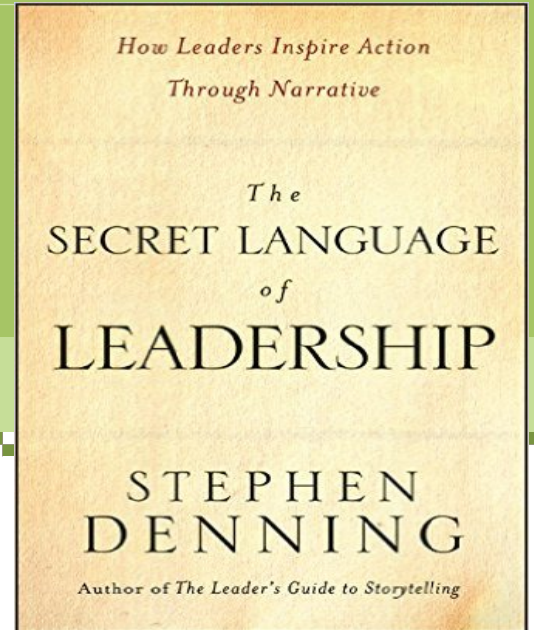


The Secret Language of Leadership

How Leaders Inspire Action Through Narrative

"Steve Denning is the Warren Buffett of business communication. He sees things others don't and is able to explain them so the rest of us can understand."

Chip Heath, co-author of *Made to Stick*



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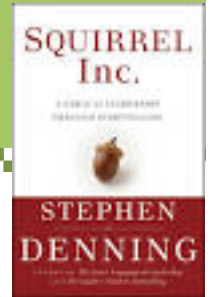
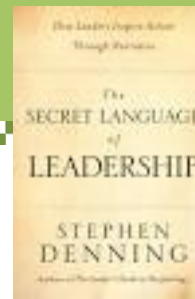
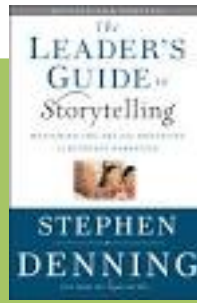
Ten Mistakes Transformational Leaders Make

1. Unclear and Uninspiring Goals
2. Lack of Total Commitment for Change
3. Incongruent Body Language
4. Misreading the Audience
5. Lack of Narrative Intelligence
6. Not Telling the Truth
7. Attention Misdirected
8. Inability to Elicit Desire for Change
9. His Reasons Backfired
10. The Conversation Died

"I highly recommend you get it today and read it tonight. Tomorrow will be an entirely different kind of day if you do."

Jim Kouzes

Denning, S. (2007). *The Secret Language of Leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass



About the Author

“Steve Denning has been referred to the Warren Buffet of business communication. He sees things that others don’t and is able to explain them so the rest of us can understand.” Chip Heath

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From 1996 to 2000, Steve was the Program Director, Knowledge Management at the World Bank where he spearheaded the organizational knowledge-sharing program.

He now works with organizations in the U.S., Europe, Asia, and Australia on leadership, innovation, business narrative, and radical management.

He has written a number of books and his most recent one, the book distributor, 800-CEO-READ selected *The Secret Language of Leadership* as the best book on leadership in 2007. His other books look at ways that storytelling can inspire change and collaboration, spark action, and develop narrative intelligence in many audiences.

Accomplishments and Education

In April of 2003 Davenport and Prusak (Harvard, 2003) ranked him as one of the world’s Top Two Hundred Business Gurus.

Steve was born and educated in Sydney, Australia. He studied law and psychology at Sydney University and worked as a lawyer for many years. After obtaining a postgraduate degree he joined the World Bank where he worked for several decades.



He was a senior scholar at the Burns Academy of Leadership at the University of Maryland. He recently published a novel, *The Painter* and wrote a volume of poetry, *Sonnets 2000*.



The transformational leader has the key to unlock "what is" in order to discover "what can be"!

The Secret Language of Leadership

“Human communication has its own set of very unusual and counterintuitive rules.” Malcolm Gladwell

KEY STEPS TO THE LANGUAGE OF LEADERSHIP

STEP #1: Getting the Audience's Attention

1. If speakers are not listening, speakers are wasting their breath.
2. Negative messages are more attention-getting than positive.
3. Ask a surprising question or challenge

- The head of a major drug company
- A director in a global fast-food firm
- A health care provider
- A presidential candidate
- A parent

What links these people? It is a wish to induce change and transmit bold new ideas to people who don't want to hear them.

STEP #2: Eliciting Desire for a Different Future

1. Enable people to see possibilities that they have missed.
2. Create the capability for others to see themselves in a new and truthful light.
3. Tell stories about the past where change has already happened.
4. Listeners create the story and the teller is just scaffolding, a catalyst to a creative process going on in the listeners.

Key Enablers to the Language of Leadership

- Articulate a clear and inspiring change idea by exuding, enthusiasm, excitement and anticipation
- Commit to the story of change and live your words
- Master the audience's story and get inside their world
- Cultivate narrative intelligence and honour stories
- Commit to telling authentically true stories to build trust and credibility
- Deploy the body language of leadership so staffs know you are 100 percent there for them.

STEP #3: Reinforcing with Reasons

1. Give people reasons in the form of stories when they are ready to receive them.
2. Tell the stories of *what* the change is and who will be affected.
3. Tell *how* you will get from 'here to there.'
4. Tell the story of *why* the change will work.

LEADERSHIP IS ABOUT LAUGHTER WITH OTHERS, DISCOVERY OF POSSIBILITY, CONTINUED CONVERSATIONS, AND ONGOING OPENNESS.



ARTICULATING A CLEAR, INSPIRING GOAL

Purpose

- Participants see the activity as good for its own sake.
- People experience their own personal growth and development.
- Participants see themselves enhancing the efforts of other people.
- The activity should be without negative instrumental effects.

Set Priorities Among Goals

When people try to tackle a large number of goals they fail in all. Successful transformational leaders select a small number of goals and make a whole-hearted commitment to it.



"Strength does not come from physical capacity. It comes from an indomitable will."
Mahatma Gandhi

The word *enthusiasm* comes from the Greek, *en theos*, a god within. The word's origin implies that leaders inspire a god within one's followers. This takes place in the form of energy that leaps, bubbles, and overflows.

Gandhi's goal was to gain and sustain political and economic self-sufficiency through non-violence.

The Leader's Own Story

Politicians as Leaders

Successful politicians are willing to fight and play hardball. They also must maintain a public image of being honest, compassionate, moral, and devout. If you want to stay elected, learn to listen.

CEOs as Leaders

CEOs bear the responsibility of the success or failure of an organization and have an array of people who all want a say in how the organization manages its affairs. They don't have time for reason so they push for action. Focusing on issues of interest to the CEO is a good place to start.

The Leader's Own Story

Commit to a goal and keep a laser focus on it. Leaders need to commit to making the change happen and may have to stop doing things they like in order to learn to do new things. Relationships with others might change but fixating on the story of change is vital.



“I know that you believe you understand what you think I said, but I’m not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant.”

Robert McCloskey

Howell Raine’s Mistake

In September of 2001 Raine took over as executive director of the New York Times with a bold change strategy and was in a hurry to implement this.

What went wrong?

- *Communication was one way*
- *His facial expressions were filled with anger*
- *He did not pay attention to quiet lunchrooms*
- *He did not draw on talents of the staff*

How could Raine inspire staff to adopt this different way of looking at the world?



Mastering the Audience’s Story

Managerial Action-Less Effective Than We Realize

Managers have a right to give instructions and be obeyed, but is this effective?

Hierarchical leaders have the ability to hire, fire, and offer incentives but genuine leaders instill in people the ability to do something different.

Audiences Are More Difficult Than They Used to Be

Historically people did what they were told and leadership was hardly needed. Today, people are tired of being talked at and controlled.

The challenge is how do we connect and led people who have different views about almost everything?

Leaders Must Understand the Audience’s Story

Leaders need to understand the listener’s story. They need to: question, explore, intuit, wander, mingle, live in it, be patient, and become part of the world they lead. Talk *with* people and not *down* to them. Share mutually experienced stories so it is possible to discover what is going

Cultivating Narrative Intelligence

How Do We Get Other People to Change Their Minds?

1. Involve people
2. Invite people to generate a new story
3. With honesty and openness, appeal to reason.
4. Appeal to intuition to incorporate emotions and feelings.

Direct Narrative

Stories spark what is called *transportation*. The listeners go on a journey without leaving their seat. Persuasion by direct narrative can be very powerful.

Indirect Narrative

The presenter’s story allows the listeners to hear their own silent voice within.

The Leader as Storyteller

Leaders need to know the different components of narrative and remember that it is founded in truthfulness.



Three Ways of Communicating Distinctiveness

1. Tell the story of the firm itself
2. Tell the stories of the products and services themselves.
3. Tell the story of the client

Denning (2007)

Considerations for Companies

- Show real concern for the interests of counterparts
- Reveal vulnerability
- Share something of value early on
- Mesh with what has gone before
- Be willing to learn

Telling Truthful Stories

- To achieve enthusiasm of people, truthfulness is essential
- Transformational leadership is a collaborative activity

“Doing the right thing pays off. Storytellers who trick consumers get caught. They become inconsistent and sooner or later they get punished” (Denning, 2007, p.121).



Leadership Presence

Body language is so important. It cannot contradict what we are saying or it will undermine our message. Listeners pay close attention to speakers' body language and the slightest gesture such as looking at a watch can send a message that you want the meeting or presentation to end. Vicki Hearn's book, *Adam's Task*, describes people who come to visit the wild animals she works with as one of three categories:

1. 'Hollywood types' that just strut and are not really there to see the animals
2. 'Researchers' who are testing propositions on the animals
3. 'Animal trainers' are aware of the animals there and often mimic them. They have an acute 360-degree awareness.

What Are the Basics?

- Eye contact
- Throw away your notes
- Get out from behind the podium
- Face the audience squarely and do not walk from side to side
- Engage with individuals in the audience

Leaders need to be animal trainers

“It is no surprise that conductors live so long, as they spend their life constantly exercising and bringing into harmony - body, emotion, and thought.” ~Peter Brook

Practice, Practice, Practice

Content of the story is only part of the impact. How you deliver the message is also important. Style and content needs to be mixed together. Voice, demeanor, the way you hold your body, and the look in your eyes all impact the story.

“To be sincere, speaking the language of leadership from the heart and making a full effort to communicate what you know, may often be enough” (Denning, 2007, p. 139).

Speak with honesty
think with sincerity
act with integrity

GETTING PEOPLE'S ATTENTION

Attention Is...

1. ... attracted to what is unexpected.
2. ... engaged by the emotions.
3. ... engaged by what is personal to listeners themselves.
4. ... relevant to the subject at hand.
5. ... communicating proportionately to the scale of the task in changing minds
6. ... engaged by what is negative.



Do Leaders Need Charisma?

According to the life example of Gandhi the answer is no. He was a small, thin and sickly child and only displayed charismatic qualities after his achievements. After being thrown from a train at the request of a white man, he began his journey as an agent of change. This is when people began to think of Gandhi as having charisma.

Charisma is usually a consequence of leadership, not the cause of it (Denning, 2007).

To Write or Not to Write

Leaders should limit the amount of written communication they use. Once an audience is interested in a topic, emails, the listener will seek books, podcasts, websites, videos, and articles out.

PowerPoint?

PowerPoint is a powerful presentation tool and the only limit it has is the imagination of the one using it. A message will more likely stick if it has a mix of images and words.

EFFECTIVE TOOLS FOR GETTING ATTENTION

1. Tell a story about the audience's problem.
2. Tell a story of how you handled adversity.
3. Ask a question.
4. Use a striking metaphor.
5. Launch an unexpected exercise.
6. Issue a challenge.
7. Share something of value.
8. Give a musical performance.

How do you get people's attention?

MODERATELY EFFECTIVE WAYS TO GET ATTENTION

1. Show the real thing.
2. Offer a surprise.
3. Make an extraordinary offer.
4. Talk about an opportunity for the audience.
5. Tell a springboard story.
6. Tell a joke.
7. Show an image.
8. Create a frame.

Combining several methods to get people's attention is sometimes needed. As a storyteller you need to be able to read the audience and use the methods that are best suited. Effective leadership presentations are structured in this fashion.

INEFFECTIVE WAYS OF GETTING ATTENTION

1. Hype
2. Tell the story of who your company is.
3. Just give the facts.



STIMULATING DESIRE

Principles to Stimulate Desire for Change

- ...the idea should be worthwhile for its own sake
- ...the communication tools should make the idea memorable
- ...the idea must become the audience's own idea
- ...the audience needs room to contribute
- ...the idea must be positive
- ...the idea must be positive for the particular audience
- ...the more useful communication tools tend to be stories
- ...communication is effective when it generates a new story

Most Promising Methods to Use When Working With a Difficult Audience

- Seeing is believing.
- Tell a positive story.
- Externalize the obstacles to change.
- Use a metaphor that points to a story.
- Tell the story of who we are.
- Tell a “common memory” story.
- Offer a positive challenge.

Ineffective Methods

- Present arguments and reasons
- Tell “burning platform” stories
- Create dissatisfaction to sell your point
- Pose an unexpected question
- Employ satire and irony
- Tell fictional stories

How do you stimulate desire?

REINFORCING WITH REASONS

Stories that reinforce change have certain characteristics and are as follows:

They tell a story of...

...what the change is

What will the change look like and turn this into a memorable story.

...how it will work

This is a future story and shares with the listeners how the change will play out.

...how to get from here to there

How can this change be implemented and what road maps need to be created to provide a mental guide to listeners to show them that this is indeed manageable?

...why it will work

This is a story set in an imaginary time and place and needs to have a happy ending.

...how arguments are turned into common memory stories

These types of stories remind people of things that they already know.

...communicating the reason through someone's eyes

Tell how the program will affect a participant.

...supporting the story with images

WHEN CLOSING THE PRESENTATION REFER BACK TO THE STORY YOU STARTED WITH OR END WITH A QUOTATION TO SUSTAIN DESIRE FOR CHANGE

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

"WHEN MINDS MEET, THEY DON'T JUST EXCHANGE FACTS: THEY TRANSFORM THEM, RESHAPE THEM, DRAW DIFFERENT IMPLICATIONS FROM THEM, ENGAGE THEM IN NEW TRAINS OF THOUGHT."

~Theodore Zeldin

Three Challenges of Keeping the Energy Flowing

1. When problems arise, resistance to change surfaces do it is more important than ever to collectively maintain forward progress.
2. Loss of focus as new avenues open up can result in the goal being lost from sight.
3. Outside investors might see change as turbulent and not as progressing toward a goal.

"TO CONTINUE FORWARD MOMENTUM, LEADERS NEED TO MAKE IT EASY AND COMFORTABLE FOR PEOPLE TO CONTRIBUTE THEIR INSIGHTS"

(Denning, 2007, p. 201).



What is a Conversation?



- Stories promote conversation by stimulating creativity and we become interested in other stories.
- Conversations facilitate learning and are like a secret garden-full of surprises and discoveries.
- Face to face conversations build trust.
- On line discussions need time for the group to get comfortable, so having several sessions will give the group time to unfold and blossom.



**“Leadership conversations involve balance between having a ferocious determination to achieve a goal and having the openness and curiosity and willingness to listen to other ideas about how to get there, even including whether it’s the right goal to be pursuing at this time”
(Denning, 2007, p. 210).**

-A conversation allows people with different views to learn from each other. It is *not a negotiation or argument*. It is collaborative and person-to-person, not role-to-role.

Leaders should:

- Ask questions-“what if?”
- Level with people-hidden agendas kill conversations so be willing to say what you think and where you stand
- Show vulnerability- “I don’t know, I need help, and I was wrong” spoken by leaders invites trust
- Build on the inputs of others-“Yes and” rather than, “Yes but.”
- Share stories-it is naturally collaborative and the language of conversation.
- Encourage others to share their stories- everyone gains insight and knows what is going on.
- Have participants tell one another’s stories-by learning about others and their viewpoints change becomes more natural.

Can you think of a leader who demonstrated this? Are you that leader?



9 out of 10 execs say they don't know how to tell a story.



90% of business leaders are bored.

Language of Leadership

“The difference between generating resistance and enthusiasm is narrower than we imagine. Through the language of leadership, ordinary people can have extraordinary impact” (Malcolm Gladwell, 2000, p. 211).

In a Nutshell

Denning's book teaches the reader how to use language to take ordinary leadership and transform it to extraordinary through the use of narrative. With vision and commitment a leader can become transformational and inspirational. Denning takes a close look at why traditional and dusty communication methods fail, how to communicate in ways that motivate and inspire, and how to use emotionally charged narratives to take leadership and change to the next level. This book is about why the language of leadership works and unfolds the power of narrative and story. Denning shares the hope that mastery of the language of leadership can be learned and how to use this language to combat pushback, resistance, and cynicism. He tells the reader that the goals of human beings are embedded in their stories and how connecting with these stories as leaders will facilitate change and engage. His message is one of hope in a world that is changing at a rapid pace and reminds the reader that anyone can master the language of leadership.

Implications and Connections to Education and Leadership

Throughout the read of Denning's book I was making mental journeys to a variety of educational settings I have been in. I have worked with leaders who did not have clear goals and this resulted in teachers working in isolation and delivering very flat, worksheet driven programming. On the contrary I have worked with passionate leaders who had vision and were very inspirational. It was these leaders who were present in our classrooms, asked us questions about our lives outside of school, and shared stories with us about who they were and how they came to be that person. These leaders were risk takers and not afraid to show vulnerability and admit to mistakes. How engaging these people were to be around. They were invitational and filled with emotional concern-not only for the students but also the staff. These leaders believed in those they worked with and served and led with an open-door policy. These forward thinking leaders have inspired me more then they will ever know and Denning's book was a life changing read and reaffirmed what I deemed good leadership to be.



Stephen Denning's book – *The Secret Language of Leadership* was motivational and filled with hope for enthusiastic leaders. It took a deeper look at different communication styles and how some work but others don't. Leaders should pick this book up and not only for themselves but also for the staff they work with. The message of using narrative to lead and inspire can also be effective with students and families. The read was very explanatory, filled with examples, and testimonials from a wide range of corporate professionals and leaders.

Included in his book are appendices that are Denning's personal story, exercises to enhance your leadership and storytelling skills, and a quiz to see what your narrative intelligence is. The author brings you into his world with his real life examples of his own world with a summary of the presentation to the Change Management Committee of the World Bank in 1996. The quiz is a great way to see at a glance, where you are in the understanding of narrative.

Denning also pinpoints mistakes that transformational leaders should never make. I found this very powerful and yet so simple. Having this checklist posted on your office wall would be a daily reminder of what not to do. In my next office it will definitely be there.

The author shares his own leadership journey and this willingness to show his vulnerability makes him feel like he could be an old friend who wants to share his latest and greatest secret with you. He tells the reader that *narrative* isn't the whole story and that the secrets of leadership are not only in how the stories are told but also in how the leadership goals themselves are formulated. Denning gives a variety of communication tools that work-frames, questions, offers, challenges, metaphors, reasons, and so on.

I am eager to read his other books, *The Springboard*, *Squirrel Inc.*, and *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling*. I knew a good story when I heard one but did not know precisely how to execute one. Now I have the tools to take my transformational leadership to the next level. Sharing stories and believing in the staff you work with is key to becoming agents of purposeful change and that faith in staff can be summed up nicely in a parable.

“The kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree so, the air come and nest in its branches.”



~Matthew 13:31-32 (NKJV)