

How to Use Language That Employees Get

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It's not just what leaders say; it's also how they say it.

In our research on executives who have instilled a great sense of purpose in others, introduced powerful brands, or managed successfully in turbulent times, we've found that they often use terms and metaphors that resonate with their employees.

Walt Havenstein, the CEO of security and defense technology maker BAE Systems, incorporates the symbols of science in written communication with his engineers. To state that integrating acquired firms yields a result that's greater than the sum of the parts, he'll use the expression $\int > \sum$. The tech types get the point. Havenstein also draws on military language to keep his professionals focused on the safety of troops who use the company's products: For example, he calls annual strategy sessions, in which managers review mission objectives, "commander's guidance."

Limited Brands CEO Les Wexner, who introduced such retail concepts as Victoria's Secret and Bath and Body Works, relies on a very different metaphor—moviemaking—to appeal to both the operations people and the creatives. Citing director Sidney Lumet's book *Making Movies*, Wexner points out to workers that films are successful only if everyone, from key grip to leading actor, shares a common understanding of what the end result must look and sound like. To explain to employees in fashion merchandising what he means by "brand integrity," he shows clips of the dissimilar actors who have played James Bond—all asking for their martinis shaken, not stirred.

Of course, resonant messages also involve audience-appropriate delivery. For example, speaking off-the-cuff is a good way to address certain groups. Bank of New York Mellon CEO Robert P. Kelly delivers his speeches without a script because he believes that in today's business climate, employees—especially the young people who fill many of the bank's frontline positions—are suspicious of leaders' scripted remarks. Kelly considers the occasional verbal stumble a small price to pay for honest communication.

As a manager trying to emulate these highly effective communicators, you must first stop and think about your audience. Are your employees technically minded? Artistic? Do their jobs get them thinking about problems in particular ways? What is their attitude toward leaders? And then you can learn to use language in a way that's credible and compelling to them.