis and recommendations were complete and consensual. Both of the sentences below are questions, but if you pay attention to the words used

— one closes minds, distances people and disempowers them, while the other empowers, includes and creates the potential for new possibilities.

- a) Who disagrees with this recommendation?
- b) Does anyone hold a different point of view?

One of these questions expresses our professional values of accountability, innovation, support and inclusivity, and the other does not. If you imagine these questions being asked perhaps you can start to differentiate the two. The option chosen generated a fresh discussion that led to outcomes that were not predictable. It was a transformational moment that came from the mindful delivery of a carefully crafted question. If questions are great vehicles for getting at what is already known but hidden or held back in our minds, there is another tool that allows us to access what is not currently known. It is a technique that enables intuition, insights and brand new connections to be made. That tool is telling stories.

The creative influence of stories and metaphor

Stories and metaphors surround us all of our lives. They provide a framework for how we communicate and make sense of things

with ourselves and our world⁽⁹⁾. The "stories and symbols in organisations provide a barometer reading, showing the health of the organisation."⁽¹³⁾ Stories are incredibly powerful because the learning is not so much in what is said in the story, but rather in what is not. The listener adds their own unique, personalised interpretation and makes it part of their own evolving story. The words that the leader uses are mere scaffolding and trigger a highly individualized creative process that takes place within the listener.

The Australian Army, in identifying an organisational imperative to "encourage flexibility and adaptability at all levels" introduced a methodology they refer to as "anecdotal circles"⁽¹³⁾. These anecdotal circles are unstructured sessions initiated through open questions where participants generate their own stories to illustrate an individual's perspective on their understanding of their workplace. As anecdotes are being shared, in one part of their mind, the listeners are hearing the speaker's story. In another part, the listeners are imagining a new story, one in which they have each become the protagonist.

These sessions were created in response to an increasing awareness that "the changing nature of warfare means that combat and support personnel make decisions that may have far reaching ramifications for the safety and welfare of personnel and civilians alike, as well as having far-reaching political implications beyond the success of the stated mission or tasks"⁽¹³⁾; a statement that is largely in line with the concept of the "strategic corporal"⁽³⁾.

To engage us at our most innovative and insightful, the stories we tell need to be offered lightly, able to drift, to wax and wane, so as to leave room for personal interpretation. Transformational leadership language is not about transmitting an increasing amount of information, removing any doubt or ambivalence. It is about leaving enough space so that the listeners themselves can generate the insights and imagine new possibilities — "the leader says less: the listeners understand more."⁽¹²⁾

One might consider the Joint Warfare Centre (JWC) as a highly effective story telling machine. Through our scenarios and simulations we give our audiences enough information to make their own





ILLUSTRATION GRY HEGE RINALDO

interpretations, and play out their actions in a safe and benign environment. We leave the audience with the ability to use that story, develop and refine it, internalise the lessons learned, their insights and discoveries, in a completely different context in the future.

When JWC ran STEADFAST JUNO in 2010, no one was predicting the events that would unfold in Libya just months later and it was certainly not the scenario that was used. Nonetheless, Lieutenant General Charles Bouchard claimed that the staff that had been through this JWC exercise were "light years ahead of those that had not." In other words we had created the environment for "organisational learning"⁽⁸⁾, where knowledge can be reused, reshaped and reapplied in new contexts. That is transformational leadership in action and it started with a story that was crafted and then delivered by the staff of the JWC.

"In the future, leaders will not only have to be effective strategists, but rhetoricians who can energize through the words they choose"⁽⁹⁾, but is this really new to us in our military context? I don't think so; a swift internet search on inspirational speeches will flag up a disproportionately high set of results that have military origins. Perhaps the difference is that highly effective transformational leaders ask questions and tell stories purposefully, they do so in line

with the Commander's intent and in order to get the mission done.

Saying lots by saying nothing at all

To communicate in ways that engage and inspire does not always involve words. When you say nothing at all, you are still communicating. Indeed, NATO has a formal decision-making process based around the use of silence. Silence, when used mindfully, is a liberating and empowering tool. It creates space for thought and reflection and encourages others to fill the gap with their world view⁽¹⁴⁾ and it is probably the simplest of all transformational leadership language skills to try out. Next time you are in a discussion where a decision needs to be made but you are not sure if you have all the factors before you, just leave a five second gap between when you would normally speak and when you now choose to do so. You still get your turn, and you might be surprised with whom else, or what else, fills this seemingly uncomfortable gap.

Another strange phenomenon is that the most effective way to lead transformational behaviours is not through the mindful selection of what you say; the stories you tell or the questions you pose. It is about what you choose to do, day in day out. What actions and behaviours do you exhibit that might encourage transformation

in others and consequently in our organisation. Conversely, what do you choose to turn a blind eye to, what do you encourage by allowing it to happen or by exemplifying it yourself. Leaders throughout the organisation are under 24/7 surveillance and scrutiny; followers are constantly gathering cues, consciously or otherwise, on what leadership behaviour actually looks like. Moreover a leader's shadow is cast even when they are gone; they leave an indelible mark on an organisation.

Five tips for enhancing your transformational leadership language

1. Ask even more questions of yourself than you ask of others. No matter how certain you feel about your point of view, intentionally coach yourself by asking "what else is there in this situation I may not be seeing yet?" Seek out those with different perspectives. Know that all you have is a point of view, and that is all anyone else has too. The language of leadership is about synthesising these points of view.

2. Consider carefully the stories you tell/hear. Do the stories you tell encourage the recipients to make their own connections, create their own conclusions and enable new possibilities to emerge? Are you



willing to discourage negative, demotivating or disempowering stories? Are the organisational stories enablers for the JWC's Vision, our Commander's intent, our purpose and goals?

3. Restrain your natural tendency to judge. Hold strong convictions and steadfast beliefs but do so lightly enough so that you can let them develop and evolve or even give away altogether. Be ready to believe and accept without judgement that the person you are leading is doing what makes perfect sense to them, given their interpretation of the information and context. Use silence as a tool to find out even more.

4. What shadow are you casting? How big is the gap between what you say and what you do? How could others interpret your behaviours? Are you ready to step in and challenge behaviours that are not in line with our commitments to each other and our organisation? When do you step in and say "that's not how we do it around here"?

5. Be courageous enough to be vulnerable. See the value in expressing emotion and displaying a little humility. Be ready to admit when you get it wrong — by "setting aside the pretences of invulnerability and omniscience" leaders invite their peers and subordinates to trust⁽⁶⁾. Trust is perhaps the most important characteristic in a "leaderful" organisation⁽²⁾.

Conclusion

In today's highly networked interconnected world where information is news long before it ever gets made sense of, with a world waiting for instantaneous reactions before decision makers have the chance to bring their wisdom to bear, it may become an operational imperative to enable leadership throughout our organisations. Intent, mission and purpose need to be understood at all levels. We simply don't have the luxury to burden the "chain of command" with the sole responsibility to make sense of the environment and then expect them to disseminate their sense link by link.

"With the growing complexity and speed of change in the world, the traditional hierarchical model of leadership that worked

yesterday will not work tomorrow. The leader simply won't know enough to adequately tell people what to do; the world is changing too rapidly. No one person can master all the data needed to address the complex issues that confront today's organisations,"⁽¹²⁾ ...but lots of people can. The question then is how to get all the people "that can" to the table, and how to engage and inspire them to bring their best game with them.

In a transformational setting *"an effective leader's persuasion is of the subtlest kind, for he or she must interpret reality to offer images of the future that are irresistibly meaningful. In the choice of words, values, and beliefs, leaders craft reality to ensure commitment and confidence in the mission."*⁽¹²⁾ Yet there are also times when clear no-nonsense leadership is required, where the more transactional leadership approach influenced by command and control is not just appropriate, it is critical.

A TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADER requires versatility and an intuitive ability to flex his/her style according to the desired outcomes. Engaging in duality of this kind is a challenge. Most of us have been brought up on a healthy dose of unity of command and operational stovepipes and these are highly effective paradigms, except when they get in the way. To have the ability to shift your language from issuing clear expectations to a language which leaves enough room for your staff's own personal and organisational insights requires courage and commitment.

Developing our transformational language of leadership may require deep personal change. It may demand introspection into our own beliefs and values. It involves *"thinking through what we are attempting, exhibiting more than a little humility, and being able to level with others and speak from a genuine point of view. It involves acquiring a new perspective on the world, a profound clarification of what it means to be leader."*⁽⁹⁾ I am not proposing that our reliance on a transactional style of leadership is lacking in relevance, but, if a hammer is the only tool we have in our toolbox, well everything starts to look like... oh you know what I mean. ✦



A transformational leader requires versatility and an intuitive ability to flex his/her style according to the desired outcomes."

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