

When Talk Ain't Cheap: Language Practice That Empowers Effective Agile Project Delivery

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Abstract

What is language and what has it got to do with project delivery, teams, and business success?

How we respond to this question depends on our fundamental view of language. Traditionally, we view language as a form of speaking (or writing) that describes a world which exists independently of our speaking. That is, we use language to tell ourselves and each other what we are observing in a world that is already given to us.

An alternate view of language – one which has made its mark in recent management thinking as it has in 20th Century philosophy – views language as that with which we create a world. That is, we use language to bring forth a world that is congruent with our commitments and intentions.

In this mini-workshop, we begin to examine the play of language in our day to day practices, and how we might begin to intentionally shape language such that, indeed, it is we who "use it", rather than "it using us". Through presentation, inquiry, and practice, we will

- Discover some of the most common – though often invisible – language practices which all-too-often derail projects and disempower teams;
- Design a set of new language practices which can help agile project leaders (Scrum Masters and Agile Coaches) and their teams amplify the benefits of agile delivery.

Along the way, we will, more generally, begin to develop a facility for seeing the power of language in creating worlds, whether in our work, in our communities, or in our personal lives.

Presenter Biography

As an organizational consultant and educator, Michael Hamman is committed to the transformation of organizations and of the workplace. Through rich dialog and inquiry, and through the collaborative design of actions in which people themselves transform their workplace, Michael helps organizations develop their own capacity for profound innovation and ongoing change.

Believing that authentic change can only happen where there is genuine choice, Michael specializes in working with executive leaders, line managers, and workers to create whole-system solutions that are not only transformative, but also sustainable.

As a Scrum Master, Michael has lead 5 Scrum projects, has trained and coached over 70 Scrum Masters, and in 2004 and 2005 was instrumental in helping to launch a large, highly successful, Scrum adoption initiative at Capital One. This went on to become one of the largest corporate Scrum adoptions in North America.

Michael has worked for over 15 years with organizations in business, academia, and government. Michael earned his Ph.D. in an interdisciplinary program which combined computer science, philosophy, and music composition.

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NOTE ON THESE NOTES:

*The following text is taken from index card notes used for an introductory workshop to language practice for agile teams. The workshop was conducted as an **inquiry**, a form of dialog in which a group of people together discover – more in the very process of questioning than in the presentation of concepts – something new. Though, in this text, I try to capture something of the feeling of inquiry, it really is a different experience.*

1. INTENTION OF THE WORKSHOP

Ken Schwaber refers to Scrum as “The Art of the Possible.” In this mini-workshop, we want to powerfully enable Ken’s prescription by considering how we use language.

The intention of this mini-workshop is to provide insight into language as practice, and to suggest some ways in which such an approach to language can help teams become more effective in committing to and delivering projects

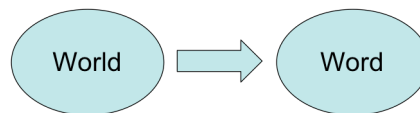
Here’s what I intend that we cover:

1. How language creates a world
2. How we might develop a relationship to language practice in which we can, through language, create a world that we want.
3. Some specific language practices that can help us do that:
 - a. Requesting
 - b. Promising
 - c. Acknowledging
 - d. Distinguish Assertion from Assessment
4. Linguistic ‘viruses’ that impede our ability to work effectively together.
5. What all of this has to do with project delivery.

2. LANGUAGE CREATES WORLDS

[NOTE: The following is offered for purpose of uncovering something – it is not The Truth (or even **A** truth). Rather, I offer some things to consider in order to engage a process of discovery]

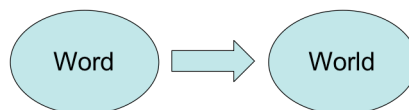
Each of us in modern society are born into a Cartesian paradigm. One product of this paradigm is a notion of language which regards the function of language as that which *describes* a given world. That is, the world comes first, followed by our descriptions, in language, of that world:



This notion applies to everything, from stones to feelings. For instance, when I say “I feel sad,” we understand it as a *description* of an emotional state. Or, we might say “that customer is uncooperative” and be comfortable in feeling that our statement describes the way that person *is*.

In our conversation today, we would like to consider another paradigm – not a *replacement* for the language-as-description paradigm (which as we’ll see later remains a crucial language paradigm) – but a *supplemental* way of thinking about, and relating to, language.

In this new paradigm, we want to consider that language creates a world. That is, our language (our words) come first, and from our language, the world then occurs for us:



An obvious example: for someone who is continuously resigned, the world (including their state of mind and their moods) usually occurs as hopeless and unfriendly. For someone who is more possibility-oriented, the world usually occurs as full of possibility.

However, this notion of language-as-creation can easily devolve into a kind of naïve, polly-anna view of the world in which “everything is possible if you just think it.”

So, we want to develop a more powerful relationship to the notion of language as that through which we might create a world. Before moving forward, I want to state that what we are talking about – that language is that through which we create a world – is not

some new 21st century paradigm shift. In fact, it is something we already always do: In the domain of our work, of our concerns, of our technology, what it is to be human is to create our world through language.

Our notions of organizations, of technology, of societies all got created in language. The problem is is that most of that stuff got created before we were born: we just happened along into that which was already created in language (our culture, our paradigms of thinking, our 'mental models'). As a consequence of our just happening along into that which was already created, we fail to see, for the most part, that it got created. For us, for the most part, the world (organizations, relationships, technology, etc.) just is.

What we want to begin to investigate today is how we might begin to take ownership of our capacity to create the project and organizational reality in which we work. To do this, we'll need to do a bit of work, and a bit of thinking together!

3. DISTINCTION

We want to begin at a kind of beginning of language. Not linguistics, etc. But a beginning of language practice (remember: none of this is 'true' – we're simply creating an experiment in language to see what we might discover as a language practice).

We begin with the notion of “**distinction.**”

Here is a provisional definition of Distinction which we make solely for the purpose of this conversation:

A distinction is a language construct that opens a new way of relating to reality because reality is experienced differently for the person realizing the distinction.

Consider for instance the distinction “balance.” For the reader who rides a bicycle, you may recall that moment when you were first learning to ride a bike – that moment when you *got* balance.

Try to recall that experience now.

Notice **where** balance occurs, and where it doesn't occur. It doesn't occur in your mind. Nor does it occur in your feelings, per se (though you may have experienced a feeling of exhilaration). Nor does it occur exclusively in your body.

Where balance occurs is in *the occurring of the world*, in real time. That is, yes it occurs in our body (and our mind to some extent); but it also occurs in how the world is moving, how the bike is wobbling, how our arms and legs are adjusting to this real-time occurrence of the world.

Again, recall that moment when you first got balance and try to recall **where** it occurred.

Now recall our provisional definition of *Distinction*:

A distinction is a language construct that “opens a new way of relating to reality because reality is experienced differently for the person realizing the distinction.”

Note, by the way, that even though you may have gotten balance at that moment, you hadn't yet mastered it (you still no doubt fell down a lot, or nearly did so). However, you could not have mastered balance on the bike without having first had that experience of “getting” the Distinction called “balance.”

A number of distinctions enable us to ride a bike – that is to cope with the world as it occurs while riding a bike. Some of these could be steering, speeding up, slowing down, etc. (can you think of others?).

Consider that we relate to distinctions in terms of what's happening at any given moment – that is, in terms of our capacity to effectively cope with what's happening now... and now ... and now.

Consider further that distinguishing is a way of relating to language in which we become empowered to cope with the occurring world – that distinguishing brings forth a new domain of action and effect – that it brings into being that which was hitherto either unknown or non-existent.

For instance, consider the role Product Owner. Product Owner distinguishes a set of relationships, actions, and effects that were not clearly distinguished before; which relationships, actions, and effects brings into existence a new way of working on a project and within an organization. Similarly, the role Scrum Master distinguishes a way of managing a team which supports various kinds of relationships, actions, and effects that allow the team to become self-organizing.

As such, we can begin to think of Scrum as having introduced a body of distinctions that help software development organizations get work done in a new way – in a way that can more effectively respond to a world in which change is happening more and more rapidly. A body of distinctions that help us *cope* with an accelerated world of product development and business demands.

(NOTE: Consider that when something is consistently and repeatedly not working, what's missing is a new distinction)

4. DECLARATION

One of the things we'll be doing today, is bringing out attention to certain distinctions *in language*.

One such distinction: **Declaration**.

An act in language by which act a new future is generated, and in which the actor is, in some way, authorized (through social practice or cultural delegation) to act in this particular way.

“Declarations make the future happen at the moment of speaking.”

- E.g. “I now pronounce you husband and wife.”
- Jury declares the defendant innocent or guilty.
- The umpire declares – “calls” – it a strike. (1. “There’s balls and there’s strikes and I call ‘em the way they are.” 2. “There’s balls and there’s strikes and I call ‘em the way I see them.” 3. There’s balls and there’s strikes and they ain’t nothin’ until I call them.”

Declarations aren’t true in the factual sense – they are either *valid* or *invalid*.

In order for a declaration to have its power, the one declaring must be granted some kind of *authority*.

Such authority could be granted institutionally (e.g. the minister of justice of the peace, the empowerment of a jury through legal protocol and the backing of a judge).

Is institutional authority the sole basis for authorizing a declaration? What else might there be?

For instance, if I declare that “Our team will reduce defects by 20% in the next release”, what must be the basis for making this declaration? What would grant the team authority to make such a declaration? What must their relationship to language be?

In order for our declaring to be capable of truly creating a future, we have to relate to language as if “Talk Ain’t Cheap.”

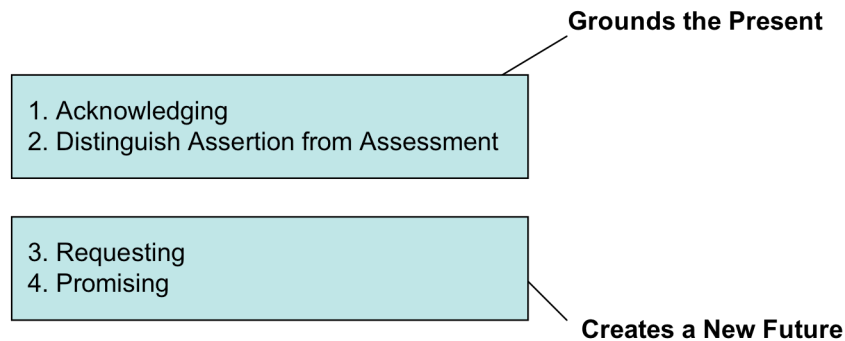
We will need to develop a relationship to language – with our word – in which what we say will be WILL BE.

This brings a powerful level of authority to what we declare. To have this relationship to language requires a discipline of practice.

6. LANGUAGE PRACTICES

Consider that to have such a relationship to language requires that we adopt specific language practices. These are among a set of practices which, when they form the basis for ongoing and disciplined practice, can help you and your team begin to create a powerful relationship with language. A relationship to language in which it becomes possible to begin to generate a reality through our speaking and listening.

Four language practices we want to distinguish today:



Acknowledging and Distinguishing Assertion from Assessment grounds the present.
Requesting and Promising creates a new future.

Though we have not yet talked about it, it is crucial to the integrity of language practice to note that we cannot create a new future unless we are able to ground ourselves in the present.

*This is the foundation of integrity necessary to be as our word – that what we say will be WILL BE. For instance, for team members to make the declaration “50% reduction in defects for next release”, those team members have to have the capacity to tell the brutal truth – ongoingly -- about what is currently the case. Without this capacity, the foundation for their declaration will be shaky, and the likelihood of delivering on the declaration will be low. **Of course, this is also one of the fundamental principles of Scrum!***

LANGUAGE PRACTICE #1: ACKNOWLEDGING

- Telling the truth – declaring what’s so, even when it’s uncomfortable to do so.
- Makes that which is otherwise *invisible*, visible.
- When acknowledging another person, can literally ‘create’ that person as that given by the acknowledgement. (Oftentimes, we don’t know how others see us;

acknowledgement, particularly affirmative acknowledgement, gives the other who they are).

Acknowledging, like promising, has a lot of cultural baggage, mostly associated for people with shame. However in the right environment, when team members acknowledge something they didn't do (which they agreed to do), or acknowledge something they did do (which is in some way out of integrity for that person, team, or organization), not only are people informed about things they need to be informed about. But there is also something that happens for us as individuals when we 'come clean' so to speak: it's easier to let go of it and then move on. Oftentimes people hold on to these things, which has the effect of having a lot of baggage around.

Agile coaches can help teams immensely by supporting this kind of acknowledging.

The other aspect of acknowledging is to acknowledge **another**. For instance, "Ken, I acknowledge you for how you handled that interaction with Barbra – you really listened to her and didn't try to convince her of your point of view...." Such acknowledgement is designed to help people see positive aspects of themselves which they may not otherwise see. It is another way – a very important way – of making visible what is otherwise invisible.

LANGUAGE PRACTICE #2: DISTINGUISHING ASSERTION FROM ASSESSMENT

That is: distinguishing fact from story.

An **ASSERTION** is a statement for which I'm prepared to provide evidence. The evidence – and the assumptions on which it is based -- I provide must, in some way, be acceptable to those in the community where the assertion is being made. And it must be open to discussion: the assertion must be testable.

An **ASSESSMENT**, by contrast, is a statement of opinion, judgment, or evaluation. It is a kind of declaration that says how the world (or some part of it) is for us. Assessing is a nearly constant way of being for most of us: we're constantly assessing whether something is good or bad, whether we agree, whether we like it, whether it's right or wrong. Most of this goes on internally, in each of us. It forms the 'background' in which events and people in the world occur.

As a form of declaration which is *unacknowledged* (see above), assessments give us little power. They are particularly toxic in organizations when they are stated as though they are assertions. For instance, I might say "Nathan is not a team player" would be an assessment, whereas statements like "Nathan broke the build 4 times this week," "Nathan has missed 3 of the 4 Scrums this week," etc. are more clearly statements of fact.

Dysfunctional teams are very good at mistaking assessments for assertions. Members on these teams will have what you might call an 'always-already' assessment of so-and-so or such-and-such. So-and-so "doesn't get it" or "so-and-so" is *resisting*. In my experience with these teams, it takes a lot of work to help them see that what they might swear is true about so-and-so, is an assessment, not an assertion. And, moreover, such assessments usually say more about the team, and the dynamics in which it works, than it does about the person being assessed.

LANGUAGE PRACTICE #3: REQUESTING

A request is specific as to **what** and **by-when**. The **what** needs to be clearly articulated, and the by-when needs to be specific (e.g. "This Friday by 3:00pm").

A request is either accepted, declined, or counter-offered. Accepting a request means that the one accepting it is committing to delivering that specific request (what and by-when).

A request is different from an invitation (How?)

LANGUAGE PRACTICE #4: PROMISING

Consider: A promise is the declaration to take a specific course of action, the taking of which generates a new future, both for the person making the promise and those who may be impacted by the fulfillment of the promise.

For example: The promise "we as a team promise to deliver the next iteration with zero defects" is, for a team that already has zero defects, closer to a prediction than it is to a promise. By contrast, the promise "We as a team promise to deliver this next iteration with zero defects" given by a team whose project is plagued by defects calls that team to a very different level of performance.

This can be, admittedly, a rather controversial notion of promise, which deserves a lot more attention and consideration than we can give it in this short presentation. But it gets to the heart of what we were talking about before about declarations requiring a relationship to our word. Promising, in the way we're talking about it here, is a language practice that requires lots of practice! Part of the reason for this is that in our culture we've been beaten down regarding broken promises and therefore have learned to treat promises more like predictions in order to avoid repeating those unpleasant experiences.

However, as a *practice*, it is possible to support teams using promising as a path toward high performance and joyful collaboration.

7. LINGUISTIC 'VIRUSES'

What are some of the language practices you more commonly see on your projects? That is, how do people make requests? Promises? Do people declare breakdowns, or do they wait until they become problems?

In his book *You Are What You Say*, Matthew Bud used the term 'linguistic viruses' to describe language practices that make us less effective and less able to cause things to happen.

Here are some of the linguistic practices I commonly observe on teams, and in organizations more generally:

1. Not making requests (hoping they'll just do what they 'know' they should do)
2. Making unclear or weakly articulated requests (E.g. not specific as to time, and conditions of satisfaction), (e.g. "I wonder if you might think about doing x.").
3. Accepting a request, even when you aren't clear about it, or when it is not clearly given.
4. Making promises that are really predictions
5. Making impossible promises (wishful thinking)
6. Breaking promises without communicating it cleanly.
7. Stating an assessment as though it is an assertion (fact)
8. Not acknowledging mistakes or breakdowns (keeping things invisible)
9. Not acknowledging each other on your team or the others you work and collaborate with.
10. Using words like 'always' and 'never' to describe other people (e.g. "You're always doing that...").

8. FURTHER READING, ETC.

Much of the thinking reflected in this workshop comes from:

- Fernando Flores
- John Searle
- Martin Heidegger
- Werner Erhard
- Hans-Georg Gadamer
- Newfield Network
- Landmark Education

Here are some books you might want to consult:

1. Winograd, T., Flores, F., *Understanding Computers and Cognition*: Addison Wesley, 1986.
2. Solomon, R., Flores, F., *Building Trust in Business, Politics, Relationships, and Life*: Oxford University Press, 2001.
3. Budd, M., Rothstein, L., *You Are What You Say: A Harvard Doctor's Six-Step Proven Program for Transforming Stress Through the Power of Language*: Crown Publishers, 2000.
4. Seiler, A., *Coaching to the Human Soul: Ontological Coaching and Deep Change*: Newfield Australia, 2003.
5. Argyris, C., *Overcoming Organizational Defenses: Facilitating Organizational Learning*: Allyn and Bacon, 1990.
6. Senge, P., *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*: Currency Doubleday, 1990. [Especially the section on Mental Models]