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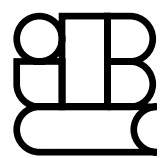
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How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work

How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work

Seven Languages
for Transformation

Robert Kegan

Lisa Laskow Lahey



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In memory of
William Graves Perry, Jr.

How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work

Introduction

What Do You Really Want . . . and What Will You Do to Keep from Getting It?

The late William Perry, a favorite teacher and precious colleague of ours at Harvard, was a gifted trainer of therapists, counselors, and consultants. “Whenever someone comes to me for help,” he used to say, “I listen very hard and ask myself, ‘What does this person really want—and what will they do to keep from getting it?’” This is a book about the possibility of extraordinary change in individuals and organizations. It locates an unexpected source of boundless energy to bring these changes into being.

As Bill’s wry words suggest, if we want deeper understanding of the prospect of change, we must pay closer attention to our own powerful inclinations *not* to change. This attention may help us discover within ourselves the force and beauty of a hidden immune system, the dynamic process by which we tend to prevent change, by which we manufacture continuously the antigens of change. If we can unlock this system, we release new energies on behalf of new ways of seeing and being.

As developmental psychologists bringing the field of adult learning to organizational life, we are best known for championing the idea that there is life after adolescence; that our mental development, unlike our physical development, does not *have to* end at age twenty; that we can keep growing and developing in adulthood (and not just put on weight). A rich mix of professional groups—educators and administrators at all levels, managers and management consultants, physicians, psychotherapists, judges,

and clergy—have afforded us unusual access to their deep-down inner purposes and puzzles. So when we are asked to consult or give counsel, it is nearly always because people know our focus is on the deeper, underlying changes in the way individuals and groups make meaning, rather than aiming for the immediate relief of symptoms or behavioral strategies to bring about short-term solutions.

Yet for all our occupational and preoccupational interest in the possibilities of transformation, we have developed a simultaneous fascination and respect for another aspect of our being, which can have the effect of *preventing* change. We have concluded that this dimension is not well understood in terms of “resistance,” or “denial,” or “fears,” or “defensiveness,” or “the shadow side of personality.” Of course, each of these accustomed understandings triggers a stance—typically with unhelpful effects—regarding this very aspect of our being: people tend to say “How can we *break down* resistance—our own or that of others? How can we *overcome* our defensiveness? *Reduce* our fear?” And so on. In this book, by means of a new technology for learning (a “mental machine,” in essence), we invite you into a novel and deeper understanding of this aspect of our being, one that is more respectful and consequently a more promising support to the miracle of individual and organizational change.

This book is for people interested in the possibility of their own transformational learning, as well as for people interested in supporting the transformational learning of others. We consider the second activity—widely practiced by helping professionals—an increasingly necessary feature of effective leadership, since nearly all leaders, in as dynamic a world as our own, are called upon to lead processes of change.

Leadership is a much more widely distributed and frequented activity than we are often given to believe. For every chief executive presiding at the top of some organization or enterprise, there are a thousand men and women called upon to exercise temporary or sustained leadership over a project or team within an organization. For every person assuming leadership because he or she sought to, planned to, and now does so as an extension of a long-crafted self-identity, there are countless others who lead because they were asked to; because “well, *somebody* has to”; because