

CLAUDIA DOBKIN, PhD



LEADING
WITH
LANGUAGE

**Persuasion and Presence
in the Age of AI**

**| Leading
With
Language**

Praise for *Leading With Language*

Leading With Language is a must-have guide for effective leadership communication. Synthesizing cutting-edge cognitive research with insights from decades advising industry executives, the author forges a uniquely pragmatic approach to language as a transformative leadership instrument. Unlike other leadership books, this one provides both the ‘why’ and the ‘how’ with remarkable clarity. What distinguishes this work further is its refreshing accessibility—the author’s vibrant anecdotes and engaging narrative style transform potentially complex concepts into an unexpectedly enjoyable journey. This book is essential reading for anyone committed to leadership excellence in our linguistically mediated world.”

Julie R. Ancis, Distinguished Professor
New Jersey Institute of Technology

“Corporations investing in training and development in public speaking, sales, and client and government relations would do well to consider *Leading With Language*. This foundational approach gets to the heart of communicating in the business world. Dobkin offers an understanding of how language works and then offers a practical guide on how to communicate effectively.”

Alan Brick-Turin, PE, PMP, F.ASCE;
Principal Project Manager & Chief Risk Manager,
Gannett Fleming, Inc.

Leading With Language is an exceptional exploration of language as humankind's ultimate tool for persuasion, empowerment, and influence. Insightful and thought-provoking, this book blends rigorous research with real-world experience, offering a perspective shaped by the author's work alongside some of the most compelling communicators at world-leading consultancies. Thoughtfully written and deeply engaging, it is a must-read for anyone seeking to understand the profound impact of language to create a standout personal brand."

William Berenson, Senior Partner,
Private Equity Practice Leader, Paktolus

"This is an excellent treatise for lawyers whose audience includes boards, regulators, and clients. Persuasion lies at the heart of what we do, and it requires an understanding of the audience, building strong legal arguments, and presenting them with impact. Whether your goal is to convince one person in a face-to-face conversation, or win over the public, persuading others who are skeptical or opposed to your views will be your greatest challenge and the key to your success."

Former federal prosecutor
Partner at a leading international law firm

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“Your success in life will be determined largely by your ability to speak, your ability to write, and the quality of your ideas, in that order.”

— Patrick Henry Winston, Professor of Artificial Intelligence and Computer Science, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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PROLOGUE

Soft Skills?

Consultants convince CEOs and boards to change course.

CEOs convince analysts to write favorable reports about their companies.

Entrepreneurs convince investors to fund their startups.

Executives convince constituents to make specific plans of action.

Job candidates convince managers to hire them.

Politicians convince people to vote for them.

If you make complicated recommendations to people who are not experts in your field, if you make pitches for new services, if you want to win recognition for your most important contributions, if you want to become a sought-after advisor, then you need this book.

For thousands of years, humans have started religions, revolutions, social movements, even new countries without PowerPoint slides, white papers, and surveys. They only needed an idea and the right words—delivered to paint pictures, evoke emotions, and inspire others to follow.

Persuasion is a key aspect of what it means to be human and is central to business, politics, and other endeavors. Words remain one of the most persuasive tools we have. Words can change the world or change minds.

Having worked for more than 30 years alongside trusted advisors at top consulting and law firms worldwide, I've experienced firsthand the communication skills that these professionals use to influence decisions worth billions of dollars. I have advised and coached them in the best strategies and techniques for persuading clients and others.

I hold a doctorate in psycholinguistics and have studied how language shapes perception. This unique blend of high stakes consulting experience with a deep grounding in cognitive science has been instrumental in my success in helping to drive billions of dollars in services for the firms and professionals I have advised.

My experience has led me to a vital question: As professional advisors with specialized expertise in law, technology, tax, communications, and many other complex services, how did we come to ignore the power of spoken language?

Consulting and advisory services firms all build their brands around people – in contrast to the traditional approach of building a brand around a product. In the world of specialized services, most interactions are conversations, not formal one-to-many presentations.

Never have people shared more words and ideas – and never have we found it more difficult to be heard.

In the age of artificial intelligence and of commoditized expertise, technical answers are no longer your competitive advantage. You must be able to persuade others to adopt your ideas. This ability is the single greatest skill that will help you survive and thrive.

Speaking with clarity and impact is a completely trainable hard skill directly linked to a firm's ability to win business, retain clients, execute projects profitably, manage risks, and, ultimately, drive sustainable growth.

When You Speak Well, You Lead

Leadership inspires action. As strategic advisors, we don't speak to convince people of how great our ideas are – we speak to help our clients make decisions and move forward. That is persuasion and that is leadership.

Clients seek clear guidance and unique perspectives from their advisors as they grapple with increasingly complex decisions. Of course, clients need solutions, but they mostly need someone to lead them through their options with a compelling vision and a clear path. In this critical role, good advisors lead the way, and language is unequivocally their most potent instrument for inspiring trust and guiding others effectively. In this sense, language makes leaders.

Language is not a transaction. Think of sending a data file. You click “send,” and the file goes out, arriving largely unchanged. That’s a transaction. Language isn’t like that. When you “send” words, they don’t arrive as a neat package. They arrive as raw material for the listener’s brain to interpret, filter, and assign meaning to, based on their own experiences and context. It’s a highly interactive, messy, and creative process.

It is, in fact, almost miraculous that when we put together a few words in a sentence, a listener can immediately start playing a movie in their head of what they perceive we mean to say. Think about this other miracle: Despite our utterances never being the same, we can still understand each other and imagine new possibilities, even when hearing something for the first time. This miracle occurs every day because of our innate ability to draw on shared knowledge of the world, culture, time, and space. This unique human ability allows us to engage with each other in endlessly creative ways. We are the only species with the ability to use language not just to describe things we can see and touch, but also to invent ideas about things that don’t exist.

We also have the singular power to understand and experience one kind of thing in terms of another which enables us to understand each other more quickly and more forcefully than by mere explanation of the facts. For example, when we say *living in the fast lane*, we understand immediately that this has nothing to do with driving speed. Language is the external manifestation of a system of “metaphors we live by,” as linguists have

demonstrated. We use words as symbols for mental concepts.

Nevertheless, what we say and what others hear is often not the same thing. When we say democracy, for example, some people will understand it as a political order which protects basic civil and political rights, while others understand it as a political system in which the government does what most people want, and yet others understand it as being the act of voting. This does not mean people do not understand the term democracy. Rather, the associations each person makes are often unique and are influenced by a vast background of cultural and personal experiences.

Break Through the Noise

I have spent my career in the high-pressure rooms where global deals are won and lost. Even with my solid academic and business experience, I faced a daily challenge: Establishing immediate credibility in conversations full of seasoned lawyers, auditors, and consultants who—on paper—held all the power.

I know the weight of trying to influence decisions without necessarily being the highest-ranking person in the meeting. To bridge that gap, I couldn't rely on my credentials alone. I had to master the three frameworks in this book: The Language of Possibility to lead others toward a new vision, the Language of Preference to make my ideas stick, and the Language of Power to claim my seat.

By consistently applying these principles, I have guided teams to win hundreds of millions of dollars in results and helped catapult the careers of the professionals I worked with. I wrote this book to share the exact techniques I used to turn quiet expertise into undeniable leadership presence.

I have distilled and integrated insights from multiple branches of cognitive science into a playbook of battle-tested techniques you can apply to any client situation, from one-on-one conversations to more formal group presentations. While most of the examples in this book come from my experience working in consulting, law, and communications firms, the recommendations apply to any knowledge firm. If you want to shape how people make sense of information you communicate, select the techniques in this book that most resonate with you and practice them.

The techniques you'll learn in this book revolve around three languages of leadership:

Chapter One – *The Language of Possibility*. Speaking this language is the cornerstone for building leadership presence. You'll learn three foundational techniques: Having a compelling point of view, harnessing the power of mental models, and storytelling for influence.

Chapter Two – *The Language of Preference*. Speaking this language is about unlocking the immense power of framing and other techniques to distill complexity and enable memorability. This is crucial

because memory and decision-making are closely intertwined.

Chapter Three – *The Language of Power*. Speaking the language that establishes social hierarchy is not always easy, but there are some practical ways to create power with your voice, your words, your questions, and your body.

Resources. You'll find a brief list of academic leaders whose work informed my thinking and shaped the practical applications proposed in this book. I have examined an extensive body of academic literature in psychology, cognitive science, behavioral economics, and linguistics to validate insights into the power of language that I learned from collaborating with professionals in law, consulting, branding, and journalism.

My Promise

We all have the capacity to speak with impact to win the battle of ideas. We all have the capacity to inspire others to adhere to our point of view. This is true at every stage of our careers.

Making use of just one principle in this book may help you make the sale, convince the boss, or persuade a board. And when you persuade others to follow your lead, you build your “leader” brand. Remember what legendary branding expert Marty Neumeier says: “A brand is not what you say it is. It’s what they say it is.”

“The confidence people have in their beliefs is not a measure of the quality of evidence but of the coherence of the story the mind has managed to construct.”

— Daniel Kahneman, Nobel Prize-winning economist and psychologist

Chapter 1: The Language of Possibility

Problem-solution selling is not a leader's power tool.

To be seen as a leader in your field, you need to do more than solve problems; you must give voice to possibility and guide clients in making complex decisions with confidence and clarity. You must understand that the enduring value you bring to clients is not the benefit of your approach but how confident people feel proceeding with you by their side.

This chapter offers three foundational techniques to establish a leader's brand and presence:

- **Having a compelling point of view**
- **Harnessing the power of mental models**
- **Storytelling for influence**

HAVE A COMPELLING POINT OF VIEW

It is said that Michael Moritz of Sequoia Capital was persuaded to invest \$12.5 million in Google because its founders, Larry Page and Sergey Brin, delivered the most concise mission statement he had ever heard. Moritz is also quoted as saying he never forgot the statement because of its simplicity. They said to him:

“We want to organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful.”

The cornerstone of leadership presence is having a unique perspective that challenges conventional thinking and delivering your point of view with clarity.

BLUF (bottom line up front) – always

Showing your cards immediately helps listeners see the world differently and captures their attention. It is the touchstone of leadership presence.

BLUF is a military term that expresses the value of speed and clarity in high-stakes communications. And it needs to be apparent from the start of any conversation. To put it another way, don’t bury the lead. Share your most important point – your single salient idea – extremely quickly, before you elaborate with reasons to believe you. This conveys confidence.

Unicorn company Zuora played a significant role in shaping the modern subscription-management landscape. It all started with a single compelling idea the Zuora team presented to investors: *the subscription economy*.

The narrative that follows is an abridged restatement of the start of Zuora's investor presentation. It illustrates how clarity of vision can break through the noise of today's information landscape and differentiate a leader.

We are standing at a precipice. The digital revolution isn't just changing how we deliver products; it is fundamentally redefining what a product even is in the minds of our customers. Our traditional business model, while historically robust, is now a decaying asset in an accelerating landscape where value is shifting from ownership to access, and from static goods to dynamic experiences. We now live in a subscription economy; it's a shift from products to relationships, it's a new way of thinking, and this changes everything – from pricing and packaging, to billing, payments, and revenue accounting.

Don't reserve showing your bottom line up front just for client meetings.

Too often, professional advisors sabotage their leader brand with the way they speak during internal firm meetings. Consider a scenario in which a project manager needs to update their team on a delayed project and propose a correction.

Here's a typical approach: *Good morning, everyone. I want to talk about Project X. We've had a lot of moving parts this quarter, and I know everyone has been working hard on their deliverables. I want to start by showing you a quick chart of our original timeline versus*

where we are, and you can see that there's a bit of a variance here. So, what I've done is a deep dive into the remaining features, and I've re-examined the resource allocation on a number of these items. I was thinking that maybe we could re-prioritize the QA team's efforts for the next couple of weeks, and then potentially circle back on some of the minor features after the initial launch. So, what I'm proposing is a two-week sprint to prioritize the critical features and a revised schedule that I've outlined for your review.

I have heard this type of statement countless times from both seasoned and early-career professionals. They are burying critical news under a long, meandering introduction and a description of a process. As a result, listeners must wait until the very end to see the way forward. Without the bottom line up front, the team may be wondering why they are looking at a chart of the timeline and what the ultimate purpose of this conversation is.

Now consider this approach to the same scenario:

Our launch timeline for Project X is at risk. We need to implement a two-week sprint to prioritize the remaining critical features, and I've already outlined a revised schedule for your review. My plan to get us back on track involves reallocating the QA resources and delaying the minor feature set until after launch. This decision will help us meet our core objectives while still managing the client's expectations, which I believe is our most important goal.

This example immediately establishes the urgency of this information and the speaker's confident plan to address the challenges. Clarity of vision is of paramount importance if you want to become a trusted guide for colleagues and clients. Management guru Peter Drucker is noted for saying, "Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things." That is because at its core, leadership is about knowing how to prioritize the right things at the right time and expressing your point of view with conviction. People will follow when they are confident that you know where you are going. If they don't believe in the messenger's vision, they won't believe the message.

Share a single salient idea

People may recognize you as having lots of ideas, but if you want them to follow your lead, they need to remember you as the owner of a single idea each time you speak.

Consider the power of a TED Talk, defined by a single idea that changes the audience's perspective. Just as in a TED Talk, your point of view needs to stand out as a single surprising or new idea that changes the perspective of the listener. This means abandoning jargon, distilling complexity and making sophisticated ideas accessible. Your idea needs to offer a unique point of view or vision – and it needs to be presented up front.

For example, consider how Palantir Technologies CEO Alex Karp reiterated his vision for effective application of cutting-edge, mission-aligned software and AI as the

key to national and commercial power in the 21st century. During a presentation on the 2024 third quarter results, he said, “The world will be divided between AI haves and have-nots. At Palantir, we plan to power the winners.” Karp created a sense of urgency for AI transition not as a benefit, but as a mandatory, existential choice. In fact, he further asserted that the AI-driven world will be a winner-take-all environment, with Palantir enabling the “winners.”

Or consider what happens when Tesla repeatedly states that its mission is “to accelerate the world’s transition to sustainable energy.” The company goes beyond simply talking about selling electric cars, elevating its mission to a global effort to combat climate change.

Why are these statements so “sticky”? Because each shares a single salient idea that challenges many ordinary ideas. This level of clarity is what clients are looking for when they come to you.

For every interaction, you must ask yourself: What is the single idea I want my listeners to remember? Once you have zoomed in on that single original idea, you need to make it stand out.

So, how do you find the single idea that will inspire confidence in you? Breakthrough ideas are often born from insights into the client’s operating environment, economic and financial shifts, changing consumer behavior or cultural mindset and talent management. Bold ideas are not descriptions of your services. They

are innovative observations of opportunities to help your client succeed.

For example, two clients may call to discuss a digital transformation strategy, but each has completely different objectives. For a highly acquisitive company in a rapidly changing industry, the main objectives may be speed, flexibility, and cultural alignment. For a company that is recovering from regulatory sanctions, the stakes are existential, and its leaders will value entirely different outcomes, such as central visibility and better governance of global operations. Examine the client context rather than simply the specific definition of the problem that the client may have articulated in an RFP or in a conversation.

When Satya Nadella took the reins of Microsoft as CEO, he recognized that one of the company's biggest challenges was internal—an outdated culture. To accomplish one of the most significant corporate transformations in recent history, he introduced a bold, single idea that spoke directly to this internal reality: the "Learn-it-All" meme.

As he has stated in many interviews, Nadella explains that the cultural shift at Microsoft began with this new idea:

“The learn-it-all will always do better than the know-it-all.”

This powerful phrase provided the entire company with a new guiding principle. The shift in focus to curiosity and continuous adaptation became the core definition of value, reshaping everything from hiring and

performance reviews to meeting etiquette across the organization. The bold idea worked because it named and solved a problem rooted deep within the company's own context.

Contrast frames, such as Nadella's or Karp's and other techniques to make ideas more salient and memorable will be discussed in Chapter Two. But the idea is the key, so you need to dedicate yourself first to articulating an original point of view.

The best way to uncover a client's core opportunity or risk is to focus on the root cause of a problem and ask insightful questions. It's a process of inquiry and refinement, not a sudden flash of genius. The objective of this exchange is to co-creating value with the client. This approach helps position you as a facilitator of possibilities for the future rather than today's technical problem-solver.

Embrace the art of the start

A good conversation or presentation starts with simplicity, a clear structure, and an emotional hook. It creates a dynamic launchpad for your single salient idea.

Steve Jobs, arguably one of the most influential people of the 21st century and one of the best storytellers of all time, started his first presentation to Apple executives in 1997 by creating an emotional hook, stating his bottom line simply, and then outlining the three concrete things he planned to discuss:

"I've been back about eight to 10 weeks, and we've been working really hard. And what we're trying to

do is not something really highfalutin'. We're trying to get back to basics. We're trying to get back to the basics of great products, great marketing, and great distribution."

The emotional hook is simple and direct: "We've been working really hard." The vision, getting back to basics, is clear and engaging, giving the listener a sense of purpose and direction. Jobs then outlines his plan to realize the vision. This is a simple, clear, and persuasive way to start a conversation or a presentation.

To convince your listeners, you need to show that you have a well-thought-out plan and they need to believe that you are capable of solving their problem. You lay the foundation for both with the right beginning.

Jobs understood this and embraced the art of the start in his most memorable speeches and presentations. One of the most quoted examples was his commencement talk at Stanford University toward the end of his life. He began on a humble, human note, one that was somewhat surprising. He then provided a clear structure for his talk (three stories). Here's how that speech began:

"I never graduated from college, and this is the closest I've ever gotten to a college graduation. Today I will tell you three stories from my life, that's it. The first story is about connecting the dots."

This opening also uses another technique that helps make the speech memorable: a surprising twist. Our brains are hardwired to remember things that stand out. They are "change detectors" and pay close

attention to things that are novel or unexpected. When Jobs started his speech by saying, “I never graduated from college,” he increased the likelihood that it would capture his audience.

Jobs also gave a roadmap of what he was going to talk about. It’s a proven approach to beginning any discussion or presentation. That’s why a typical opening statement in a jury trial will lay out the decision points. Here’s how that might look:

Today, we will show that the prosecution’s case rests on three flawed assumptions: first, that my client had a motive; second, that he had an opportunity; and third, that the evidence they presented is conclusive.

This is similar to the earlier Steve Jobs example, in which he finished by clearly sharing how he planned to solve Apple’s problems:

“We’re trying to get back to the basics of great products, great marketing, and great distribution.”

One warning about smart starts: Some people like to tell jokes; unfortunately, most of us fail miserably with them.

Instead, consider these two simple types of openings that emotionally engage listeners; they can be adapted to any individual style:

An if/then or big questions opening

What are the mechanisms by which we imagine or simulate things that have never happened?

How do brain systems guide decision-making and problem-solving in a forward-looking way?

An “imagine what it would be like” opening

Imagine what it would be like to enter a courtroom knowing every single detail of your case is at your fingertips, perfectly organized and instantly accessible. What if you could anticipate opposing counsel’s next move because you have a complete, data-driven understanding of their past strategies?

I worked with a senior private equity lawyer at a law firm who would start almost every conversation with the following statement:

“Let’s dream a little.”

This type of an *imagine-what-it-would-be-like* opening is of an endearing quality and goes a long way to putting everyone at ease. More importantly, it was fascinating to observe how that simple comment helped insert a seasoned lawyer’s point of view into a conversation where many senior voices were competing for power. This individual consistently redirected the dialogue and emerged as the de facto leader of every decision-making discussion he was involved in at that firm.

Those of us who work exclusively in professional services firms know too well how meetings can easily turn into a competition for who is the smartest person in the room. But the goal is not to flex your intelligence muscles. It is to convince and persuade. Look for an opening that sets you up for success.

To continue after your engaging start, consider structuring your talk in numbered parts, giving you spots to summarize the discussion at each point. The numbered approach is generally a very effective roadmap for the listener, making your points easier to follow and to remember.

A blueprint for starting just about any business conversation or presentation

1. Emotional hook
 2. Single salient BLUF (bottom line up front) idea or vision
 3. Outline of three or four main topics you plan to discuss
-

HARNESS THE POWER OF MENTAL MODELS

We are often told that humans are not very good at making decisions and that more data is always better. In fact, the opposite is true: Humans are good at decisions precisely because we can envision new realities outside of the data. Our strength lies in the innate human ability to imagine what does not yet exist. We can do this because we are constantly drawing on mental models.

Change a mental model and change a mind

When you reshape a mental model, you open a pathway to challenge assumptions and redefine value.

The ability to change mental models is essential to elevating your status and building a leader brand. A mental model is a representation of how things work that helps us understand, predict, and interact with the world. Mental models allow us to see patterns and make sense of our encounters, driving our ability to anticipate and explain the world around us. For example, we all have a mental model for traffic. This model includes our understanding of how traffic lights work, how other drivers behave, how road conditions affect speed, and how traffic flows during rush hour. We use this model to predict how long it will take to drive to work, decide whether to take the highway or a back road, and much more.

Consider how Mastercard changed the way people thought of its credit card when it shifted the mental model from something that was accepted everywhere to an enabler of priceless experiences. This single idea helped reverse the company's market decline.

Mastercard's "Priceless" campaign showed a grocery list of everyday purchases made to facilitate an experience with a loved one. For every item, the price was expressly stated, with visuals showing the purchases made using a Mastercard. Then, the pattern was broken with a statement about an experience that was priceless to the ad's main character. It was all summed up in a moment with the tagline, "There are some

things money can't buy. For everything else, there's Mastercard."

The shift from a transactional message to an emotional one captured the imagination of millions and has been part of the world's consciousness – stretching across continents, cultures, and generations – ever since. The word priceless and the entire campaign concept became part of everyday language long before going viral was a marketing goal.

A single idea that creates a new mental model in people's minds can instantly differentiate a company or a service. I am not suggesting that you write a pithy tagline on a document; those words alone will not reshape your client's mental model. I am suggesting that you understand the existing mental models that people may have about the issues you discuss with them, then use your interactions to broaden or change these models.

When Dupont CEO Ellen Kullman was leading the company through a strategic transformation from a traditional chemical manufacturer to a more agile, science-driven, and customer-focused enterprise, she often described innovation as a "contact sport."

The traditional mental model of innovation was an internal, isolated process, something that happened in a lab. This implied a linear, slow, and secretive process. Kullman redefines this mental model using a sports analogy. The new mental model is simple, powerful, and immediately brings to mind concepts of speed, collaboration, and direct engagement. This linguistic

choice is a concise and memorable way to communicate a fundamental cultural shift within a massive organization, making the abstract concept of a new R&D process concrete and actionable for all employees.

Here's another example of how to shift a mental model: Through a strategic linguistic choice, IBM CEO Ginni Rometty reframed AI not as artificial intelligence but as "augmented intelligence." This new model guides the public to see AI as a collaborative partner rather than as a rival, challenging prevailing fears of replacement. Here's what she said during an interview at the World Economic Forum in 2018:

"We don't believe in artificial intelligence. We believe in augmented intelligence. It is to help humans go faster, to go deeper, to make better decisions."

When you challenge or strip away conventional mental models, you lead the listener to pause, reconsider their assumptions, and arrive at a deeper understanding – from your point of view.

Linguistic choices for shifting mental models

The following linguistic choices are some of the ways you can try to shift mental models. They enable you to articulate complex ideas in a way that challenges assumptions and helps others open to new ways of thinking.

- **Metaphors, similes**

Directly compare an abstract quality to some concrete, easily visualized, and understood concept.

We're going to do a Marie Kondo for cost take-out.

- **A new definition of an old term**

Reimagines an old term to help people abandon an outdated view and inspires them to see a new possibility.

Our mission at PayPal is to democratize financial services and to build a future where everyone can achieve full financial citizenship.

- **Two competing approaches**

Articulates two distinct concepts and invites listeners to understand the differing priorities each approach represents.

Stakeholder capitalism versus Shareholder capitalism

- **A borrowed framework**

Takes a familiar framework and applies it to the new idea without needing extensive explanation.

Our project operates like a well-oiled machine, where every cog understands its function.

- **Reverse the stigma**

This reverses a traditional perception, challenging a deeply ingrained social stigma.

Vulnerability is the new strength in leadership.

- **Inversion**

Simply flips conventional wisdom on its head.

Success is overvalued; avoiding failure matters more.

- **Paradoxical statement**

Presents a seemingly contradictory truth that forces the listener to pause, reconsider their assumptions, and arrive at a deeper understanding. The tension inherent in a paradox creates memorability and insight.

To truly grow, we must learn to subtract, not just add.

- **First principles reimagining**

Breaks down the traditional model and invites a new vision based on its core purpose and inherent truths.

Education isn't a classroom; it's the lifelong cultivation of human potential, accessible anywhere, and validated by applied knowledge.

- **If / then**

Explicitly lays out a cause-and-effect relationship to underscore the inevitable consequences of a particular action or inaction, thereby establishing a new mental model of reality.

If we fail to embrace this technological transformation, then our market relevance will not merely decline, it will evaporate.

Credibility is built on clarity

A speaker who is unclear will never be seen as someone to follow, even if their ideas are interesting.

The most damaging consequence of not being clear is that people will judge the quality of the person offering the ideas along with what they are saying.

If you leave gaps in logic, listeners use their mental models to create their own narrative. Humans use mental models to impose order on confusing soundbites, fill in gaps in the logic of a statement, or reduce uncertainty. This is a way to quickly make sense of fragmented or incomplete information. Our brains hate ambiguity and work tirelessly to construct a meaningful narrative. In a world flooded with buzzwords, confusing or incomplete information invites listeners to create their own narrative – potentially leading to conclusions detrimental to your message.

Consider jury trials. Jurors are presented with disjointed pieces of evidence – testimonies, documents, and physical objects – that often don't form a complete, linear story. A juror's mental model, which is built on individual norms, habits, and expectations, acts as a framework that individual uses to organize these fragments into a plausible narrative of what happened.

For instance, a juror might hear this statement from a defendant in a robbery case: "I ran out the back door and kept going."

This is an incomplete soundbite. The juror, using their mental model that suggests innocent people don't run

from the scene of a crime, might fill in the gap by concluding that he ran because he was guilty.

This model provides the juror with a sense of certainty by connecting running to guilt, even without direct evidence. But it's not necessarily what the speaker wanted them to understand.

Here's another scenario: Imagine a co-worker says, "I was talking to a new employee, and I just told her, "That's not how we do things here."

This soundbite is a little blunt and could be interpreted as rude. However, if you have a mental model of this co-worker as a good person who is generally helpful and kind, you will fill in the missing context, and tell yourself, "Oh, she must have said it in a helpful way, probably with a kind tone. She was just trying to show the new person the correct procedure."

All the decisions your clients make involve filtering choices through mental models. If you aren't clear, you can't expect people to get on board with your point of view. Your job is to make the path forward so obvious that clients feel safe taking it.

TELL A STORY, MAKE A POINT MAKE A POINT, TELL A STORY

Over the course of many years working in global law firms, I had the privilege of observing highly accomplished trial lawyers, including a former president of the American Bar Association, a former chief justice of the Appellate Body of the World Trade Organization,

and many federal prosecutors. I learned from these experts that a trial is a battle of impressions, not a battle of logic, and facts don't win jury trials – stories do. The most accomplished trial lawyers know that any time they need to influence decisions, share lessons, counter half-truths, or align on a single vision, they must tell a story that will seal the impression they want to make.

In business, you don't tell stories to show how creative or well-spoken you are; you tell stories to help listeners lower their emotional filters, making them more open to hearing your ideas. This ensures that your message and your unique perspective are not just heard but deeply remembered.

Swap facts for faith

People typically don't need more facts to make decisions; they need more faith. Stories help them suspend disbelief and open up to new possibilities.

People remember stories more quickly than they recall data points. That is because stories are the easiest way to establish an emotional connection, and an emotional connection makes people more likely to loosen their filters and hear your ideas. To persuade, you must facilitate a connection where listeners actively integrate the information you provide into their own existing knowledge and beliefs. Stories are one of the best ways to do this. In fact, cognitive psychology has established that emotions act as a glue for memory, attaching feelings to the events of the story and making them easier to recall.

It's important to remember that it is the listener who gives a story meaning. The storyteller simply guides perception. Human reality is shaped by our perception of the world, and the narratives you create can influence that perception. That's why jurors who hear identical pieces of (sometimes conflicting) evidence construct different stories. They filter the evidence presented to them through their own expectations, values, and beliefs. And, like all decision-makers, jurors tend to seek out and remember information that is consistent with their preferences, while they scrutinize and reject information that is inconsistent with them.

Your conversations are like movie trailers, helping different people establish a common understanding of the future you're envisioning. As you can imagine, the ability to synchronize your message with your audience is essential when seeking to influence a group of people who may otherwise individually derive a different understanding.

By carefully constructing the stories you tell, you can help your audience shift their perception and, consequently, their reality. A movie trailer tells a full story in a very compact package, and it contains all the elements of a memorable story:

- Emotional connection
- Simplicity and clarity
- A surprise
- Relatability

- Sensory details

The reason these elements are effective is that they tap into the ways our brains process and retain information. Using functional magnetic resonance imaging technology, researchers have demonstrated that a story can synchronize the brains of the listener and the storyteller by setting the tone, teasing the plot, and building anticipation. In this way, your stories shape the audience's expectations, emotions, and perceptions.

Share a story of one person and one decision

Find one decision that you helped a client with, and you will have a great story to tell. Clients want to know how you've solved problems like theirs.

Your impressive deal lists, tools, and assets are a necessary condition and useful proof points to support your recommendations. But they are not sufficient to differentiate you from competitors with similar assets. That's where stories come in.

Clients are interested in hearing stories about how you solved intractable problems involving people and the lessons you learned that you could bring to their situation. This is especially true when discussing complex high-stakes topics such as M&A services, the creation of a cybersecurity program, or a compliance program.

In film and literature, we often admire a character more for trying than for succeeding. We connect with situations that get characters into trouble, the choices they make, the transformations they experience. When a

person's struggles, desires, or successes mirror our own, this relatability creates empathy and makes the story's lessons more impactful and lasting.

This is also the reason for the stark journalism adage "If it bleeds, it leads." News prioritizes emotionally charged events because human beings connect with raw human truths, not abstract ideas. Memorable stories are always about people, the choices they made, the risks they took, the upside, the downside.

When we hear a great story, we project ourselves into the other person's shoes and imagine how we would react in a similar situation. You want your client to do just that – especially the part where your advice helped someone else make a complex decision.

Make examples SOAR

Effective examples that illustrate a specific result draw their power from the rich context of obstacles faced and concrete actions you describe prior to sharing the resolution.

Success stories have their own structures, and there are many variants available. Two of the most used are:

- STAR method: Situation, Task, Action, Resolution
- SOAR method: Situation, Obstacle, Action, Resolution

I have found that the SOAR structure is the most useful in general, especially when the audience is aware of challenges and needs to understand the possibilities

for solving them. This type of narrative is most effective when you humanize the tasks by explaining how people feel/act/talk at each point. When we tell stories this way, people understand they are not alone.

The ability to overcome challenges with strategic impact reinforces your leader brand. The story that follows illustrates the SOAR structure I recommend:

- **Situation**

Back in 2008, when the global financial crisis hit, my client's biggest enterprise client, a major auto manufacturer, was facing unprecedented liquidity challenges and a looming production halt that threatened thousands of jobs.

- **Obstacle**

My team was tasked not just with preserving our long-standing relationship, but with finding an innovative way to ensure their supply chain remained solvent and operational, despite the frozen credit markets.

- **Action**

We immediately assembled a cross-functional task force, working around the clock with their finance and operations teams. I brought together their key suppliers and banking partners, and we engineered a novel, multi-party financing structure that bypassed traditional credit lines by securitizing future inventory. It was complex, involved intense negotiation, and required complete trust from all sides.

- **Resolution**

Within 72 hours, we had secured the necessary capital injection. Not only did our client avoid a shutdown, but our solution became a blueprint for others in the industry, and our relationship with that client evolved into a true strategic partnership, enduring to this day.

A template for sharing success stories

Here is a basic template for effectively sharing examples of success via the SOAR method.

1. Explain the SITUATION – the why

Grab attention by sharing the main point of your story and why it matters. The basic structure can be, “I had/my client had ... and they are feeling/doing/saying ...” If the listener is anxious, begin with the resolution. If the listener is complacent, begin with the complication to create a sense of urgency.

2. Illuminate the OBSTACLE – the what

Paint complexity. More complexity makes the listener want to know more about how the challenge was overcome. What made this so difficult? What is the wider industry or sector context affecting the individual?

3. Outline the ACTION and RESULTS that matter to the listener – the how

Focus on aspects of your approach that were invaluable to the specific people you helped. Include how people made choices and why, the risks they took, the process they used, and the lessons learned. Show how having you by their side mattered to them.

Structure bold recommendations around a do-or-die moment

Leading people toward a course of action that will critically impact the organization requires a bold story structure that defines what is at stake.

Over the course of many years coaching professional advisors, I've seen that even the most seasoned professionals spend countless hours struggling to organize their longer narratives. So, I developed a structure that simplifies this process: It reimagines any problem as a *do-or-die* moment and revolves around an inflection point. This narrative structure shifts perception toward a new vision of what's possible to redefine value for the listener.

The basic do-or-die moment narrative structure:

1. **BLUF** (bottom line up front)
2. Inflection point
3. Idea
4. **Evidence**

Here's an example of that narrative structure in action: Netflix transformed from a DVD rental service into a global powerhouse in streaming, reshaping the entertainment industry. But go back to the early 2000s and imagine an advisor to Netflix explaining her recommendation to pivot from DVDs by mail to streaming:

- **BLUF**

We face a fundamental choice, not just about our next business model, but about the very future of

entertainment. The physical disc, for all its convenience, is rapidly becoming a relic. The future, unequivocally, is streaming – instantaneous, boundless, and global. If we cling to the past, we risk becoming Blockbuster – a historical footnote.

- **Inflection Point**

This isn't just an evolution; it's a revolution in how people experience stories, and we must lead it, or be left behind.

- **Idea**

Our imperative is to transform Netflix from a DVD rental service into the world's leading internet television network. This requires us to embrace a new architecture for content delivery and a new relationship with our members, built on instant access and personalized experiences.

- **Evidence**

- *The burning question: The question that keeps us awake at night isn't, "How do we get the right DVD to the right house?" The answer is data. It's about knowing that your member in Brazil loves Korean dramas, while the member in Berlin is captivated by British documentaries.*
- *A-day-in-the-life: Imagine a young professional, let's call her Maria, arriving home after a long day. She doesn't need to check her mailbox for a disc. She simply sits on her couch, picks up her remote, and her TV is already suggesting a new show based on what she finished last night.*

- The metaphor: *Think of the old model as a library. We curated a vast collection of books, and you came to us to borrow what you wanted. But our imperative is not to be a library anymore. We are transitioning into a personal storyteller who sits with you and knows your tastes better than anyone else.*

A template for structuring a do-or-die moment narrative

You need to start strong, end strong, and manage the middle. Your narrative will revolve around the inflection point.

1. Start with your BLUF

- Identify a massive shift in the industry that demands a new way of thinking. This isn't a list of pain points—which are often just symptoms of a deeper problem. Instead, present a compelling point of view that challenges the status quo and forces the listener to abandon their old mental model for a new picture of how to think about the choice to be made.
- Your vision should be about the possibility of the future, not just a restatement of the client's current struggles. Leading as an advisor means helping the client see a reality that doesn't exist yet.

2. Define the INFLECTION POINT

- Describe the do-or-die moment. Every market shift creates a divide: those who adapt and those who become obsolete. If you don't

establish that there is a risk in standing still (why they should care), your advice—no matter how beneficial (what they get)—will lack the urgency required to drive a decision.

- Address the human instinct to fear change by framing the high stakes in two ways: Show the expansive opportunity of moving forward and the existential risk of remaining static. Remember that the fear of a missed opportunity often carries more psychological weight than the promise of a simple gain.

3. Introduce your BIG IDEA

- Invite them to your future state. Much like a movie trailer, paint a vivid picture of the client's success—a world where their current complexities have been resolved. The future state must be highly attractive, but it is also sophisticated enough that reaching it requires your specific expertise and partnership.
- Position yourself not as the "hero" of the story, but as the trusted guide who provides the tools to reach this new destination. Describe the future in their own language, focusing on how they will feel when you transform their daily reality (e.g. "*Your team will be our engine for growth*").
- Avoid the "technical trap." Do not give solution details here. People need to believe in the vision and the guide before they care about the gears and grease of the implementation.

4. Show BIG EVIDENCE

- List the three primary arguments you will use as proof of your ability to deliver the future state (e.g., experience, assets, etc.). After you've listed them, all, dive into the details of each one.
- For each piece of evidence, include relevant case studies and examples, using the optimal story construct to help listeners visualize concepts. For example, share their burning questions, along with your answers. Additional examples of constructs for forcefully framing ideas are included in Chapter Two.

5. Make your CLOSING STATEMENT

- Restate the opening questions, then summarize the discussion. This brings the conversation into full circle and sums up why everyone has been engaging with you. Ask if you answered all concerns and if there are any remaining questions.
- Finish the talk by calling listener(s) to action or reaffirming everyone's commitment to the project.

In My Experience: Be the Challenger

One of the most memorable moments in my career was working with a global team to win the integrated audit of a blue-chip financial institution. I was new to the firm and to the industry, and I was not the named leader of

the pursuit team. Nevertheless, I took the global pursuit team in an entirely new direction.

The team was stalled: They had won over every international jurisdiction but failed to convince the decisive U.S. client. The pursuit team operated under the traditional mental model of “operating to minimize risk” – a reactive mindset.

To persuade the client, we needed to change their mind by changing their mental model. We pivoted our argument away from the generic problem-solution approach. Instead, we shifted to “operating with a wider lens” – a proactive model. We focused on the forces at work, the “big stakes” of the market conditions, to create urgency: Given the rapidly changing U.S. regulatory and tax landscape, not having this wider view would lead to unacceptably negative consequences. Our story became about possibility. It allowed the client to see complexity as an opportunity and get ahead of the risk, envisioning a better future with us by their side.

ABSOLUTE ESSENTIALS

Move beyond problem-solver to trusted guide and leader by incorporating these actions into your communication.

- Distill your thoughts into one unique perspective that challenges conventional thinking or offers a new vision, ensuring your audience remembers *you* as the owner of that idea.
- Always share your single, most important idea immediately – before elaborating on the process or evidence.
- Understand the existing mental model your audience holds about the issue and use your communication to deliberately reshape or broaden their model.
- Prioritize clarity over everything. Ensure your communication has no gaps in logic or ambiguous information.
- Tell stories not to entertain, but to establish the emotional connection necessary for listeners to suspend disbelief and integrate your ideas.
- Use the Do-or-Die Moment narrative structure to frame your advice as a critical choice that will create winners or losers.

**“In a world deluged by
irrelevant information,
clarity is power.”**

**— Yuval Noah Harari, Professor of
History, Hebrew University of Jeru-
salem**

Chapter 2: The Language of Preference

Being memorable is key to being preferred.

When faced with a choice, people tend to select what comes to mind first. If you are memorable, clients are more likely to recall you during crucial decision-making moments, and determine your recommendations are preferable to others.

There's another, equally important reason why being memorable is key to being preferred: Memorable experiences also lead to a sense of familiarity and trust among those who've participated in them. Because of this, people are more comfortable choosing something or someone they recognize and remember positively. The battle of ideas is often won not just by being the best option objectively, but by being the option that is most familiar when the need arises.

This chapter shares three keys to the language of preference:

- **Framing the way you present information to make someone more receptive to your ideas**
- **Making the abstract accessible through metaphors, analogies, and other linguistic mappings**
- **Reducing psychological distance to build trust**

FRAME, FRAME, REPEAT, REPEAT

Research in human memory has shown that people may forget about 50% of what they hear within one hour. After one week, people typically forget about 90% of the content. How, then, can you expect clients to file your message in their brains and then retrieve those files in exactly the way you intended them to be remembered? Fortunately, techniques that direct attention, establish relevance to existing knowledge, and engage the active participation of the listener can significantly enhance memory and decision-making.

Shape the decision frame through which people view facts

Verbal frames help you distill complexity and shape the mental space in which people make decisions.

Frames are the set of choices you make about what to say, how to say it, and what is left unsaid. The frame surrounding an idea can change the listener's perception without altering the facts. Without a frame, the facts of an argument can be lost on the listener.

When you frame an idea in a novel way, you are asking people to infer – to go beyond passive listening and interpret the underlying meaning of your words by using their own knowledge and reasoning skills.

Consider how a journalist might change your perception of a set of facts. News items are stories recreated from different angles and perspectives.

The media's framing – its choice of words, metaphors, and images – activates a particular mental model that

their audience has. For example, the topic of nuclear energy can be framed as an economic development issue, a safety issue, or an environmental issue.

A similar process is at work in marketing. The same car can be framed as a low-cost car, a performance car, a green car, or an experience (such as the source of comfortable road trips with family). These are examples of *emphasis* framing: Highlighting specific aspects of an issue or a product to influence perception.

Jury trials are another example of the singular power of framing to make an idea memorable and shape decisions. The legendary trial of former NFL star O.J. Simpson provides an excellent illustration of this. He was accused of murdering his ex-wife and her friend. In many ways, the prosecution and defense arguments set up this question: Was O.J. Simpson a wife-beater who preyed on a defenseless female victim, or was he an ethnic minority victim of a racist police force? The outcome of the trial hinged on the frame through which the jury interpreted the evidence.

The overall frame of the defense's argument was that of a wrongful accusation stemming from a racist police conspiracy. When a bloody glove found at the crime scene and a matching glove found at Simpson's home didn't fit his hands while he was on the stand, the defense argued that was because it was a wrongful accusation. Because there was police misconduct, there was a wrongful accusation. Because there was a rush to judgment, there was a wrongful accusation.

The defense's framing ultimately won the trial. The verdict to acquit Simpson was not merely a judgment on the facts of the murders. It was also a reflection of the jury's acceptance of the defense's frame and rejection of the prosecution's. It's a demonstration of the powerful role that framing plays in shaping how people interpret information and arrive at conclusions.

Even when underlying ideas are factually equivalent, framing them differently makes people react differently. This is called *equivalence framing*.

Equivalence framing focuses on a single piece of information and tries to phrase that information as either a loss or a gain. With a change in focus, you can influence people's perceptions and decisions. This is the singular power of language.

For example, here are two different ways to present the same fact:

The product is 90% effective.

vs.

The product has a 10% failure rate.

How does each of these make you feel about the product?

If given a choice between a product that is 90% effective and one that has a 10% failure rate, most people will choose the 90% effective one. The emphasis on a gain gives them confidence and evokes positive feelings.

Behavioral economics research has demonstrated that people value gains and losses differently, placing more weight on perceived losses than on perceived gains. This is because a loss has a greater emotional impact on an individual than an equivalent amount of gain. Given a choice between two identical options presented in different ways, most people will pick the one that minimizes losses.

Direct attention with frames to make your ideas memorable

Mountains of research show that we attach more importance to items that are easily retrieved from memory.

Preference tends to be heavily weighed on the most recent piece of information received or the simplest thing to recall. We remember best what we hear first and last, as well as what is salient, frequent, and associated with emotion.

Contrast frames prime the brain and are an excellent way to direct attention, especially when you need to clarify benefits and provide obvious reasons to act.

Consider the following examples of contrast frames:

I hope to transmit to you something that will make the difference between a career-busting tragedy and a career-launching triumph.

Imagine a world in which every customer interaction is a seamless, personalized experience. Now, compare that to your current system, in which

customer data is fragmented, communication is siloed, and valuable insights are buried in spreadsheets.

Common contrast frames include:

- before/after
- easy way/hard way
- then/now
- advantage/disadvantage
- old world/new world

Additional frames to make your ideas memorable

- **Climactic frame – list the impact on the listener in order of importance**

This new platform is not just a software tool; it is the digital core of your enterprise; it will transform how you operate, providing a single source of truth for all your data and creating a seamless workflow across every department.

- **Past-present-future frame – provide perspective or review a process**

Today, Nike is a global powerhouse in the sportswear industry. ... Nike's story began in 1964 as "Blue Ribbon Sports," ... Looking ahead, Nike's strategy focuses on expanding its digital ecosystem.

- **Explanatory chain frame – lay out “what affects what” to clarify the logic of a strategy or outcome**

[What] *A relentless focus on the customer*

[Affects what] *drives product innovation,*

[Affects what] *which in turn builds unparalleled customer loyalty,*

[Affects what] *and that loyalty, more than anything else, will fuel your long-term growth and profitability.*

- **Cause-and-effect frame – help people understand the logic of your position**

“Success breeds complacency. Complacency breeds failure. Only the paranoid survive.” – former Intel CEO Andy Grove.

- **What/so what/now what frame – lead people toward a call to action**

[What] *We’ve seen a clear and sustained decline in customer engagement metrics across all digital channels over the last two quarters. Your user activity is down by an average of 15%.*

[So what] *This isn’t just a number; it fundamentally impacts your brand loyalty, your competitive standing, and, ultimately, your revenue projections for the next fiscal year. If we don’t address this, you risk becoming irrelevant.*

[Now what] *Therefore, we recommend initiating a cross-functional task force to re-evaluate your*

digital strategy with the singular focus of redefining and reinvigorating your customer experience.

Make “defining the battlefield” a go-to technique

This frame identifies a hidden, often overlooked, or conceptual antagonist and allows you to control the very criteria for success.

A lost deal really brought home to me the power of using strategic framing to define the terms of the choice and create a preference – commonly known as “defining the battlefield.”

Several years ago, I was advising a technology team that wanted to communicate the value of their solution in terms of time saved for the client. The team proudly made this claim: “Our solution is 80% pre-configured, so our effort and time to customize the solution to your needs will be minimized.”

Unfortunately, the client heard: “I’m going to be locked in with no ability to change.”

The team spoke the language of implementation (saving time), but the client heard the language of constraint (losing power). The language failed to shift the client’s mental model toward the intended benefit. The team clarified the statement in many ways, but the deal was lost. The client heard the 80% downside right off the bat and was no longer open to hearing about the 20% upside. The perceived loss of customization options left the client convinced that the risks far outweighed the

benefits. Because people weigh losses more heavily than equivalent gains, the immediate negative implication anchored the client's perception, making them immune to any clarifying statements.

Consider another scenario that illustrates the power of using the "defining the battlefield" frame in a competitive situation. I advised a team that needed to convince a client that they were well-suited to do customer strategy work. They were competing for the business with a firm that was far better known for this type of work.

My team could have tried to level the playing field by listing the benefits of their approach as the foundation of the pitch, and minimize the fear of risk by including credentials, case studies, references, etc. This traditional problem-solution technique can certainly be helpful. However, by focusing only on the team's credentials, they would have failed to offer the client a unique perspective on what matters most about this type of work.

Instead, my team chose a more leader-like way to shape the decision-making space: They reframed the choice based on gains versus losses. They recognized that their *ability* to do the work (*yes/no*) was just table stakes and changed their focus to the *value* of the work they could do (*what really matters*).

This new decision frame was expressed in our conversations in this way:

"A valuable strategy is an executable strategy."

The new frame allowed us to not only compare the benefits of our approach to our competitor's, but also to establish a new risk inherent in the competitor's approach with a strategy that could not be implemented.

The simplicity of the new decision frame we presented made it easier to remember, and therefore more persuasive, than an extensive list of credentials. Of course, we had many examples of our ability to deliver the work, but the basis for the client's decision was the risk of a strategy that couldn't be carried out.

Use headlines that distill your ideas to the unforgettable

A strong headline builds a protective fence around your idea. It prevents distraction and makes your idea quotable and shareable.

Focus on simplifying your complex ideas or relevant insights to their most sticky, memorable essence with a simple, curiosity-inducing statement.

Some linguists describe news headlines as “relevance optimizers.” They are designed to grab attention and convey the most essential information to readers quickly. Your headline should do the same. The idea is to strike the optimal balance between providing new information and minimizing the effort required for your listener to understand and remember it.

You can use headlines throughout any discussion to make the points that follow easier to understand and remember. For example, you could begin talking about

your insights on M&A with the headline: “There’s a new playbook for today’s M&A deals.”

Or, you could say:

Our experience suggests that four behaviors are critical to the success of today’s growth-focused deals.

For the listener, both headlines trigger a bit of fear of missing out. But only the second headline triggers *fear of messing up*, which is more engaging. It makes the listener ask themselves questions such as, “Do I know what the four rules are? Am I doing this right?”

The headline is the bumper sticker of your argument and should evoke an emotional response. Headlines should contain only one fact or theme, and be bold, and clear like a soundbite.

We see this in some of the themes used in trials:

This is a case of David versus Goliath.

This is a case of paying for someone else’s mistake.

When you speak in headlines, you are answering two main questions:

- What do you, as the speaker/leader, know that your listeners/followers don’t know?
- What frame of reference is most useful for the decision your listener/follower needs to make?

You must be clear about your central idea and then reduce it to its essential theme. For example:

[Central idea] *If the glove recovered at the crime scene isn't O.J. Simpson's, he shouldn't have been charged.*

[Headline] *"If it doesn't fit, you must acquit."*
(Stated by Johnnie Cochran, Simpson's defense attorney, during closing arguments.)

Do not confuse headings with headlines. This is especially important when using headlines more generally to transition between topics or as signposts if people lose focus or derail the conversation.

For example, this is a signpost: Next, I want to talk about communication. And this is a heading: We believe in open communication. Both can sound ordinary.

This is a headline:

There is no substitute for having the right conversations at the right time.

It makes the topic more memorable, more repeatable, and simply more human.

Consider another example, using the vague and forgettable phrase "innovative technology," as in: Next, I would like to talk about the importance of having the most innovative technology.

Instead, this headline would make people pause, and likely remember:

Next, I would like to talk about our technology, which provides deeper actionable insights in real time.

The right headline is indispensable to help people understand your claims. I worked with a pursuit team that was struggling to articulate their big idea for an existing client. The client was moving financial operations to a cloud-based ERP system to improve efficiency, collaboration, and data accessibility. The pursuit team was almost entirely focused on describing how they would mitigate risks of the implementation, along with its benefits. One day, a mid-career manager who was not on the team but had some experience working with the client asked a question that completely transformed the conversation:

Have you guys thought about how difficult it is to crack the code between the business and IT functions in this company?

This question changed everything. Marrying the two sides of the business was the greatest challenge for this company. *Cracking the code* became the bumper sticker the team used to begin the conversation and persuade the client they were the right fit.

Something else to take from this story: The manager who challenged the team with a question demonstrated a compelling point of view, and others noticed. Two senior industry leaders were on the call when he asked his question. They immediately recognized that a junior member of the team who was confident enough to jump in and was able to redirect and lead a

team of experts in an entirely different direction. This manager has since made partner and is a division leader.

How many ideas have you articulated so clearly that people noticed and remembered?

Take advantage of the ironic rebound effect

Asking people not to think about something makes it more prominent in their minds. More prominent means more memorable.

This salience-based tactic is one of the simplest ways to instantly create interest in what you have to say. The most famous example comes from linguist George Lakoff's "Don't think of an elephant" admonishment. If you tell people not to think of an elephant, that's all they'll be able to think about. Psychologists call this "the ironic rebound effect."

For example, if you want people to consider the risks of a particular initiative to dispel common myths, start the conversation with a very provocative statement:

Derisking government technology projects is not a problem.

You can use similar salience techniques to create thought-provoking statements that challenge conventional thinking:

Customer experience is not a department.

Innovation is not disruption.

Competition is not the enemy.

The brain is naturally drawn to information that is new, surprising, or counterintuitive. This type of statement immediately creates salience because the deliberate provocation forces the listener to stop, pay attention, and rethink the meaning of the sentence.

When a statement aligns with a person's existing belief system, they tend to ignore it. A statement that challenges an existing belief system forces the person to engage and to think.

The brain must do the work to figure out what the statement means, and in doing so, it opens the door to a new way of thinking. The act of resolving the initial contradiction makes the new idea more memorable.

Repetition forges familiarity

People typically prefer things that are familiar. Restating ideas through repetition makes them instantly more familiar.

Our brains favor information that is easy to process. When we hear a statement for the second or third time, it becomes increasingly familiar. We often mistake this feeling of ease for an indication of truth. The brain's shortcut is: *This is easy to recall, so it must be true.*

In his most famous speech, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. repeated "I have a dream" 16 times. Repetition of that nature is what cognitive psychologists refer to as a priming technique. It helps listeners see patterns and become more familiar with key ideas or words. The

technique was extremely effective for King in that speech.

A highly effective way to create brief, recognizable patterns is to repeat something three times or present things in groups of three. This practice is deeply rooted in oral traditions. Research shows that information presented in groups of three is inherently more satisfying, more engaging, and more memorable. The three-part structure makes each statement clear, concise, and memorable.

Consider incorporating the *rule of three* in headlines or when outlining recommendations, for example:

Let's look at the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Did we stop, look, and listen?

Or use the rule of three as an engaging warmup to a more substantive conversation. PayPal's Dan Schulman did during a conversation at the Council on Foreign Relations as he was closing on a decade as president and CEO:

"Anytime you have hit a certain part in your career I think there are three kinds of alternatives you face. You can die in the job, you can be fired from the job, or you can retire from the job."

Here are a few more examples you probably remember:

- *"I came, I saw, I conquered."* (Julius Caesar)

- *“Hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil.”* (common translation of a Japanese proverb)
- *“Ready, aim, fire.”* (classic command sequence)
- *“Tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.”* (courtroom oath)
- *“Location, location, location.”* (real estate maxim)

You might also try repeating a sequence of words three times at the beginning of a statement, making it more memorable. I have heard this technique at internal company meetings to rally a team and inspire confidence, such as in this example:

We will not be complacent, we will not be out-worked, we will not be outsmarted, we will deliver the best results for our clients!

In this example, the phrase *“we will not be”* is repeated at the beginning of each clause, building a powerful statement of commitment and determination.

Similarly, repeating the same word or phrase at the beginning and end of a sentence is a powerful way to make a point and make it memorable. Here’s an example:

We must succeed. Our commitment to innovation, our dedication to our customers, and our pursuit of excellence – it all comes down to this one simple truth: We must succeed.

MAKE THE ABSTRACT ACCESSIBLE

Metaphors, analogies, and other linguistic mappings that serve as bridges between familiar and new concepts are among the most effective tactics to quickly make difficult concepts easier to understand.

Simplifying complexity without losing the nuance is the touchstone of the leader. When you do this, you not only elevate your leader presence – you also make your ideas more memorable.

Master the metaphor

Metaphorical expressions help the listener navigate new terrain by making it resemble terrain they already know. This helps them rewire the world inside their head.

Every January until his passing in 2019, MIT Professor Patrick Winston gave a lecture for scientifically gifted but perhaps less communication-savvy MIT students on how to speak with impact. Winston was a significant pioneer in the field of AI, but it was his annual lecture “How to Talk” that transformed him into a legend. A video of this lecture has attracted more than 13 million views to date. It continues to inspire students and entrepreneurs more than 40 years later.

To highlight the critical importance of speaking with impact, Winston opens his talk with an epic analogy between the military and educational institutions. He says:

“The Uniform Code of Military Justice specifies court martial for any officer who sends a soldier into battle without a weapon. There ought to be a

similar protection for students, because students shouldn't go out into life without the ability to communicate, and that's because your success in life will be determined largely by your ability to speak, your ability to write, and the quality of your ideas, in that order."

By using a military concept that is easy to visualize, Winston's analogy infuses forceful new meaning into the concept of communication.

When to deploy metaphorical language

Metaphors serve many valuable purposes.

- **Shape perception**

As a framing device that gives meaning to an idea, a metaphor can change the way people think about a topic. For example, framing a military intervention as a surgical strike makes it sound precise and controlled, even if it is not.

- **Simplify complexity**

A single, well-chosen metaphorical expression can explain a complicated idea in a single sentence. For example, when Jeff Bezos said, "Your margin is my opportunity," he used a simple phrase to encapsulate an entire business strategy of disruption.

- **Visualize possibilities**

Metaphorical language turns abstract concepts into physical sensations. For example, the idea that a strategy is "an engine that is running out of gas" is not a literal truth, but it creates a vivid, easily understood mental image of decline.

- **Enhance memorability**

Because metaphorical expressions work on an emotional level and create a mental image, they are sticky and easier to recall than a list of facts or statistics. For example: The budget deficit is a ticking time bomb.

Use concrete language – colors, taste, touch, sound, feeling words, and nouns

Paint a picture in the mind, making your points more tangible and easier to remember.

Concrete language is especially important when you need to explain technologies or abstract concepts. When Steve Jobs introduced the iPhone, he described it as a combination of three existing products – a music player, phone, and internet communicator – rather than as a radical new device. This concrete description made it easier for consumers to relate to the new product. Jeff Bezos emphasizes a startup mindset of urgency, experimentation, and customer obsession, no matter how large Amazon becomes, by saying, “Every day is Day One.”

Concrete language enables you to trigger emotional associations, making listeners active participants in your narrative and making your ideas more familiar. This, in turn, makes your ideas preferable.

While there is great power in using abstract language to appear more influential (see below), avoid using *generic* language that simply expresses general truths and is not memorable. By using concrete language,

you avoid falling into the generic trap. By using vivid sensory details – what things look, sound, or feel like – you create a more immersive experience for the listener. These concrete details help to paint a picture in the mind, making your points more tangible and easier to remember.

The following examples illustrate how using concrete language can make typical statements you hear in business conversations more distinctive and more memorable.

- Generic: We are globally connected.
Concrete: *Ideas conceived in New York can solve problems created in London.*
- Generic: We represent most of the Fortune 100.
Concrete: *We talk to 80% of the CEOs in the Fortune 100.*
- Generic: Our strategy needs to be adaptable.
Concrete: *Our strategy needs to be as fluid as water.*
- Generic: We can help you to develop a robust yet flexible strategy to reinvent your business.
Concrete: *We will work alongside you to improve share in flat-growth markets; build and buy into new, high-growth markets; and deploy analytics to derive powerful insights from your data.*

Use abstract language carefully

Use familiar words so everyone understands you, and no one feels stupid.

Abstract language compresses a lot of meaning into a few words and requires the listener to unpack the underlying ideas. It's essential that you use abstract language appropriately, in ways that show conceptual depth, yet are precise enough to avoid being generic or incomprehensible.

Imagine an advisor trying to sound important, speaking about what customers want, but failing to be precise enough to lead the listeners. It might sound like this: "We must make sure our customers feel empowered, right? They don't just want a bunch of features. They want a holistic user experience that's super-intuitive. We need to really optimize the customer journey and ensure seamless integration of our offerings so we can drive engagement and ultimately optimize our conversion funnel."

Steve Jobs discussed the same topic during his keynote speech at Macworld 2007. He used far less abstract language:

"We believe that customers are smart, and they want the whole thing. We're not going to parcel it out in bits and pieces. We think people want to own and control their experience. And if you provide it in a way that is integrated and simple, that's what they'll pay for. That's what we found. It's not about features, it's about what it does for people, how it integrates into their lives."

I encourage you to watch Jobs' 2007 talk; it is a masterclass in balancing the use of abstract concepts with concrete language (as well as many other techniques described in this book).

Humanize data points

When you connect a data point to a person, you create an emotional link. Facts inform, human examples transform.

Consider the following example: “Sales increased by 10%.” This provides information. Now consider a human example: “Because sales increased by 10%, we were able to hire Sarah, a single parent, giving her stable employment.” A listener can imagine themselves or someone they know in that situation, making the information feel real and important.

Think about the delicious Viennese Sacher torte, arguably the most famous chocolate cake in the world. It consists of three layers of chocolate sponge cake with thickly spread apricot jam in between and on the top. What makes this or any other chocolate layer cake yummy is the filling: sweet apricot jam, gooey hazelnut ganache, addictive dulce de leche, or whatever you choose to give your cake its unique flavor. The same goes for any regulatory system, framework, or process you are explaining to our clients: The filling – the human dimension of your data points and case studies, is what will make them more relatable to people.

What makes you and your team unique is how you work with people. To stand out to clients and potential clients, you need to go beyond sharing the benefits of

what you have done in the past or what you plan to do for them. Your competitors will share the same types of stories. You need to share how you worked with the people involved. That is your filling.

Equally important to keep in mind is that, while you might be tempted to describe in detail the strategies and methods you use to achieve results, your listeners begin at the end. Their first thought is, “Do I want to dig into this (metaphorical) cake?” The most popular cake in the world is chocolate. Everyone makes one. You must make yours more desirable and more memorable by using an irresistible filling.

THE TRUST IMPERATIVE

Leadership is a relationship. While someone might hold a position of authority, they cannot lead clients or colleagues without earning their trust. Trust is the tunnel through which ideas travel. If people don't trust you, your ideas are just words and could be blocked, distorted, or ignored.

Clients prefer to follow the professionals they trust to deploy knowledge safely and tailor it to their unique needs. Research clearly shows that trust is heavily influenced and expressed through the language you employ. While expertise will always matter to clients, their expectations are less about their advisors having all the answers and more about their advisors understanding their unique needs. If people trust you, they can hear what you're offering.

In a business context, irrespective of the national cultures you may be dealing with, the evidence of trust is not that you often interact socially. The evidence of trust is that your client will discuss topics or issues with you that they will not discuss with others. They prefer to work with you. This openness creates hard-to-breach barriers for competitors – provided, of course, that you have what it takes to perform the needed work.

Connect first, lead second

Authoritative or approachable? Both, but prioritize establishing human warmth – competence is heard only after trust is established.

Social perception is fundamentally driven by two dimensions:

1. Warmth: judgments of character, like approachability
2. Competence: judgments of skill, like expertise

While both are necessary for professional success, considerable evidence shows that warmth is judged first and carries more weight in a person's overall evaluation.

Consider this example: Human rights attorney and law professor Bryan Stevenson gave a TED Talk on reforming the criminal justice system. That talk has become famous, in large part because of the way he demonstrated his humanity from the very beginning:

“I spend most of my time in jails, in prisons, on death row. I spend most of my time in very low-income communities in projects and places where there’s a great deal of hopelessness.”

Stevenson did not rely on his degrees, accomplishments, and awards to establish credibility. Instead, he focused on his character first. By doing this, he established an emotional connection between himself and his listeners that made it easier to trust the claims he made.

Too often, consultants and lawyers introduce themselves with their credentials first – attempting to establish authority without first establishing approachability. But their credentials don’t really differentiate them. The reality is that advisors swim in a sea of sameness: similar credentials, similar experience, similar assets. You can differentiate yourself by connecting on a human level first.

Angela Ahrendts, former CEO of Burberry and visionary of Apple’s transformative physical and online retail strategy, once observed, “The universal language is not texted, emailed, or spoken. It is felt.”

This “felt” communication is immediately translated by the listener into a primal assessment of warmth, which determines their level of trust and security. This subconscious judgment reflects answers to basic survival questions:

- Are you friend or foe?
- How much influence do you have over me?

- Do you make me feel insecure?

People process words related to warmth faster than words related to competence. That means something as common as the use of technical jargon or culture-specific expressions, especially when speaking to a multicultural audience, can create psychological distance and become a barrier to establishing human connections. It is therefore essential to continuously close any potential psychological distance.

Avoid jargon, such as: “We will leverage our synergistic solutions to optimize your ROI and maximize shareholder value.”

Instead, close any potential psychological distance by speaking in human terms:

We'll work together to find the best ways to improve your profits and make your investors happy.

Avoid a sports analogy that many people would not understand, such as: “What would be a homerun for your organization?”

Instead, use terminology that anyone can connect to, such as:

What will your company celebrate at the end of this project?

Avoid of a reference to food, which is so integral to and different in every culture, such as: “He’s a meat and potatoes kind of guy.”

Instead, try:

He prefers simple things such as a comfortable home and a loving family.

In order to be seen as trustworthy, we're often told, "just be your authentic self." But doing so without any thought as to who you're trying to connect with can have the opposite effect.

There's always tension between authenticity and conformity, between displaying warmth and strength. For instance, as the only Latin woman in a meeting, I can try to blend in, or I can highlight my foreign roots. I'm also a New Yorker, Ivy League-educated, and many other things. Which of these identities do I dial up? Do I project warmth to be liked, or show strength to command respect? None of these are mutually exclusive; they complement each other.

You need to make choices about how you present yourself to connect with people, but don't spend excessive energy worrying about changing your style. True confidence and authenticity stem from self-knowledge. Without self-knowledge, you are constantly checking yourself, "Did I sound smart?" "Am I acting correctly?" This internal monitor uses a massive amount of brainpower. Use your energy instead to focus on the conversation.

I intentionally choose to dial up different aspects of myself – accents, references, and anecdotes – that will help me connect with the people I'm meeting. In some U.S. settings, people might share personal details to make themselves more approachable and human, but you should always do this with great caution. I once

heard a senior executive attempt to demonstrate her humanity at the start of a meeting by mentioning that she was returning to work after an extended maternity leave for a “geriatric pregnancy”. Mentioning these personal details would be highly inappropriate in many corporate or national contexts. Attitudes toward women, work, and boundaries between public and private are all culturally determined; sensitivity toward your audience is imperative.

Contrast the intimate statement about a geriatric pregnancy with one shared by former PepsiCo Chairman and CEO Indra Nooyi during an interview. While she was navigating the world of corporate leadership, she was also a mom – a mom who was increasingly busy at work. She balanced warmth and relatability with an understanding of her audience and the culture she was operating in when she said:

“I’m a mother first, then a CEO, then a wife. ... The school was 10 minutes from the office and if there was a problem, I ran over there. It didn’t matter if I was in a meeting.”

Of course you want to be relatable but forcing a personal anecdote into a professional situation where it doesn’t make sense can be counterproductive. It’s important to keep in mind that the balance of trust in an institution and individual advisors never stops shifting. And it is always the *trust giver* who has the power. It is, therefore, essential to continuously reaffirm your individual character and competence to the trust giver.

Use the four lenses of business trustworthiness

Across cultures, people evaluate others as individuals first. The following lenses can help you understand how others evaluate you – and how you can develop trust.

1. Intentionality lens

Does this person have my best interests and the best interests of my organization at heart?

To develop trust: See people and speak to them as partners.

Across the world, people analyze the reasons behind others' actions to determine if they share values. This intentionality helps us decide whom we can trust. Clients understand they are buying services from you, but if you make them feel like partners in a joint exploration of possibilities, you can help them see beyond your transactional role.

2. Logic lens

Does this person have experience, insight, and perspective to bring to situations like mine?

To develop trust: Simplify – don't dumb it down.

Experience is a threshold capability. Advisors are also evaluated based on how clearly you relate your experience to the client's unique situation. If people lack confidence in the logic of your ideas, they might lose faith in your ability to deliver them effectively. The clarity and rigor of your logic, as well as the structured sequence of your arguments and proof points, contribute

to simplifying complex issues without losing their nuance.

3. Empathy lens

Does this person understand what is really going on?

To develop trust: Connect, then lead.

Empathy that builds trust requires more than putting yourself in the other person's shoes, such as when you acknowledge the challenges that someone may be facing; this is simple empathy of thought. The kind of deep empathy that fosters trust demonstrates intuitive understanding of another person's emotional state. For example, when asked about your competitors, simply taking the high road and highlighting their strengths isn't enough. You can significantly boost your credibility by acknowledging the competitor's challenges empathetically.

4. Authenticity lens

Is this my kind of person? Is this someone I would champion within my organization and tie my reputation to?

To develop trust: Share your crucibles.

Self-disclosure is a highly effective way to start building a foundation of trust. Analysis of investor presentations indicates that the strongest predictor of investment isn't the company's credentials or the presentation's content, but the speaker's confidence, comfort level, and passionate enthusiasm. Why? Because investors are evaluating the speakers primarily as individuals. People discern very quickly who is authentic,

and who has learned from the challenges they have faced.

Show confident uncertainty

Appearing too perfect, or better than others, or with no faults or weaknesses, may make you seem less approachable and less trustworthy.

When you appear flawless, people may perceive you as distant, unrelatable, and even potentially deceptive. Sharing some uncertainty signals that you are human and honest, which rapidly increases trustworthiness and approachability.

For example, you might show a form of vulnerability by saying:

I'm confident in the core strategy, but the long-term regulatory impact is an unknown we must monitor closely.

The essence of the technique is to validate the complexity of the risk while simultaneously asserting leadership over the path forward. When you say something like, "This is a guaranteed success. We will have zero disruption during the transition, and all of your staff will be fully trained and proficient within weeks," you may appear naïve or dishonest, and trust is lowered.

Conversely, when you say the following, you sound honest and competent, which results in a sense of security and trust:

The core business case for this platform is undeniable, and we are confident in the projected 30% ROI. However, we must openly acknowledge the two primary risks: The change management curve will be steep and a supply chain disruption during the six-week integration period could temporarily impact fulfillment. Our plan directly addresses both of these unknowns with a dedicated task force and a triple-redundancy protocol.

People also tend to judge you more harshly if you respond to a moral dilemma too quickly or appear to take pleasure in someone else's suffering. Conversely, people will judge you less harshly if they take time to consider the choices, struggle with the dilemma, and empathize with those affected by decisions.

A proven way to accelerate trust-building is to acknowledge the complexities, unknowns, or potential pitfalls of a situation without undermining the conviction of your statements. This is how an executive speaking about AI at an internal company meeting did it:

“The greatest challenge in AI adoption isn't the technology itself; it's the cultural readiness and the ability to upskill our workforce to collaborate effectively with intelligent systems. We are going to make mistakes along the way, and we'll have to correct them. But we are committed to getting it right.”

In My Experience: Reframe to Win

The CEO of what today is a global staffing and recruiting company retained the services of one of the world's most prominent branding firms, where I served as a naming consultant. The staffing company had grown significantly through acquisitions and was expanding its range of services from general finance and accounting to legal, technology, and management positions.

The CEO believed that the existing brand name was a barrier to entry into the C-suite and engaging a different buyer; he was convinced that a new company name would help accelerate the evolution of the brand story from mere staffing to more valuable talent solutions. However, while the CEO was all for change, most of the company divisions did not want to lose the existing equity of the old brand. This created an intense internal “battlefield”—a classic “change is good/bad” dilemma.

After many months of due diligence and meeting with company stakeholders and clients, I recognized the need to reframe the decision to achieve buy-in, so I redefined the core dilemma with a compelling new idea: “Closing the Image Gap.”

I used this metaphorical language to make the abstract concept of brand perception concrete and urgent for the sales teams. My rationale was that if we did not change the name, the sales force would have to constantly explain away the perception of a company name that served as an “anchor” to “temp agency,” instead of the new human resources powerhouse they had to sell to the C-suite.

This strategic reframe (from “name change” to “closing the gap”) immediately elevated the conversation. It showed the team that the existing brand was a loss of sales time and credibility. By focusing on the problem of the image gap, the CEO was able to persuade his team that the new brand would accelerate the recognition of the company as a new player in a new world. The reframe successfully led to buy-in from the whole team, demonstrating how controlling the frame can secure internal conviction and accelerate trust.

ABSOLUTE ESSENTIALS

Speak the language of preference to shape the path on which decisions are made.

- Be memorable to make clients more likely to recall and prefer you during crucial decision-making moments.
- Define the decision frame by establishing the context, criteria, and worldview through which listeners view facts.
- Repeat key ideas to make your message easier to process, more memorable, and more familiar.
- Simplify complexity by using metaphors to bridge the known and unknown, and use concrete, sensory language to make your points more tangible.
- Prioritize establishing warmth and approachability.

Nobody has power in the absence of relationships with other people. It is always relational.

— **Deborah Gruenfeld, Professor of Social Psychology, Stanford University**

Chapter 3: The Language of Power

As a form of social behavior, language negotiates relationships.

Through the ways we speak, we signal and can create the relative status of speakers. Word choice, voice, leading conversations, effective use of cultural norms – all form the language of power.

Our daily lives are filled with status transactions. For professional advisors, these transactions can be particularly complex. You need to navigate organizational and national cultures, accomplish your conversational goals, and maintain your status at peer-level or above. Your linguistic style can both reflect and reinforce social attitudes toward gender, social groups, notions of empowerment, interpersonal styles, and recognition.

It is therefore essential that you become aware of the power of your linguistic style and be intentional in its use.

This chapter explores three ways that you can create power:

- **Integrating oral and body language to show you are in charge and responsible**
- **Having intentional conversations to establish a peer or leader status**
- **Using cultural intelligence to master an organization's hidden rules of engagement**

TRUE POWER MEANS TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

Power isn't about building your authority. It is about ensuring others' sense of security. This fundamental change in how you understand power is essential for inspiring people to follow your lead. Acting with power has nothing to do with the politics of social dominance in the workplace. It is a set of behaviors that signal to others that you can be trusted because you are saying in every way, "I am in charge (or should be)."

The core of the relationship between language and social power is the unequal value assigned to different ways of speaking and the people and ideas associated with them. Language is a social badge: It signals to others your regional background, social group, and in many cultures, your level of education – all of which affect how people perceive your status. People are continuously assessing professional advisors' competence and credibility. You can remain true to your identity without compromising your status by making linguistic choices to influence that assessment.

Powerful presence is not about you

Leadership presence is not about dazzling others, but about expanding their horizons and elevating their perspective.

Much has been said about leadership presence, and most of it remains fuzzy because it fixates on the stereotypical charismatic persona and the combination of skills such a leader must exude; this misses the point.

Many traits of a charismatic person, such as confidence and conviction, are indeed leadership traits. Charismatic leaders often excite us, but it is all about how great *they* are. Leadership presence, on the other hand, is about how you can make listeners feel about the future and their place in it. Therein lies the key: Leadership presence is something one experiences in an interaction with another human being.

Leading as a professional advisor is always about *the other person*. A leader brand is not derived from how much thought leadership you publish or what your company says about itself. Like any great brand, your leader brand will be built by your clients, from the impact you have on people when you speak, when your clients and peers see themselves at the center of the vision you propose.

Traditional leadership models posit that leaders do a lot of things, such as setting vision and strategy, shaping culture, driving execution, and managing stakeholders. Yet, if these individuals lack the capacity to persuade others to embrace their perspective, they are not leaders: They may be exceptional strategists, brilliant speakers, profound thinkers, or even masterful coaches, but they are not leaders.

When an individual feels a heightened sense of confidence in you, and subsequently chooses to align with your direction, you unequivocally become their leader. This is because leaders help others to see possibilities and the role they can play in realizing them.

For professional advisors, leadership is a relationship between those who aspire to mobilize others and those who choose to follow. You cannot have one without the other. Intriguingly, and perhaps most acutely for professional advisors, it is the followers themselves who implicitly define the terms of leadership acceptance.

Speak in the present tense

The present tense conveys certainty and makes you appear more knowledgeable and more responsible.

Academic literature clearly documents that speaking with certainty makes you seem more knowledgeable, trustworthy, and powerful. Present tense makes you appear more certain about what you are saying because it makes your statements instantly simpler and more direct.

For example, “I *led* a high-performance team that exceeded the client’s expectations.” might imply that your accomplishment was potentially a one-time experience.

Instead, this statement implies confidence and control over the situation:

I lead high-performance teams that consistently exceed our clients’ expectations.

That present-tense framing also suggests something more generalizable:

I can be successful across organizations and, potentially, across time.

Consider the power of this statement:

Our strategy is clear. We are building for the long term. We are empowering our customers. We are relentlessly focused on innovation, because that is what truly drives value. This is our path forward.

I heard a consultant speak this way with a client to defend a strategic choice she was recommending – it was highly effective, because the affirmative statement in the present tense has immense power. The consistent use of present-tense verbs throughout this statement (*is, are, drives*) projects an undeniable sense of confidence, control, and deep understanding of both the situation and the chosen direction. It makes the speaker appear highly knowledgeable and authoritative. Furthermore, using the pronoun “we” instead of “you” reaffirms the joint journey with the client. People want to feel heard, and these relationship words communicate a sense of partnership.

The use of pronouns in our interactions influences status transactions. Research shows that using the pronoun *you* – in negotiations or other interactions – makes both men and women like the speaker less. While saying *you* may appear to personalize a statement and is certainly better than saying *your company* or *your project*, it can be perceived as accusatory.

Saying, for example, *I think you should change your strategy for the team to meet the new market demands* automatically places the speaker in a subordinate position. Instead, it is more effective to say:

We need to change our team strategy to meet the new market demands.

Using the pronoun *we* with clients, and certainly with colleagues, emphasizes peer-to-peer collaborative decision-making and collective responsibility, instantly leveling the status playing field and elevating your position.

Use assertive language

Submissive language instantly demotes you in the eyes of others. Assertive language eliminates the noise of insecurity.

Command is not given; it is projected through the precision of your words. Legal proceedings provide irrefutable examples of how language style influences the way people are perceived. Language is never neutral in the courtroom. When researchers analyzed the linguistic styles of witnesses, they found that certain hesitant speech patterns could negatively impact a witness's perceived trustworthiness or credibility. These included using filler words and stammering ("I mean," "you know"), qualifying statements ("sort of," "I believe"), and generally powerless language.

Half the game is not demoting yourself when you speak. Phrases like "I just want to say something" (especially when you raise your hand to speak), while endearing in certain situations, must be completely cut out when you need signal you are in charge.

Avoid submissive ways of talking

You undermine your power when you use the following submissive modes of speaking; replace them with assertive modes.

- **Passive voice – leads to automatic demotion**

Submissive: “They said,” “I was told,” “I have been instructed” “I have been tasked with”

Assertive:

- *Here’s our game plan*
- *Our objectives are*
- *I will own*

- **Justifying – is asking for forgiveness**

Submissive: “Can I just say something?” “I just meant,” “I just wanted to say” “I just feel like”

Assertive:

- *I will jump in here*
- *Let’s clarify*
- *To say it another way*
- *My experience tells me*

- **Lowering expectations – casts doubt on the value of your statements**

Submissive: “I’m just rambling here, but” “Guys, maybe this is silly, but” “Let me just ask this question”

Assertive:

This leads me to believe that

Guys, have we considered

My question is as follows

- **Seeking confirmation – automatic demotion**

Submissive: “No problem,” “Hopefully, it makes sense” “Sorry for the delay” “I think maybe we should”

Assertive:

- *Always happy to help*
- *Let me know if you have any questions*
- *Thanks for your patience*
- *It’s best if we*

- **Other submissive phrases to avoid**

- Submissive: “I may” “I will try” “I think I can”

Assertive: *I will*

- Submissive: “In my opinion” “I think” “Around” “About” “May” “Might”

Assertive: *Definitely, Clearly*

- Submissive: “It seems to me” “I suppose” “A bit” “It seems” “Generally”

Assertive: *Obviously, Undeniably*

- Submissive: “Probably” “Maybe” “Kind of” “Sort of”

Assertive: *Guaranteed, Irrefutable*

- Submissive: “I feel that” “I feel like” “This could be”

Assertive: It is clear that

Pauses put power behind ideas

Silence is the sound of a leader. While the weak rush to talk as if seeking approval, those in command use pauses to force the listener to lean in.

One of the most iconic lines in film history is, “Bond, James Bond.” It’s iconic not because of the words but because of the way it’s delivered – with a strong pause after the first “Bond.”

It is concise, and it is usually delivered in a low, smooth voice that conveys a sense of authority and control. Of course, it’s also usually delivered in a cool, confident, and slightly detached tone, reflecting James Bond’s persona as a sophisticated, unflappable secret agent.

The pause draws and holds attention, makes your points land harder, and makes people remember them longer.

Pausing gives a listener time to not only hear your point, but digest it, evaluate it, determine its relevance, and visualize its implications. That’s because it takes at least twice as long for a human to process what you say as it takes for you to say it. You’re familiar with what you’re saying, but our listeners are hearing it for the first time.

In a contentious meeting where everyone is arguing and talking over each other, signal you are about to speak, pause until you get silence, then speak. The effect of the pause will change the tenor of the whole meeting.

Use a pause before making a critical point to increase tension, then pause again to let it sink in. It is good to take a beat, and if you feel the temptation to fill in that golden silence, fill it with eye contact or a smile.

For more formal presentations, starting with three seconds of silence before your BLUF signals you own the clock and ensures you have 100% of the attention before you utter a single word.

Voice is power

Your voice is the physical manifestation of your authority. A steady, resonant tone does not ask for attention—it demands it.

When you control the volume (not whispering or yelling) and maintain a lower, steady pitch, you are perceived as more calm, stable, and commanding. The projection of calm creates a gravity that pulls others toward your direction. To be in charge, you must sound like the person who knows exactly what happens next. A high pitch or vocal fry can be subconsciously associated with anxiety or youth, undermining your power.

A confident voice:

- Uses deliberate pacing – slowing down to emphasize key points

- Signals that you are certain of your message and in control of the situation, thus commanding continuous attention.
- An easier-to-listen-to voice means people don't have to work hard to understand the message.

Psychological studies show that information that is easy to process is generally perceived as more positive. It also reinforces the perception of the speaker's credibility and competence, which are foundational elements of likability. In general, people are more likely to agree with people they like.

When speech is monotone and void of emotion, people will disengage. If your voice lacks power or resonance, you will not sound convincing. The rise or fall of your voice conveys grammatical meaning – such as questions or statements, attitude and emotion – such as surprise, joy, or sarcasm, and so much more. It's tough to have an impact if you offer great news in a monotone voice or serious news too excitedly or with an upward inflection. It has even been demonstrated that people who speak louder and vary their volume – even when the substance of their message is not very distinctive or strong – signal they are more confident, which in turn makes them more persuasive.

As I've noted in other chapters, formulations that are too long and too complex cause people to lose interest. Voice matters in this, too. Using short, complete sentences, speaking naturally but slowly, and stressing consonants and vowels signals to the listener that

everything you say is worth retaining. Fearful people speak quickly, as if they cannot stand being at the center of attention. Speaking quickly also signals you're afraid someone will steal your speaking time. Some powerful people might speak faster, for sure. However, only powerful people have the confidence to speak slowly.

Here's one more voice technique that amplifies power but may seem counterintuitive: Lower your voice progressively as you speak so people must lean in to hear what you are saying. This power-grabbing technique can be extremely effective in group settings.

Techniques to make your voice count

You have many tools at your disposal that can help you use your voice to amplify your power.

- **Speed**
 - Speak naturally but slowly to signal confidence.
- **Volume**
 - Raise your volume slightly but lower it if you're nervous.
 - In group settings, consider progressively lowering your voice as you speak so people need to lean in to hear you.
 - Use the rise and fall of your voice to convey grammatical meaning, attitude and emotion.

- Individuals from other backgrounds sometimes feel like Americans are shouting; be aware of cultural differences.
 - Don't drop your volume when approaching the end of a sentence; this usually happens when an insecure or low-status individual notices that people aren't listening to what they say. Doing so communicates that you don't believe in yourself and are afraid that people might disagree. Instead, increase your intensity to draw attention back to your words.
 - **Accents**
 - Keep opening sentences slow and over-enunciated so people can adapt to the way you speak; everyone has an accent.
 - Make your own accent a memorable moment: Tell a joke or share something personal to explain the accent and connect it to the present situation.
 - **Upspeak**
 - Using upward inflection at the end of sentences robs you of power. Avoid it at all costs.
 - Use only in situations when you want to appear to be less threatening.
-

Align your body with your words

To be in charge, your physical stature must provide evidence for your words.

Command is achieved when your posture, eye contact, and gestures reinforce a single truth: You are the strongest presence in the space. If your body contradicts your words, you forfeit authority instantly. Humans are hardwired to believe what they see over what they hear. Consider a job interview or presentation. You are there to prove that you are the right person to take command. You verbally express enthusiasm and passion for the role, saying you are eager to contribute and make a significant impact. However, you sit slumped in their chair, avoid eye contact, and fidget nervously with your hands. People are more likely to remember your anxiety and insecurity rather than your confidence.

Humans acquire more information through vision than through all our other senses combined. When a person's verbal and nonverbal signals are aligned, trust, clarity, and rapport increase. Conversely, a mismatch between the two creates a sense of unease or discomfort, leading listeners to question the sincerity of the speaker.

One of the biggest hurdles most professionals face when dealing with power is managing self-conscious energy. We all want to come across in charge and in control, but we often feel powerless or insecure. So, we fight with ourselves about how we should behave. One of the easiest ways to win the battle is to do what actors do so well: Focus on the other person in the

scene. When you do this, you will feel and appear more powerful.

Like an actor, you can create the appropriate perception of authority by making intentional choices to align your words and body. I am not suggesting everyone should become an extrovert, but you need to understand which communication levers can be adjusted to project confidence when needed. Power is about intentionality, not personality type.

Sometimes you need to create psychological distance and project the authority, power, and influence of those whom we normally think of as superiors. Sometimes you need to appear more approachable and likable by being deferential with your body, so your words retain their strength but do not threaten. You need to strike the right contrast of both strength and humility.

A note on gender and expressions of power: Gender studies show that direct expressions of power and dominance, such as direct requests, adversely affect a woman's likability, and indirect expressions of power do not affect a woman's likability. This means that a woman might be better served with indirect expressions of power (this is different from submissiveness). For example, a woman might choose to ask something in a friendly tone such as: "*Do you think you can do that?*" Then, she should hold eye contact and have the other person acknowledge that yes, they can.

I worked with a litigator who mastered the art of indirect power with her voice. When she wanted to disagree forcefully, she made the most searing statements while

raising the pitch of her voice, as if to soften the blow. Conversely, when she wanted to reinforce an agreement reached after much discussion, she would lower her voice dramatically to underscore the importance of the joint decision.

When we think about how men and women communicate, we often imagine differences that seem almost instinctive. But these differences are shaped by more than biology. They are deeply influenced by social roles, cultural expectations, and the subtle nuances of language itself. While psychology and communication theory have long studied these gendered patterns, this book sets aside a discussion of those distinctions to focus on universal principles of effective language use. All the recommendations I'm sharing apply equally to men and women. You need to adopt a personal style that builds trust and inspires others to follow your lead.

Universally useful ways to use your body to create power

There is a vast body of research on the impact of body language and gestures in communication, as well as on unique cross-cultural considerations such as eye contact and personal space between speakers. I've chosen the most universally useful techniques. Consult the many videos available online to see these in action.

- **Use your body to project HIGH status**

This is the body language to use when you need to reinforce your actual rank or when status is up for grabs. When used appropriately, this language can

make others feel safe and protected. This language creates distance and occupies maximum space, both mentally and physically.

- Speak in complete sentences and hold your head still.
- Stand up, look people in the eye, and use forceful gestures.
- Hold eye contact a little longer than normal.
- Walk into other people's space and assume they will feel comfortable and move out of our way (the physical equivalent of cutting someone off).
- Occupy maximum space: Lean back, slow down, use sweeping gestures, show that you are relaxed and open, be expansive, and generally take up more space in the room.
- Incorporate dramatic gestures or bold accessories to appear larger than life.
- Use a whiteboard or flipchart to pace your delivery; the act of writing or drawing introduces delays that allow the listener to catch up and absorb information.
- **Use your body to project LOW status**
Use this body language when you want to appear more approachable and likable or want to show deference to other people. This body language is one of the secret weapons of great leaders, but use with caution, as it is possible to lose credibility or

power if you simply appear weak, flighty, or flirtatious. Always balance this body language with strong points of view and headlines that are easy to remember.

- Hold your body close and tight as if you're hiding or shrinking.
 - Speak in incomplete sentences.
 - Use fleeting and jerky movements.
 - Glance at another person and look away as if looking to confirm that what you said or did was OK.
-

Keep your hands visible and useful

Hand gestures can give your words great power. They signal confidence, enthusiasm, and credibility. Keeping your hands in your pockets tells everyone you are nervous.

It turns out that the most viral TED Talk speakers tend to use their hands a great deal. Hand gestures make people listen to the speaker. They are especially effective if you make the gestures purposeful to explain important points. Using appropriate hand gestures, especially those that illustrate or emphasize your words, makes your message more powerful, clearer, and much more memorable. When you gesture, you are delivering the same information in two modes: auditory (your words) and visual (your movement). The brain processes this information simultaneously, creating a

richer, two-part memory trace. This dual encoding makes the information easier to retrieve later.

However, cross-culturally, not all hand gestures are created equal. Be particularly careful about pointing. In general, in most cultures, people don't like to be pointed at because it can be seen as accusatory. However, you can point to get someone's attention or to literally make a point. For example, the pointing gesture goes well with the statement "*this one's important.*"

Use basic gestures to punctuate words

These gestures are generally universally understood.

- **Numerical listing**
 - The easiest and most basic listing gesture is numerical: Hold up the number of fingers that corresponds to the number in the list.
 - This makes the number easier to remember and adds movement and warmth to body language.
 - But be mindful of cultural differences specifically for gesturing the number one.
- **Come together**
 - Bring both hands together to symbolically show two forces coming together as one.
 - You can even mesh or fold your hands together to show complete togetherness.

- **Growth**
 - Moving your hand upward or gesturing upward indicates some kind of increase.
 - Use these movements to indicate expected growth, excitement, or the direction where something is headed.
 - **Opposing ideas**
 - Whenever you want to separate two different ideas or things, use hands to represent them.
 - For example, if you're talking about changing tax regulations, you could use your right hand when talking about some of the rules that are already in place and your left hand to indicate the rules that are coming. This is both captivating and easier for listeners to remember.
-

CONVERSATIONS NOT PRESENTATIONS

Relying on a pre-packaged presentations signals that you are subordinate to your own script. To project command, you must take control of the dialogue. Most client interactions are not formal presentations, so it's important to lose the fear of jumping in and speaking up. The easiest way to combat this fear is to have intentional conversations, and to spend more preparation time on impactful questions.

Pre-packaged presentations force clients into passive listening roles and do not create dynamics conducive to establishing connections. Presentations can sometimes give the impression that the speakers are more concerned with talking about themselves than with helping the client. Instead, when you ask questions aimed at getting to the issues that are on the client's mind, they will be grateful that you are treating them with respect. This shift from presenter to guide helps the client to engage with you as a leader.

Command is demonstrated by your ability to navigate the conversation without a map. When you are over-scripted, it can make you look both powerless and untrustworthy. The perceived powerlessness comes from the sense that you don't have enough confidence in what you're saying to just say it. Being able to go off script strongly signals competence. You aren't there for people to agree with your slides, you are there to lead the problem-solving process. Impactful questions are not just about gathering information – they are tools used to frame the conversation on your terms and demonstrate that you have the insight to lead the way forward.

Ask better questions

Probe into the *how* of things to join the client in discovering their priorities and their fears.

Imagine this scenario: You meet a new potential referral source for the first time at a networking event. You strike up a conversation, showing genuine interest and engagement by asking several questions that

encourage your new contact to elaborate on their story. After the conversation ends, you part ways. Later, you realize that they didn't ask any questions about you, leaving you with little opportunity to share information about yourself. Who was the leader in this conversation? You – the individual who asked better questions.

A question such as “What are your goals for the next quarter?” elicits a generic answer (“growth”, “increased revenue”).

A better inquiry, which will lead the other person to reveal their priorities and constraints, would be:

How will you measure and track your progress toward that goal on a weekly basis?

Or, instead of asking “How important is the timeline?” ask:

What would it mean for you if you could save three days a month from this process and use it for more brainstorming with your team as you exit each phase of the project?

Conversations have three goals: Information exchange, impression management, and getting to the next conversation. Think of your meetings as joint problem-definition and option-generation sessions. You'll invariably arrive at a better definition of the client's aspirations and perceived challenges.

Consider the following example of a conversation between a consultant and a group of health care finance

executives. When the consultant asks the question at the end, he is not simply answering a client request. He is inviting the executives into a conversation about their willingness to reassess the cost structure, optimize processes, and leverage technology to achieve sustainable cost savings.

You asked us to present the feasibility and approach for a \$12 million cost take-out. Of course we can find \$12 million. We are confident we can find \$15 million, or even \$20 million. The real question is: What is your appetite for engaging in a comprehensive transformation to achieve results?

Asking better, more purposeful questions gives people time to think and to frame issues from their perspective. It also turns your role as leader into more of a guiding role, freeing your client to think more strategically. The best leaders are also teachers, and the best teachers are also leaders.

Questions help your listeners escape the trap of their existing mental models by broadening their perspectives. To lead, your mindset needs to shift from always trying to provide a solution to engaging in discovery – helping clients become less attached to their existing views.

In addition to getting comfortable with asking questions to learn more about your client, you need to master the art and science of responding to a client's questions without compromising your status as a peer or higher. The questions clients raise are vital data pointing toward their real obstacles. Show enthusiasm for the

opportunity to be asked and answer questions. The hardest question to answer is the one they never asked.

Consultants are often told that, when you don't know the answer to a question, you should say you'll ask "an expert." But this statement instantly demotes you. Instead, I recommend taking the opportunity to dig a bit deeper. Try saying something like:

That is a huge question; how does this fit into the bigger issue?

Techniques for responding to clients' questions

Client questions are an opportunity to better understand their fears and aspirations – and how you can lead them toward realizing those aspirations.

When you don't know the answer, buy time by:

- Probing: Get more information by asking *how* or *what* (generally avoid *why*).
- Mirroring: Repeat the last one to three words of their question with an upward inflection so it sounds like a question. Then go silent with an effective pause; this is a respectful clarification.
- Labeling: Phrases such as *it seems like*, *it sounds like*, *it looks like*, and *that's a huge question* are a wonderful way to gather more information and test positions. They open dialogue in a quietly firm way.

Uncover hidden agendas by saying:

- *What makes you ask?:* This is a neutral way of saying “I don’t understand.” Saying, “Why do you ask?” can sound confrontational.
 - *How does this fit?:* Get the person to take a step back and look at the problem holistically.
 - *How do we know the team is on board?:* This question helps you determine the degree of influence of the person asking, and if, in fact, buy-in is a key consideration in the decision.
-

Counter objections with the illusion of explanatory depth

Prompting someone to explain their rationale often causes them to confront the gaps in their own knowledge and can lead to a more moderate view.

When faced with an objection or an opposing point of view, your instinct may be to present evidence and try to convince the other party of your version of what matters. Behavioral economist Dan Ariely has an interesting take on the power of asking questions instead of presenting information. Ariely suggests working with the *illusion of explanatory depth*, a cognitive bias that causes people to overestimate their understanding of complex topics. People often think they understand things more deeply than they do. Instead of directly challenging their knowledge, ask them to explain their position in detail. As they do this, they will likely reach the limits of their understanding, which naturally reduces their confidence.

This approach helps lower resistance without making a person feel attacked. Engaging with someone in this way enables you to elevate your status more gracefully. This approach is especially useful for less experienced professionals, who often shy away from using questions to challenge the ideas of others whom they assume to be higher-status. This approach is also extremely helpful when speaking with people from different countries. In both cases, this technique helps avoid ambiguity and deepen your understanding of the situation and individuals.

Here's an example of how you might ask a question to help clients become less attached to their existing views (which is more effective than trying to directly prove the value of a new view). This technique leverages the illusion of explanatory depth to allow an individual to discover the limits of their own understanding.

A client is committed to an outdated, complex internal process, believing it's robust and efficient, despite evidence of growing bottlenecks and inefficiencies. You want them to consider a new, simplified approach, but directly telling them their current process is flawed might trigger defensiveness.

Instead, you might ask this question to help them become less attached to their existing view:

Could you walk us through, step-by-step and in detail, the full journey of a customer request or product order through your current system, particularly highlighting where information flows and the precise mechanism for handoffs between teams?

With this question, you're not questioning the effectiveness of the system directly; you're asking for a detailed explanation of its inner workings. This requires the client to fully articulate a process they might only understand superficially. It's framed as a request for understanding, not a challenge or an accusation. As they struggle to articulate the *exact mechanism* or *precise handoffs*, the client may recognize the inefficiencies, complexities, or gaps in their existing view, making them more open to exploring alternatives with you.

Control the frame without dominating the dialogue

You project authority not by speaking the most, but by speaking the most strategically.

True authority in a peer setting is often granted by others when they see that your leadership results in a better collective outcome. If you talk too much or without focus, you demote yourself. When you speak, it is to guide people to the finish line.

Controlling the frame means you are the person who sets the context, scope, and direction of the conversation. You can do this with strategic interventions—using phrases to clarify, redirect, or summarize at key junctures, particularly when the discussion is ambiguous or drifting. Using clear, definitive language when stating goals or summing up decisions (e.g., “The plan is X,” not “Maybe we could try X.”)

An easy status-raising power hack is to adopt the brief style in emails used by senior professionals. Their succinct responses to emails or questions reflect a lack of

time to waste and a sharp focus – two qualities that project authority. The simple act of getting straight to the point with an answer or with another question can set you apart instantly and signal you know what is important (see BLUF in Chapter One). Most young consultants spend countless hours explaining themselves in emails, until they eventually understand that the objective of an email is to simply get others to continue talking to them. The same goes for conversations. Here's an example. When someone asks, "Can I count on you to contribute to this initiative?" Don't start your answer with lots of disclaimers and conditions. Simply reply:

I'm all in, are you free to discuss details later today?

Tactics for controlling the frame

These tactics enable you to project peer or senior status.

- **Speak last**

Make it a habit to distill and summarize what's been said, framing the dialogue with insight instantly signals your command.

- **Correct others carefully**

Your authority and credibility increase when you correct others respectfully.

- **Use provocative questions to promote dialogue**

Challenge assumptions with questions such as:
What would the other side say about your point of

view? What are the disadvantages of the plan? But is this really true? What's really going on here? What does all this add up to?

- **Separate from the crowd**

When you disagree or someone has stated your idea incorrectly, use the frames: *I'm not convinced yet...*, *What really matters is...*, or *What's wrong with this picture?*

- **Avoid negating another's frame**

Negating another person's frame often helps to reinforce the very idea you are trying to reject. Instead, you inadvertently activate it in the listener's mind. For example, when President Richard Nixon said, "I am not a crook," he tied his image to that of a crook, making it more salient and memorable.

Practice precision for spontaneous speaking

Avoiding ambiguity is the fundamental requirement for authority on the fly.

Given that most interactions are spontaneous, it is essential to make each exchange impactful. Simultaneous translators are masters of spontaneous speech, and they achieve this by rehearsing multiple ways to express a single idea. This deliberate practice builds a vast mental lexicon, guaranteeing immediate recall and a wide range of expressions during live translation.

For example, the concept *go up* can be expressed in multiple ways, including *grow*, *balloon*, *escalate*, *climb*. Practicing different ways of saying the same thing

enables you to be spontaneous and clear instead of repeating yourself or fumbling to find the right words. Your goal is to communicate the concept behind your words in the most precise way to avoid costly cultural blunders.

For example, the word *brainstorming* requires pause. In English-speaking corporate cultures, brainstorming is a common, often informal, technique for generating ideas. Yet, in cultures that place high value on order, structured discussion, or respect for hierarchy – like some cultures in Germany or Japan – this may be perceived negatively, as a chaotic storm of ideas. The process of open, collaborative, and uninhibited idea creation can still take place even in cultures that favor order and deference to authority. But we must choose our words wisely; depending on your audience, you might want to use a more globally acceptable alternative, such as *idea-generation session*.

Equally important, you need to match your clients' level of formality, intimacy, and enthusiasm, and follow their lead on how to greet, address, and negotiate with them.

When all is said and done, mastering in-the-moment communication is what many professional advisors fear the most. It is also one of the most valuable skills to develop in your leadership journey. Deliberate practice and consistent application of the techniques described in this book will help you get there.

LANGUAGE IS CULTURE AND CULTURE IS LANGUAGE

Language carries the cultural rules for social interaction. Every high-stakes business conversation is a complex interplay of establishing influence and navigating status. The most effective global communicators recognize that language is the voice of culture, embodying how we live and think, and therefore see these conversational dynamics not just as words, but as culturally encoded signals of respect and hierarchy. They possess the cultural intelligence to interpret and skillfully deploy these cues to avoid critical missteps that lead to being perceived as an outsider with lower status.

Focus on cultural drivers

Culture is the true engine of power in organizations and nations.

Culture dictates the informal rules, the acceptable risks, and the unspoken goals that actually drive policies and objectives. If you don't grasp these cultural drivers of power – the real priorities of the group – you will misinterpret decisions, act against the hidden norms, and therefore not be perceived as someone to follow – irrespective of your title.

Contrary to widely held belief, corporate culture is not a sense of comfort and familiarity with co-workers or a statement of values. Culture is a common way of working, a mutual understanding of how to make decisions and assess risks. While culture is subliminal in nature,

people in all organizations are effectively hardwired to recognize and respond to it instinctively.

People use distinctive cultural frameworks to process information. And leadership models are defined by national and organizational cultures. Do people lead through command-and-control or connect-and-collaborate? Are they transparent or do they share information only on a need-to-know basis? What norms define what is encouraged, discouraged, accepted, or rejected within the group? Does the culture function as a group or as individuals?

Concepts such as work style, teamwork, or innovation trigger different beliefs rooted in the logic of national and organizational cultures. And professional advisors need to recognize and understand these different cultures and then adapt.

Here's an example: You've probably heard the term "design thinking." If you use the term loosely to describe a process without an understanding of what it means in the client's world, you might diminish your credibility. That term might mean one thing to a "design-thinking organization" and another entirely to a different organization.

Cultures often have a creation story that reveals their unique definition of innovation, teamwork, or other concepts we think are universally understood. The creation story answers the question *What makes them who they are?*

Consider these two simple, well-known creation stories:

Two guys in a garage build personal computers (Microsoft).

Small teams create a revolutionary fabric (Dupont).

Corporate cultures form their own languages that are quick concentrations of meaning. These tend to be so pervasive that they serve as a litmus test for belonging. Listen for catchphrases and memes. These lexicons have precious meanings. If you don't know the words or do not understand how they are used, you're not part of the group. For example: "Don't be evil" (Google) or "Think different" (Apple).

Corporate and national cultures also have rituals: repeated interactions that give an indication of how the group prefers to engage and take in new information. For example, some cultures are willing to participate in exercises and Q&A sessions, but many are not. Some have distinct formats for meetings; for example, Chick-fil-A meetings always start with prayer.

Learn to recognize and understand cultures

Ask yourself some (or all) of these questions as you work to understand an organization's culture:

- Does the client use words that concern desires, aspirations, engagement, and experience to describe products and services?
- Does the client or national culture place greater value on autonomy, individual action,

and competition? Or does it emphasize integration, managing relationships, and coordinating group effort?

- What are this culture's catchphrases and memes?
 - Do people lead through command-and-control or connect-and-collaborate?
 - Are they transparent or do they share information only on a need-to-know basis?
 - What norms define what is encouraged, discouraged, accepted, or rejected within the group?
-

Understand the cultural context of change

Professional advisors are in the business of change. Lead by working *with* the prevailing attitudes, not against its hidden forces.

To build or secure your position as a leader of change, you need to fully understand your client's attitudes toward change and risk. By understanding the company's *actual* tolerance for these elements, for example if a company prioritizes predictability and maintenance of the status quo, or if it emphasizes flexibility, adaptability, and receptiveness to change, you gain the ability to predict resistance and frame your proposals to match the acceptable risk profile,

For example, if you need to emphasize stability and continuity, don't say, "To enhance our agility and responsiveness to evolving market conditions ..."

Instead, try:

To maintain the positive trajectory we've established ...

It's also crucial to understand attitudes toward openness in the corporate culture. Is it normal to discuss risks, and is constructive challenge encouraged? Are rules and procedures concrete and are the risk responses and the effects visible within the organization?

I once advised a team in China who had no exposure to cross-border deals or constructing recommendations to private entities in the U.S. and Europe; their entire professional careers were built on making recommendations to government entities, and they used a strict protocol for structuring their recommendations, often glossing over risks and risk mitigation. When the team had to make a presentation to their new U.S. board of directors, they were woefully ill-prepared.

To communicate authentically and with impact within your client's world, you must delve deeply into the nuances of how their corporate and/or national culture shapes interactions and expectations about change.

Adapt and code-switch

Status is communicated and negotiated differently across national, regional and corporate cultures.

Never assume a listener shares your cultural framework. People come hardwired with multiple cultural frameworks wherever in the world you may interact with them. It is estimated that more than 40% of the world's population is bilingual. That means that almost half of all people utilize two languages daily. But even individuals who are not bilingual have deep, assumed patterns of thinking that shape how they understand the world and represent the reality that they learn as members of a culture – national, regional, or corporate. Any conversation may involve different characteristic ways of viewing equality and status, as well as a variety of other assumptions each individual brings to it.

To effectively control how others perceive your status, you must be willing to adapt your own communication style to accommodate their cultural preferences; this may involve adjusting tone, pace, and level of directness.

Adapting your communication style does not mean compromising your position. It's about finding a balance between assertiveness and respect for the other person's cultural norms. Always prioritize relationship-building, avoiding ambiguity, and making sure your statements are clear and concise.

Keep in mind that cultural identities can shift in moment-to-moment interactions. Language is one of the primary tools humans use to define our identity in the context of who we are speaking with. We all have this ability: It's called code-switching, and some of us use it instinctively.

When we find ourselves in unfamiliar social situations, we often code-switch to fit in better or to avoid reinforcing stereotypes. For instance, when I am in any country in Latin America, I lean into my Argentinian identity for stories and examples, because it is the one nationality in the region that can break through cultural barriers. When I am in Miami with a diverse group of Spanish speakers, I dip into Spanglish to show I am just like my listeners. In other situations, I use self-deprecating comments about having attended Harvard; it helps me level the playing field with people who might see themselves as superior for any reason and those who might feel intimidated by my background. In all these situations, I am not pretending to be anything other than the rich tapestry of my identity, but my focus is on dialing into my listeners' sensitivity to close the psychological distance between us.

Many politicians are known for their deliberate use of language to connect with diverse groups of people. President Barak Obama was extremely adept at changing speech patterns depending on his audience. Because of prevailing ideas about his identity, Obama needed to speak in a way that made as many people as possible feel comfortable with him. To connect with the Black community, he often employed a "Black preacher style," linking himself to familiar figures like Martin Luther King Jr., but he used "standard" English when addressing more general audiences. Not only was his "Black preacher style" significant for the Black electorate, but it also helped alleviate some White Americans' fears that he was "not American" or "not Christian." Obama's ability to navigate the cultural

discourses of race, language, citizenship, and religion by switching between different linguistic styles was a significant advantage in his political career.

Code-switching occurs naturally as we observe our surroundings, almost like having a translation device in our heads. You can adjust your linguistic style and still embrace your own cultural identity and that of your client.

In My Experience: We Are Far More Powerful Than We Believe

Within just a few weeks of joining the marketing department at one of the world's largest law firms, I was unexpectedly called into the CEO's office to discuss an upcoming advertising campaign.

While I had extensive marketing experience, I was unfamiliar with legal advertising, and I also felt very uneasy because my boss, who had developed the campaign, was not invited to the meeting. I was not feeling confident, but what became clear during the first few minutes was that the CEO was open about his doubts. Instead of dodging his questions as an insecure subordinate, I seized the opportunity to behave as a senior member of his team. I framed my views as thought-provoking questions to help me understand the CEO's doubts as well as his certainties.

This conversational approach allowed me to challenge his thinking in new and unusual ways. My goal was simply to create enough constructive tension to arrive at the right answer together. As I steered the

conversation toward the unique strengths of the organization, it became clear that the advertising campaign was off track, and we agreed to stop it.

To this day, I don't know if the CEO meeting was a test of my ability to challenge perceived authority or a genuine decision-making moment. What I do know is that, for the 15 years I worked at that law firm I was sought after for my point of view by some of the most seasoned trial lawyers and deal makers.

ABSOLUTE ESSENTIALS

Speak the language of power to signal *I am in charge*.

- Completely eliminate upspeak, submissive phrases and passive voice. Instead, use assertive language and present tense, and use your voice to command attention and convey certainty, expertise, and competence.
- Shift your mindset from only providing solutions to engaging in discovery by asking better questions. Project authority not by talking the most, but by speaking the most strategically.
- Be prepared to lose your script and speak spontaneously.
- When faced with an objection, ask the person to explain their position in detail instead of using evidence to argue.
- Be aware of the client's corporate norms and national culture – especially risk tolerance and directness – and adapt your tone and level of formality so you are not seen as an outsider and demote

EPILOGUE

With more than 7,000 different languages spoken worldwide, human language is regarded as the most intricate form of behavior in the universe. Nevertheless, linguists have documented a wealth of strong recurring patterns that provide a blueprint of how to communicate persuasively. I hope this book has provided a comfortable read about this important topic.

My promise to you at the start of this book was that you would improve your ability to develop your leader brand by:

- Developing a bold point of view to guide clients with confidence and clarity
- Framing ideas to make them salient and memorable
- Creating power with your words, voice and body

Throughout the text, you learned a total of 35 ways to lead with language. I encourage you to find someone whose speaking style you admire and learn by observing what they do. By doing so, you can learn at least 35 more ways you can lead with language.

You will not use all these suggestions all the time. Make use of at least one technique in this book and it may boost your career.

RESOURCES

The science of language has undergone a seismic shift in recent years. Revolutionary advancements in computational linguistics and the digitization of everything from consumer reviews to earnings calls is enabling researchers to unlock unprecedented insights into how language works. This book distills that learning, offering essential foundations for deep dives.

In a world where many voices sound credible, choosing reliable guidance is challenging. To cut through the noise, this section offers:

A curated selection of authorities from the fields of behavioral economics, cognitive science, linguistics, social science, and persuasion to inform your continued exploration.

BEHAVIORAL ECONOMICS

Dan Ariely, professor of psychology and behavioral economics, Duke University

- Author of multiple *New York Times* best-selling books, including *Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces That Shape Our Decisions* (Harper Collins, 2009)
- Access danariely.com for research in behavioral economics in plain language

Daniel Kahneman, Nobel Prize-winning economist and psychologist

- Author of *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2013) and many other books and articles on the psychology of judgment and decision-making
- *TED Talk* (2010), *The Riddle of Experience vs. Memory* [video]
- *Talks at Google* (2011), *Thinking fast and slow* [video]
- Access Nobelprize.org for notable interviews and lectures

COGNITIVE SCIENCE AND LINGUISTICS

Daniel Dor, professor of communication, Tel Aviv University

- Author of *The Instruction of Imagination: Language as a Social Communication Technology* (Oxford University Press, 2015)

Evelina Fedorenko, associate professor of brain and cognitive science, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

- Research on the brain's language system and the relationship between language and various cognitive, perceptual, and motor systems
- Applied Machine Learning Days (2024) *Language Versus Thought in Human Brains and Machines* [video]

Uri Hasson, professor in the psychology department and the Neuroscience Institute, Princeton University

- TED Talk (2016) *This is Your Brain on Communication* [video]

George Lakoff, professor of cognitive science and linguistics, University of California, Berkeley

- Author of *Don't Think of an Elephant!: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate* (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2014)
- Author of *Metaphors We Live By*, (University Chicago Press, 2003)

Charan Ranganath, professor of psychology and neuroscience, University of California, Davis

- Author of *Why We Remember: Unlocking Memory's Power to Hold on to What Matters* (Doubleday, 2024)
- *Talks at Google* (2024) *Why We Remember* [video]

Steven Pinker, professor of cognitive psychology, Harvard University

- *TED Talk* (2005), *What Our Language Habits Reveal* [video]
- *Talks at Google* (2007) *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window Into Human Nature* [video]

Deborah Tannen, professor of linguistics, Georgetown University

- Author of *Talking from 9 to 5: Women and Men at Work* (HarperCollins, 1994)
- Author of many books and articles about how the language of everyday conversation affects relationships; see deborah.tannen.com

Patrick Winston, professor of artificial intelligence and computer science, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

- *How to speak*, MIT open courseware [video]

- Author of *Make it Clear: Speak and Write to Persuade and Inform* (MIT Press, 2020)

SOCIAL SCIENCE AND PERSUASION

Jonah Berger, associate professor of marketing, University of Pennsylvania

- Research on influence, consumer behavior, and natural language processing
- Author of the *New York Times* best-selling book *Contagious: Why Things Catch On* (Simon & Schuster, 2016)

Amy Cuddy, social psychologist, former associate professor, Harvard Business School

- Research on body-mind connection; novel perspectives on presence and performance under stress
- *TED Talk* (2012) *Your Body Language May Shape Who You Are* [video]

Paul Ekman, professor emeritus of psychology, University of California, San Francisco

- Pioneer and probably the world's leading expert in the field of emotions and their relation to facial expression
- Author, *Emotion in the Human Face 3rd edition* (Malor Books, 2015)

Carmine Gallo, instructor in executive education, Harvard Graduate School of Design

- Author of *Talk Like TED: The 9 Public Speaking Secrets of the World's Top Minds* (St. Martin's Griffin, 2015)
- *Talks at Google* (2016) *The Storyteller's Secret: From TED Speakers to Business Legends, Why Some Ideas Catch On and Others Don't* [video]

Marshall Ganz, senior lecturer in leadership, organizing and civil society, Harvard University

- Harvard Kennedy School course on *Public Narrative: Leadership, Storytelling, and Action*

Deborah Gruenberg, professor of social psychology, Stanford University

- Research on power and presence; see Stanford Graduate School of Business courses and many online videos
- Author of *Acting With Power: Why We Are More Powerful Than We Believe* (Currency, New York, 2020)

Yuval Noah Harari, professor of history, Hebrew University of Jerusalem

- *TED Talk* (2015), *Why Humans Run the World* [video]

- Author of multiple *New York Times* best-selling books, including *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (Harper Perennial, 2018), which was a *New York Times* Readers' Pick for "Top 100 Books of the 21st Century"

Jay Heinrichs, professor of the practice of rhetoric and oratory, Middlebury College

- Author of the *New York Times* best-selling book *Thank You for Arguing: What Aristotle, Lincoln, and Homer Simpson Can Teach Us About the Art of Persuasion* (Broadway Books, New York, 2020)
- Access articles on jayheinrichs.com

Barbara Kellerman, lecturer in public leadership, Harvard University

- Author of *The End of Leadership* (Harper Business, 2012) and many other books on leadership and followership
- Groundbreaking work that departs from the traditional leader-centric approach

William O'Barr, professor of cultural anthropology, Duke University

- Author of *Linguistic Evidence: Language, Power, and Strategy in the Courtroom* (New York, Academic Press, 1983)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Edelman Trust Barometer

- At the forefront of understanding shifts in institutional trust with important implications for individual leaders

National Institute for Trial Advocacy (NITA)

- Access numerous webinars on courtroom persuasion techniques

Think Fast. Talk Smart.

- Stanford University podcast providing robust sources of tangible, actionable skills for how to speak

Y Combinator

- A technology startup accelerator and venture capital firm that offers invaluable advice and resources on how to communicate with impact

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Claudia Dobkin is an expert in persuasive communication. For over two decades, she has advised executives at the world's elite law and consulting firms on message strategy for high-stakes interactions with clients, employees, boards, and the media. Her methodology is built on a rigorous scientific foundation: A PhD in psycholinguistics from Harvard University and research focused on semiotics – how we construct and control meaning. Fluent in English, Spanish, and French, Dobkin is a sought-after advisor on language and brand strategy.