



Brave New Words

In Need for a New, Conscious Language to Express Organizational Change and Transformation - Part I

Are your organization's "officers" supposed to be fighting all day?
Do you allow your employees to be empowered?
Can a unit be a team, and how human are resources?
Do you emancipate your employees?
What's your market value, what's your price tag?
Could women work man days?
And are you going to die when you meet the deadline?

Questions and nuances in language such as these have led me to focus more attention in my work about how we talk and what we write, especially as it relates to the Future of Work. To my surprise even articles and books that describe new organizational models or more progressive management approaches often are expressed in very traditional language.

I sense it's high time to give more attention to the words we use and the stories we tell each other. Let's become more responsible authors of our lives, particularly when we intend to describe the changes and transformations that are underway in the field of management and in pioneering organizations all around the world.

A first step would be to increase our awareness of how we currently express ourselves, with the purpose to reverse and transform our spoken and written practices by choosing our words more wisely.

Using Traditional Language to Express Transformation?

When gathering examples of dysfunctional words and conventional language in current business and management literature, I identified seven language clusters that I call

"The 7 Ms of Traditional Management Language":

- Military
- Machine
- Money
- Mafia
- Masters
- Make-Do
- Machismo

Let's have a closer look at these 7 Ms.



Military

Historically the practice of management is rooted in the military so it's no surprise that many of the terms we currently use in business and organizations have their origin in the battlefield. For example, we use words like strategies, targets, goals, objectives, aims (whatever the hierarchy of these might be in your organization) to describe vision and mission or even purpose.

We structure our corporations in divisions and departments. The headquarters or head office is led by a general director who manages a variety of officers. The field structure is about building the frontline to the customer who is welcomed at the front desk. We purchase new warfare, hire new recruits to strengthen our workforce and employ an army of people. We pay our legions a salary, establish camaraderie and an esprit de corps and become veterans within our organization, fighting a lone battle to survive. No surprise that the roots of the word company is "compagnie" (French), defining "a body of soldiers", while its origins refer back to "companion" as "one who breaks bread with another".

On a day-to-day basis, general managers rally the troops with a call to arms using an innovative arsenal of weapons, sometimes free-lancers. Being at the forefront, organizational soldiers shoot far, spearhead initiatives, fight to capture market share, gain margins from the target audience, defend their turf and win over competitors, often struggling in the battle. A command and control structure is established and strict guidelines are developed to reinforce policies, align everyone across the ranks and to assure that orders are executed by the staff. We even follow the emperor's maxim to divide and conquer.

There's a daily war going on in our business world. More often than not, it's about victory or defeat.



Practical Ideas - Money

- seriously reconsider the terms and expressions you use and choose a more peaceful, cooperative and life-affirming language
- potential expressions could include e.g. purpose, values, companionship, council, committee, peers, connection, collaboration, cooperation, coopertition (the merger between cooperation and competition), initiative integration, synergies, care, commit/-ment, creation, intention, sense, accountability, aware, mindful, holistic, integral, community



Masters

Traditional management literature refers to hierarchies, often as steep as pyramids, with a well-defined chain of command (a "pecking order") and a multitude of top, higher, middle and lower management levels. These different layers require overseers each with a span of control, responsible for the supervision (which originally means "the overview") of the "underlings". Superiors manage subordinates, sometimes just bossing them around. Chiefs and Heads give top-down directives, channeled downstream; employees must express their interests bottom-up. Tasks are delegated from "above" to those "below", a process that is often mimicked by the physical architectural reality in business buildings.

While traditional management models describe clear power structures and lines of authority, recent research and publications demand empowerment of staff with little guidance or direction.

Often they advocate a sharing or even elimination of power entirely, which leaves those in power positions terrified of losing what they feel they have earned and own (leading them to grab power even tighter).

Mary Parker Follett (1925) introduced “power with” instead of “power over” almost a hundred years ago (including the dismissal of sheer force). She advocated the idea of a shared and consequently multiplied power to create truly powerful work teams. Interesting that the understanding of this concept has yet to reach management mainstream.

Exceptions are pioneering organizations like Morning Star founded in 1970, now the world’s largest tomato processor, living and operating as a co-management model. As quoted by Gary Hamel (2012): “No one at Morning Star talks about empowerment, and with good reason. Embedded in the idea of empowerment is the assumption that power trickles down, that it’s bestowed from above as and when the powerful see fit. But when power is distributed, when there are no managers with power to apportion, the notion of empowerment becomes nonsensical” (p. 229).

“Consider, for example, how thoroughly the notion of hierarchy has infiltrated the lexicon of management. “Chain of command.” “Pyramid.” “Boss.” “Subordinate.” “Direct reports.” “Organizational level.” “Top-down.” “Bottom-up.” “Cascade.” All these terms connote a formal scale of power and authority.” -Gary Hamel

It has been interesting to discover that the prefix “self-“ as in “self-management” recently used in many progressive management publications still reflects the traditional way of thinking. Assuming there would be a manager, teams are managing themselves now, therefore “self-managing” – whilst not managing oneself as a person, but actually co-managing a team together. “Co-managing” expresses a flat organization operating with its interconnected network structure much better. And the question really is if it’s about management or more about co-directed co-operation and collaboration.

Supervisors casually refer to “my team” and “our own people/staff” while not belonging to the groups they are leading. Many employees hear less of the friendly intention and more of the possessive pronoun usually applied to things (not people), which seems to express the continuation of a feudal power structure. It’s as if we are being told:

“You have signed the contract, you are paid to do this. We offer you flextime. We allow you to take some days of vacation. We provide you with the freedom to develop your skills if they serve the organization. We tell you what to do and when. We look after you. It’s your choice: Do it or die. But as long as you are under contract, we own you.” It is remarkable that by signing the employment contract and becoming dependent on the organization and the manager’s goodwill, this seemingly friendly, still paternalistic expression “my people” very accurately represents the current work reality for many and most. You’re theirs, even if they implement organizational development measures to increase flexibility, freedom and ownership.

What’s also striking in current management literature is how many well-intentioned authors ask to improve the “treatment” of employees and to “let them”, “allow them”, “give them” more control, rights or the freedom to..., “liberate them” and “unleash their strengths and talents” and who knows what happens “if you give people enough rope”? These formulations still represent the master’s way of thinking and doing something with “them”, and rendering “them” to passive objects. It’s not about shared, divided or distributed “power to the people” (so a leader gives 30% of her/his power away and keeps the remaining 70%), but about multiplied power (ideally 100% power for everyone contributing to leaders in every position) and truly powerful, active people!

It’s always revealing upon entering a new organization to learn how its members speak about themselves and their peers: do they call them/selves employees (an Industrial Age holdover that symbolizes one person working for another), co-workers, associates, allies, work partners, contributors, team members, team mates, organizational members, fellows, colleagues,

company citizens, or collaborators as people who are literally “working together” or simply staff?

A similar shift is taking place in the titles of working “entities”: do you call them business units (in machine jargon), work groups, peer groups, purpose-driven communities, teams, cells, circles or tribes?

Some organizations call themselves “a family” or refer to employees “family members”, despite them being neither a family business nor treating “their headcounts” in an amicable fashion.



Practical Ideas - Masters

- promote equality in formulations and in concrete actions
- reduce the organizational hierarchy and create a horizontal organization
- consider transforming the organizational pyramid in a circular network structure
- decentralize responsibility and accountability (instead of simply delegating tasks)
- reform the architectural reality in office buildings to express equality
- rethink your understanding of “empowerment”
- promote power with the organizational members, share it, multiply it
- use the formulation self-management when it’s about one person, and co-management when it’s about a whole team
- be carefully when using possessive pronouns and formulate more neutral, not indicating possessions or belonging, especially when you’re not a member of the group

- define together how colleagues want to be called in day-to-day work, documents and in PR material
- choose which term expresses your organizational structure of cooperation best



Machine

Since the industrial revolution and with the subsequent development of management theories by Taylor and Ford, machine terms and metaphors are still deeply embedded in our business language.

In his book “Reinventing Organizations”, Frédéric Laloux describes organizations as machines: “The engineering jargon we use to talk about organizations reveals how deeply (albeit often unconsciously) we hold this metaphor in the world today. We talk about units and layers, inputs and outputs, efficiency and effectiveness, pulling a lever and moving the needle, accelerating and hitting the brakes, scoping problems and scaling solutions, information flows and bottlenecks, reengineering and downsizing. Leaders and consultants design organizations. Humans are resources that must be carefully aligned on the chart, rather like cogs in a machine. Changes must be planned and mapped out in blueprints, then carefully implemented according to plan. If some of the machinery functions below the expected rhythm, it’s probably time for a “soft” intervention – the occasional team building – like injecting oil to grease the wheels.” (p. 28-29)

What else could be added to these abundant examples of machine and engineering terms in business, management and organizations? Additional expressions that I found are: the process starts with a pipeline of candidates and the concern for the optimal employee utilization within the chain, and taking stock of existing personnel. The top gear is concerned about the efficient use of tools and techniques and the uninterrupted functioning of the business units or silos, ideally operating like clockwork.

We are installed on the payroll and are part of the battery of employees. We fix the system (some even believe we are a system); we reverse-engineer, enroll, fine-tune and build solutions. We streamline work processes and operations according to linear chains of cause and effect. We track and monitor performance in standard units of measure and pin-down short-comings. We engineer... experiences, opportunities and our luck. Even music, entertainment, beauty, and food (amongst others) are created in “industries”.

Effective organizations are well-engineered economic engines driving change.

Why are we still stuck in the machine paradigm?
How can we help the organization to express itself fully as a living organism and network?

“But why would we want an organization to behave like a machine? Machines have no intelligence; they follow instructions given to them. They only work in the specific conditions predicted by their engineers. Changes in their environment wreak havoc because they have no capacity to adapt.

These days a different ideal of organizations is surfacing. We want organizations to be adaptive, flexible, self-renewing, resilient, learning, intelligent - attributes found only in living systems. The tension of our times is that we want our organizations to behave as living systems, but we only know how to treat them as machines.”

- Margaret Wheatley, 1996



Practical Ideas - Machine

- consciously choose co-creative terms and expressions and life-affirming language:
- potential expressions related to Living Systems / Organisms / Nature / Renewable Energies might include e.g. originate, create,

nourish, flourish, adapt transform, flow, soar; sustain, environment, variety, multitude, spectrum, array, kaleidoscope, commonwealth, commons, compassion, genuine, integrated, potential, incremental, etc.

- potential expressions inspired by the concepts of Interdependence / System Thinking might contain relational / relationships, complex/ity, chaordic, dynamic, experiment, local-, informal-, systemic, choice, proactive, etc.
- potential expressions referring to the Internet might consists of involve, engage, play, edit, modify, innovate, connect, network, belong/ing, participative, conscious, circular; cyclic, meaning/ful, freedom, open-, even, distributed, horizontal, smart, simple, etc.



Make-Do

It is striking to see how many authors in recent management literature use statements that imply that team members are passive objects: it's about “them” and “us” instead of “we”. The authors suggest to make and have them do..., manage them..., use them..., force them..., make them feel like..., get them working on..., let them... and push them... to their limits. While writing about new organizational models and so-called “self-management”, the authors are still coming from a traditional perspective, pretty much based on perspectives described above in the paragraph on Masters.

Passive workers who need external motivation, orders and pressure are very much in line with the Theory X formulated by Douglas McGregor (1960), ignoring Theory Y which constitutes the antidote to this view of human beings and describes a more humane, intrinsically motivated perspective.

Based on the Theory X tradition, managers have to acquire and use their leadership skills (understood in the traditional way) to make employees do something.

These passive formulations are not a sheer semantic phenomenon. They express the traditional power where employees “are given”, “are enabled”, or “it is ensured that they” etc. Even when recommendations are made to improve the situation, the wording still limits people to “be provided with opportunities” and “make” team members do something. These climax in requests to “put control in the hand of your people”, “emancipate employees” and to “rehumanize workplaces”. What about designing or transforming organizations to bring humanity back to workplaces in which employees govern and emancipate themselves?



Practical Ideas - Make-Do

- formulate actively using expressions such as e.g. initiate, consider, provide / offer, enable, encourage, be responsible, do
- express the responsibility
- double check words ending on -ize and replace them with something more life-giving
- reformulate e.g. by using the prefixes self- (for individuals), co-, inter-, peer-, peer-to-peer (P2P), poly-, and multi- and re-
- genuinely use expressions such as e.g. common, collective, cross, genuine, joint, mutual, participatory etc.



Money

It probably all started with Benjamin Franklin’s “Time is money.” The monetization of our life is expressed when we save or spend time, earn our living, cannot afford to have a rest, give credit to someone’s contribution, get emotionally invested, pay attention and even compliments.

At work we are considered assets or Human Capital bringing in our market value. Our relationships become Social Capital. We have a worth (avoid poor performance!) and a credibility that gets buy-in from our colleagues. And yes, we even have to earn trust. We take into account the interest of our key account clients, and bank on their needs. We capitalize on our ideas, strengths and service portfolio and hope our customers will buy into it. We mortgage our dreams for money, sell our soul to cover our cost of living (“everybody has a price tag”) and hope that this trade-off will pay-off. Otherwise it takes a toll on us and we’ll pay the price.

On a serious note as described by Charles Eisenstein in his book “Sacred Economics”: the terms “developed” and “developing world” were coined “having our current Western economic systems as the destination of other societies and countries’ “development”.” The one million dollar question is “Does this really pay?”.
What do you think: Will it be possible in the future to replace economy with econo-we?
And by the way: time is not money, time is time, lifetime to be more precise.



Practical Ideas - Money

- use monetary-related terms only when it makes sense within the context, otherwise reformulate your message until it truly expresses your life-giving intention
- double-check when you speak about the value and worth of persons and other living creatures and highlight their equal contribution
- read more on alternative finance systems and currencies e.g. the book “Sacred Economics” by Charles Eisenstein to get a deeper insight into the money economy



Machismo

While in announcements and invitations individuals are addressed as “Ladies and Gentlemen”, in most written material, we speak about “men and women”, “boys and girls”, “brothers and sisters”, “male and female”, “him- and herself” etc.

This practice might have its roots in publications, which used only the male version of words until the respective more gender-sensitive awareness was raised (to make a very long story short). Therefore it seems that the missing female term was simply added after the male term resulting in the common formulation cited above: “he and she” (ironically he for she is the title of a campaign by UNWomen aiming at gender equality www.heforshe.org), significant for many other publications on gender mainstreaming, kind of insensitive for their own conventional formulations and the power of their words).

Consequently this order is also used in official forms and questionnaires asking for titles “Mr” before “Mrs”,

“male” before “female”, when e.g. recruiting an Office Manager (m/f). And while speaking about Mrs, the question is if we still need “Ms” indicating the marital status of women only.

It’s also noteworthy that many employment or service contracts may speak in somewhat gender-neutral language about “the employee”, “the consultant” or “the service provider” and then continue with “he”, “him” and “himself” – a tradition which leaves many female employees and consultants puzzled and wondering who might “he” be – oh boy! Consequently many women refuse to sign these contracts and they request female contract versions, describing their work in something more universal than “manpower” and “man days”.

Once you get sensitized to this male-dominated management language, you will be surprised by “female landlords”, “female freshmen”, “female blue-collar workers”, etc. And what, for heaven sake, are “female heroes”? Interestingly enough we only speak about career women and working mums, whilst not even having an expression for career men and working dads. Welcome to the old boys’ club!

It’s amazing to realize that someone is considered the father of modern management, the father of a certain theory, the father of you name it, or even a forefather. Have you ever heard of someone being the mother of a theory or a concept or a foremother? And “customers are always king”, even if you’re the Queen.

Many companies are called “& Sons”, but do you know of any organizations with the name “& Daughters”, right? If so, I would highly appreciate if you could share their names and contact details with me.

In this context, having the world economic crisis in mind, one might wonder what had happened if Lehman Brothers had been Lehwomen Sisters... It’s all manmade.



Practical Ideas - Machismo

- change the order to women and men to make both visible
- consider using formulations like wo/men, s/he and fe/male which might even contribute to a better readability and highlight the order of evolution
- design forms and questionnaires so women and men are presented equally well
- use gender-neutral or fe/male versions of contracts
- treat everyone equally and equitably
- read more on the effect of women on business and promote the economic integration of women

to steal, to rob and to rip them off, maybe even to destroy or terminate and execute. “Headhunter” is a job title and head-shots are requested in a CV. Employees are seen as hired guns armed with... skills, using them to either shoot thoughts down, crunch numbers or make a killing. Even if they are caught in crossfire, a deadlock, a real dead-end, they still do their best to fight back and ensure the kill-off. Employees get a bloody nose, feel a gun to their head and the boss calls the shots. And even if they survived all of this, s/he still might fire them.

In this business environment it’s unclear who has the policing function (and when the word “policy” entered management language, anyway?). Someone might say “Don’t worry: no blood shed!”, while it’s also known that they take no prisoners. Truly competitive people die to win.

This crime scene of economic rivalry might look bloody normal, while from a development perspective it’s dead wrong.

What an unnecessary overkill, very likely we are shooting ourselves not only in the foot.



Mafia

It started with the term “deadline” (which has its origin in the prison camps of the American Civil War) and me wondering if it might be dangerous to hit it and consequently changing it to “due date” or “big day” whenever possible.

And then more “mafia speak” in management language appeared:

Some are so used to pulling the trigger, killing the enemy or competitor or crushing an idea that they aren’t afraid that this way of thinking and speaking might backfire. Employees with killer strengths are on the hunt for new business ideas and selling aggressively. Their boss shoots emails, holds people’s feet to the fire, lights a fire under employees, threatens and uses bully tactics. Brutally honest they expect them to beat the rival,



Practical Ideas - Mafia

- replace the term “deadline” with alternatives like e.g. “due date”, “big day”, etc.
- seriously reconsider the terms and expressions you use and choose a more social, fair and compassionate language.
- a great approach is Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Compassion originated by Marshall B. Rosenberg (1999).

Be an author of the future

This article has been born out of the experience of reading so many publications on future organizational and management models, which were still written in a rather traditional, conventional, dysfunctional language. One can only guess what destructive and detrimental effect this language has had on us, on how we manage and develop organizations and the world we live in.

Questions the 7Ms and this kind of language might evoke are:

1

Which attitudes about work are influenced by describing business-as-war?
Is collateral damage and a number of casualties acceptable?

2

What does the master perspective allow people in power to do in the name of achieving business glory?
Is it okay to treat workers as slaves?

3

Do you deal with the employees or team members in your organization as units, robots and numbers?
("If I knew their names, I would have sleepless nights!")

4

What do you "use" your employees for?

5

Does the "worth" you have for your organization say anything about your impact on the community?
Is it sufficient to comment on underpayment with "Well, that's the job they've chosen. They could have known better. Tough luck!"

6

What about all the gender-related differences?
Do you consider it economically viable to pay women one quarter less than men in similar positions?

7

Is it okay to promote an aggressive rat race, a competitive zero sum game and a dog-eats-dog atmosphere at work?

Organizations operating with these work styles and worldviews should warn new employees and team members...

The 7 Ms are intended to provide you with a concentrate of popular formulations used in today's management language. Hopefully reading these examples has been an eye-opening experience and has given you food for more thoughts.

Some questions you might want to ask yourself:

- What language do you use in your organization? Which terms are typical of your work environment?
- Can you spot which of the 7 Ms you are using more than others?
- Which words work effectively for you and your teams and which don't lead to the intended results?
- What would it be like to change the way you speak and write?
- Which expressions or areas of the 7 Ms would you start to change first?

When looking at the 7 Ms and their implicit messages, it's important to note that they could be easily transformed in [7 Cos of Progressive Organizational Language](#), expressing their constructive opposite pole and value:

Cooperation	Military
Co-Governance	Masters
Co-Creation	Machine
Collaboration	Make-Do
Common Wealth	Monetary
Companionship	Machismo
Compassion	Mafia

The words and expressions of this article (and many more) are collected in a word pool list. If you would like to add more words and expressions, you are very welcome to email them to the author of this article, by info@claudiagross.com

GO TO Word Pool List
<http://speak-green.com/glossary/>

The authors of the New York Times bestseller "Tribal Leadership" have highlighted in their book the importance of language for sustainable development: "If people change their words (...), they change their perception of reality (...). As they change their reality, their behavior changes automatically." And they continue by saying "If a tribe changes its language, it stays changed." Having this in mind, there is hope to become authors and creators of a better future by intentionally choosing a more life-affirming language. Adapting Mahatma Gandhi's famous quote, let's express the change we want to experience in this world, word-by-word.

Dr. Claudia Gross is both the founder of human-centered Organizational Governance promoting life at work, and the initiator of speakGreen which is offering a new emerging vocabulary that is providing a generative, constructive language for the future - both initiatives blended smoothly into each other for this article.

Find more information on both initiatives here:

www.hcOrG.com

<https://www.facebook.com/lifeatworkmovement>

www.speak-Green.com

<https://www.facebook.com/speakgreenmovement>

Feel invited to contact her by

info@claudiagross.com

Literature

Eisenstein, Charles (2011). Sacred Economics: Money, Gift, and Society in the Age of Transition. Evolver Editions.

Hamel, Gary (2012). What Matters Now: How to Win in a World of Relentless Change, Ferocious Competition, and Unstoppable Innovation. Jossey-Bass.

Laloux, Frédéric (2014). Reinventing Organizations: A Guide to Creating Organizations Inspired by the Next Stage of Human Consciousness. Nelson Parker.

Logan, Dave, King, John and Fischer-Wright, Halee (2008). Tribal Leadership: Leveraging Natural Groups to Build a Thriving Organization. Harper Business.

McGregor, Douglas (1960 / 2005). The Human Side of Enterprise: Annotated Edition. McGraw-Hill Publ. Comp.

Parker Follett, Mary (1925). Power. Presented first in a paper before a Bureau of Personnel Administration conference group in January 1925.

Reprinted from Elliott M. Fox and L. Urwick, eds. (1973). Dynamic Administration: The Collected Papers of Mary Parker Follett, pp. 66-87. London: Pitman.

Published by Graham, Pauline (1995). Mary Parker Follett: Prophet of Management: A Celebration of Writings from the 1920s. Beard Books.

Wheatley, Margaret J. and Kellner-Rogers, Myron (1996). The Irresistible Future of Organizing. Published here: <http://www.margaretwheatley.com/articles/irresistiblefuture.html>