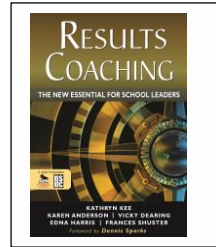




## ***RESULTS COACHING: THE NEW ESSENTIAL***



### **LEVELS OF LANGUAGE**

Language is powerful. It is far more than the simple expression of thoughts, feelings, and experiences. As psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1986) said, “It produces fundamentally new forms of behavior.” Language does this in several ways: It molds our sense of who we are; helps us understand how we think, work, and play; and influences the nature of our relationships.

Our words shape our identities. What we say to others can deeply affect their sense of who they are and who they might become. The words of educators have special power in this regard because we are working with children during their formative years. What and how we speak to them impacts their being and their becoming. As the leader of the learning environment, it becomes a moral imperative to embrace this new essential as we work with children and as we work with our staff. Language is the essential connector and how we choose to use it will significantly impact the relationships and identities of those we lead.

---

#### **Levels of Language**

Earlier, we spoke of the power of language as a catalyst for impacting our thinking, speaking, and acting. In the pre-assessment, we spoke about choosing words of power vs. words of victimhood. So, just how important is it that we are intentional with our language?

When we listen to the types of words that we choose to tell our stories or describe our schedules, we may be amazed at how often our language demonstrates victimhood rather than our level of commitment. When we hear someone tell another, “you should . . . or you ought to . . .” what is the underlying message that we are also sending? At one level, we are suggesting that we know the answer and they do not. At another level we are implying that we know better for them than they know for themselves.

Dennis Sparks, former Executive Director of the National Staff Development Council, speaks clearly about the power of language.

**“Our use of language can disempower or empower, enable or disable, intensify resistance or increase commitment and inspire passion and creativity or promote resignation and passivity.”     Dennis Sparks (2006)**

How we speak to ourselves and to others in the school setting, has a profound impact on our willingness and desire to rise to the challenges we must face. Adapted from Dave Ellis' Language Ladder in *Falling Awake*, is a mental model that can lead to greater clarity and deeper understanding of what is meant by levels of language.

Our visual that supports this notion of levels of language is a grand staircase in a two-story building or home. Imagine one that you have known. Stand at the bottom and look up at the steps before you. Consider that each of the seven steps is a choice that you can make about your use of language moving from least powerful to most powerful.

### **Language of Obligation**

Standing on the first step is the language of obligation—words that sound like “I should, I better, I have to.” When you choose words at this level, it is interesting to notice how you feel. Karen shares that she has a feeling of heaviness as if someone has placed a backpack full of bricks on her. The heaviness of “shoulds” and “oughts” weigh us down. There is also a second covert message included in the statement—one that includes a hint of guilt associated with not doing what is in the message. Words at this level have less power and place us in the position of being victims. Amazingly, our choice of words can empower us or give our power away.

By just paying attention to the level of language in a school, one can learn a great deal about the sense of power and efficacy that a staff feels for their work as educators. For example, when we hear language such as “We *should* tutor these kids because they are not going to pass the state assessment.” or “You *ought* to try this classroom management strategy in your classroom,” the underlying message is someone else is in control or knows better than you do. Yes, it’s subtle and because we have practiced this language for so long, we are often unaware of the impact or affect that it has on ourselves and others.

### **Language of Options**

Return to the staircase you have imagined and move from obligation to options. Language at the options level sounds like “I might, I could, and maybe I will.” Notice how you are feeling at this point. To say that you have several options opens the door that felt closed when your language was at the obligation level. You have increased your power and added some lightness to your load.

By changing the language from “we should tutor” to “we *could* offer several options for tutoring including before school, after school, and at designated times during the school day” shifts the power and control. When one moves from “I ought to try this classroom management strategy in my classroom” to “I *could* try this strategy *or* this strategy,” I demonstrate my influence on the decision-making process.

## Language of Preference

Continuing our ascent, we move from the language of options to the language of preference exemplified by words such as “I prefer to” or “I want to.” With each step we add energy, power, and commitment to our language. Clearly, our language at this step indicates our presence and participation in deciding what is best for us. So, our ongoing example changes from “we should tutor” to “we could offer” to “I prefer to arrive early for tutoring because I am sharpest at that time of the day.” And when I am able to tell my leader that “I want to attempt this strategy over this strategy,” I have shifted from obligation to option to preference. I have made the idea my own and will more likely proceed with its implementation.

## Language of Passion

Moving up another level, we are now at the language of passion which brings increased energy, power, and commitment for what gives us joy. When one is passionate about something, language mirrors our feelings because we have found greater personal meaning. We hear phrases such as “I’d love to, I can’t wait, or I’m excited about.” And, when this passion moves from an individual to a team or a staff, the excitement becomes contagious and doubles its potential for impact. When a staff says, “We are eager to tutor our struggling students because we know that additional time for learning can make the difference.” we are light years away from the heaviness of the language of obligation. A teacher who discovers renewed passion around implementation of strategies that will bring success to her students will be manifested through the energy in her language—“I’m excited about . . .”

## Language of Possibility

When we speak from the language of possibility, our words represent all that we intend to have, do, or be. By standing in possibility, we turn challenges into opportunities and we turn to the future for inspiration and drive. Our language shows up as “My dream is . . .” or “I desire to”. The way we stay in possibility is to generate multiple options or pathways for achieving what we want. In Chapter Seven, we will demonstrate a detailed process for how to optimize this level of language. In the case of the tutoring example, the *dream* may be for the staff to work themselves out of the job of tutoring as evidenced by mastery for every child. Another possibility is the *desire* to have every student who requires tutoring be present and working toward mastery of identified targets. For the classroom management example, the teacher may say “I *desire* to have a management plan that is fair and consistent and meets the diverse needs of my students.” A second possibility could be “My *dream* is to be so effective with the management of my instruction, that I have few, if any, discipline problems in my classroom.”

## Language of Plan

As we arrive at this step, our energy, power, and commitment continue to increase. We also add another dimension—that of accountability. When we use phrases like “I expect to” or “I plan to,”

we show more intentionality. Our language indicates that we want to do more than “talk the talk.” We are ready to “walk the walk.” With this level of language, we see our commitment and resolve to move to a future state that is an improvement beyond our present one. As you will see in Chapter Seven, resolve is the first step to creating a Plan for Action which builds concrete support for your expression of expectation. In the tutoring example, each individual forms a team that “expects” or “plans” to see the results of their actions with students. They anticipate that there will be a desired impact from their resolve to work above and beyond on behalf of the students for whom they are responsible. In our classroom management example, when I articulate “my plan” for more effective management, I accept responsibility for ensuring that misbehavior does not distract from the learning time of my students.

### **Language of Promise**

While there may be more steps on this staircase, our final step for now is that of promise. At this step, we see the highest level of intention which carries us forward into action. This level of language is expressed as “I will,” “I do,” “I promise,” and “I intend to.” The level of commitment present at this level was absent in the language of obligation. Staff members *promise* to see that all students in the school are successful and that tutoring is but one means for ensuring that success. A teacher standing in what she will do or intends to do with her classroom behavior will harness the energy and power to make it happen.

With each advancing step we have increased our energy, power, and commitment, as well as adding the dimensions of self-responsibility and accountability. As our intentionality and resolve have gone up, so has our commitment to act. Understanding the levels of language gives us the power to choose words most representative of our state of mind and intention. We can be passionate about something without a resolve to move to action. The steps are not hierarchical so we can literally leap over the ones at the lower levels and land on the higher levels of possibility, plan, and promise.

One key idea about choosing words with intention is the recognition that we cannot totally eliminate all obligations from our lives. When Karen first learned about the language of obligation, she made it her goal to eliminate all obligatory language. Quickly she learned that her goal was unreasonable for there would continue to be obligations in her life. Karen represented taking action around her new learning by reframing what was previously considered to be an obligation. At the time, her 80-year-old mother was residing in a nursing home. By listening to her language, it was apparent that she was living in the arena of victim language. You might have overheard her saying to a friend, “I have to go visit my Mom.” Once Karen heard her language and understood the weight associated with it, she resolved to move up the levels of language to a more intentional state. “I expect to visit my Mom on a regular basis because I want the remaining years of our lives together to be memorable.”

We continue to have obligations, and as leaders, we often find ourselves in the position of

obligating others. We can, however, choose to take on obligations out of options, preference, passion, possibility, plan, or promise, rather than taking on the heaviness of obligation. When we as leaders are faced with obligations or a non-negotiable, we have an opportunity before us. We can leave it at the level of obligation or we can intentionally move it to another language level. What's at stake here is the energy, power, and commitment that we want to create or assign to the impact of our words. So, one option is to reframe the obligation for our self and then to assist others in adjusting their frame or view point.

Several examples that we frequently hear in education are, "We have to do this because Central Office told us to." or "We have to teach this curriculum instead of the textbook because the district says so." Consider the impact of framing these questions from a different language level.

Let's take one at a time. "We have to do this because Central Office told us to." After reading the samples provided, formulate your own response.

- "What options do we have for meeting this request from Central Office?"
- "Central Office has asked for this report by the first of next week. While the timeline is quick, it is important for us to collect accurate data because it will ultimately be helpful information about the performance of our students. I want us to . . ."
- "Knowing that Central Office needs this information to provide support for us, what is our plan for providing them with what they need?"

What is your response? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Where does your language fall on the Levels of Language? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Here is the second example: "We have to teach this curriculum instead of the textbook because the district says so." Consider the examples provided and then create your own response.

- "Knowing a textbook draws on a national perspective, the scope and sequence of our curriculum may be my best strategy for teaching because it is designed to address the assessed needs of our students."
- "The textbook can be a resource to support our district curriculum when it aligns with the assessment of what we want our students to know and be able to do."
- What is your response? \_\_\_\_\_

There is at least one caveat regarding the seventh level—promise. Often our preferences, passions, and possibilities lead us to plan and promise more than we are able to fulfill without struggle. When this occurs, we have over-promised, and thus put ourselves back into the mode and language of obligation. "I HAVE to do this because I promised that I would."



Returning to the research of Bryk and Schneider about *Trust in Schools* (2002), one of the filters of trust identified in the study was integrity. Integrity is about honesty, sincerity, and candor. Simply, it is doing what we say; walking our talk. In leadership it shows up as the congruency between what leaders say and how they behave. It is one of the most critical values by which leaders are measured. Trust develops based on whether they keep the promises they make—both large and small.

Our words are our major currency. You will recall from the Levels of Language that promise was the highest level of intention which carries us forward into action. When we say we will act, people accept that as truth, as a promise. When we disappoint them by not acting, our integrity is diminished. So, making and keeping promises becomes a critical way to demonstrate our integrity while simultaneously developing trusting relationships.

Sometimes our intention is not to follow through, but rather to be cordial and move on. When we say we will do something and have no intention of following through, we are being dishonest and can damage relationships with our colleagues.

Because of the strong implications making and keeping promises has for a leader, viewing this issue at a deeper level can offer insight regarding how we currently make and keep promises while affording us the opportunity to examine unintended consequences that run counter to our purpose. First, we will look at how we make promises. Next, we will look at how we break promises, sometimes unintentionally. And lastly, we will look at ways to make and keep promises.

### **How We Make Promises**

People make promises in a variety of ways—overtly and covertly. Sometimes we make overt promises stating our intent for action. However, we can also make promises by signaling a promise or commitment to someone when we do not intend to make a promise. Body language figures into the equation in a huge way. Nuances take on greater significance in this arena of making promises. What might my nod or silence signal to the other person with regard to a promise?

Consider this example from an organization that thinks they have a norm of keeping promises around “being on time.” George and his department chairs meet at 1:30 by agreement. They show up, put their notebook in the meeting room, and leave if George is not in the room. To some, having their materials in the room constitutes being on time. What is your promise about being on time? What is your team’s promise about being on time?

Some of the ways a person can make a promise include silent agreement, nodding, verbalizing support, withholding comment or disagreement, or consenting without the intention to act. Additional possibilities for how we make promises include volunteering others without their consent, agreeing to tasks and assignments without intention, accepting responsibilities without intention, and accommodating others' needs.

## **How We Break Promises**

Just as making promises can be subtle or obvious, so can breaking promises. Obvious ways people break promises are by failing to following through or complete tasks or assignments by the designated deadline. A more subtle way we break promises is by keeping our opinion to our selves especially when it is counter to the one being proposed. The speaker may assume our silence means agreement and a willingness to support the idea beyond the meeting. Often we do not even consider the commitment to be a promise or do not know that our actions are being perceived as promises. Our failure to check this out leaves the possibility of a promise on the table.

We find numerous examples of this phenomenon in education.

- We promise that every student will be a reader by the third grade and some fall through the cracks.
- I promise to teach the curriculum and I continue to teach my favorite units.
- I promise to pay a contract in 30 days and I do not.
- I promise to talk to a parent when I don't intend to.
- I promise to meet the needs of every learner when some students are not succeeding.
- I promise I will be in the classroom a certain number of times and I am not.
- I promise to provide progress reports to parents on a regular basis and I do not.
- I promise to get something for you and I do not.
- I promise to meet you at a certain time and I am late or I do not show at all.
- I agree to follow our school norm about a warm and supportive learning environment and I use sarcasm in my classroom.
- I promise to be fully present and I continue to check my cell phone.

We do it in such small ways that we don't even call it breaking a promise. For example, one of the qualifications for having the Reading First Program in your school is the principal's agreement to be in the classroom a certain number of times. In many cases, even though the principal signed the contract, he or she did not keep this promise.

There are other ways we break promises. Making excuses or blaming others are promise breakers. Either strategy, excuse-making or blaming others, attempts to shift the responsibility for breaking the promise to someone else.

## How To Make and Keep Promises

To maintain the integrity of our word as leaders, it is important that we are aware of how we make and keep promises. By “turning up the noise” in our head about what we say we will do when compared to what we do, we can directly influence the level of trust we have with others. Being clear of our intention, listening to how we frame our promise, and carefully choosing our language, will ensure that we can deliver. Choosing the language of intention when we are sure that we want to make a promise aligns with our level of commitment. Expressions such as “I will,” “I do,” “I promise,” and “I intend to” signal our intent to follow through.

Thomas Leonard in *The Portable Coach* (1998) offers a strategy for making and keeping promises. He promotes “under promising” and “over delivering.” He says, “Overpromising is seduction; it makes you become either a workaholic or a liar.” How many times have we overpromised because we were trying to keep from disappointing others, hurting their feelings, or letting someone down? Acknowledging and labeling when it is not appropriate to make a promise, keeps us in integrity.

Making too many promises and making promises about things that are not our passion causes us to feel overwhelmed and ultimately places us back in obligation which is the lowest level of language. When we hear ourselves saying, “I have” to do something, that is a sign that we have moved from promise to obligation. Saving promises for the big things ensures that we can make and keep our promises to self and others.

Leaders can promise discriminately by being clear about their priorities and goals. Goal clarity frames the promise-making process helping one know when to say “yes” or when to say “no.” If a leader is unsure about whether he wants to make a promise, he can delay giving the answer, creating time to honestly consider the request. When he has made a decision, it is important to respond to the person in a timely manner. Thus when the leader does make a promise, he accepts responsibility and responds with intentionality to make the promise a reality.

How does the leader maintain integrity if he has made a promise and recognizes that he cannot keep it? When the leader finds he has overcommitted and cannot deliver on his promise, several options can allow him to maintain his integrity. One is to renegotiate the commitment rather than to make excuses or blame. Perhaps a portion of the commitment can be kept—a draft, a section of a report, or an outline. Accepting responsibility for the “over commitment,” the leader can work with the other person or persons to modify or reexamine the expectations or timeline. Ignoring the promise or turning in an inferior product diminishes the value of our word and tarnishes our integrity. Honesty and intentionality around making and keeping our promises maintains our integrity even when we cannot deliver on the original promise.