

leading  
through language

choosing words that  
influence  
and inspire

bart egnal

WILEY

# **Leading Through Language**

**Choosing Words That Influence and  
Inspire**

**Bart Egnal**

WILEY

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*Dedicated to  
my wife, Emily Mather, and my son, Kye Egnal,  
whose words and love inspire me every day.*

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## **PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

In March of 2014 I received a cold call from a literary agent, Brian Wood, who wanted to talk to me about the possibility of writing a book. In a to-the-point style I have come to appreciate, Brian dispensed with pleasantries and said, "I'll get right to the point - I've read your writing about leadership communication online, and you should write a book."

I politely told Brian that while I was flattered, the timing wasn't good. After all, just three months ago my life had changed drastically: I had just assumed the CEO role of The Humphrey Group, I had relocated my family from Vancouver (where I had been running our Western Canadian operations for five years) back to Toronto, and we had just moved into a new house and were settling in. I hadn't even gotten my first 90 days in! But Brian was not to be deterred, and he suggested a quick chat when he was next in town. I accepted, and as our meeting drew closer, I mulled over the possibility of writing a book. I started to realize there were some compelling reasons to consider proceeding.

First was the ability to share our intellectual capital with a much broader audience. Having spent over a decade at The Humphrey Group, I had developed a greater passion for our unique leadership communications methodology; over and over clients told us that it demystified the critical skill of inspirational speaking. They loved the practicality and how it could be applied to virtually any interaction. And frequently they told us (because most were executives or senior leaders), "I wish I'd had this earlier in my career!" A book would allow us to provide our intellectual capital not just to those with an executive training budget or a



company focused on leadership development; it would be accessible to anyone who had a few hours and a passion for communication.

Second, I knew a book would be a boon to our clients and the broader discourse of leadership communication because our Founder, Judith Humphrey (who is also my mother), had recently written *Speaking as a Leader: How To Lead Every Time You Speak*, and it had been very well received. Over and over clients told us it gave them an easily accessible look at the fundamentals of inspirational speaking. They bought and shared copies with their colleagues and direct reports. And it wasn't just clients who loved the book – we regularly had people all over the world write in and ask to work with us because of the book, or simply to share with us how it had made a difference for them. Building on the foundation Judith had laid with *Speaking as a Leader* was an exciting possibility.

Third, I was excited about writing a book because it could afford me the chance to continue “coaching” even as I took on the CEO role. While Judith's vision had been to create The Humphrey Group over 25 years ago, my vision was to grow the firm. With her support I had moved to Vancouver and spent five years hiring and building our team. Our business had expanded dramatically, from a company with an office in Toronto and a few employees to a global business with offices in Toronto, Vancouver, Calgary, and Mexico City and with nearly 50 people who today deliver training around the world. When I became owner and CEO in January 2014, I fulfilled a life-long dream to carry on Judith's legacy. Yet, in only three short months I was already realizing that the demands of the CEO role would increasingly take me away from individual coaching and training; writing a book was a way to reach out and continue to help others develop their ability to lead and inspire.

So, when Brian arrived in Toronto for our meeting, I had come around to the idea and was ready to proceed. In June of 2014 I retreated to my in-laws' cottage on Georgian Bay, about two hours north of Toronto, to prepare the book proposal. Away from Wi-Fi and even cell phone reception, this was to be the first of many productive writing retreats. Free from distractions (except my road bike, which I'd ride for a few hours each day to take a brain break), I penned the proposal that Brian then shopped to publishers, which, six months later, led to Wiley offering me a contract to publish the book you are now holding in your hands.

Though my name goes on the front cover, *Leading Through Language* was really authored by so many individuals inside and outside of The Humphrey Group.

I owe a debt of thanks to Judith Humphrey, our Founder, for creating not only The Humphrey Group but also the intellectual capital that remains the foundation of the work we do today. She taught me how to think, write, and speak clearly, and to help others do the same. Her willingness to provide clear guidance and coaching to our clients served as a shining example to me as I built my own relationships with executives. And her own writing – *Speaking as a Leader* and now her new book *Taking the Stage* – was proof that I could produce a book of my own. I was fortunate to have her assistance when writing the chapter on rhetoric, an area where she brings deep expertise.

This book also draws on the collective wisdom, experience, and expertise of my colleagues at The Humphrey Group. For nearly 15 years it has been my great privilege to work with and learn from each of them. From the day I joined the firm, they have invested their time in teaching me about leadership communication, and I continue to learn from them to this day. Writing a book is tremendously time-consuming, and I would like to thank the members of my

management team – Rob Borg-Olivier, Jessica Young, and Aram Arslanian – for their support and understanding when I couldn't be present because I had to meet another writing deadline. I'd like to thank the members of our administrative team who helped in innumerable ways: Melissa Wilson, who put in a huge amount of work on interview transcripts, research, and overall project management; Niamh Farrelly, who was the only member of our firm to read the proposal; Emily Hemlow and Margo Gouley, whose keen copy-editing eyes were invaluable in making sure there were no mistakes in the text; and Kaylee Saloranta, whose research on visionary leaders uncovered some fine examples I was able to incorporate at the eleventh hour.

Many people outside our firm made invaluable contributions as well. At the heart of this book are over 50 hours of interviews I conducted with executives, managers, doctors, lawyers, professional athletes, and thought leaders. Their collective willingness to spend their time and open their minds to me led to a rich set of examples – and to a deeper understanding of how leaders use language to inspire action in a wide variety of workplaces. You will read quotations, all used with permission, from many of those whom I interviewed.

I'd like to thank Emily Alonzo, Michael Barry, Les Dakens, Bruce Derragh, Jorina Elbers, Chuck Fallon, Martha Fell, David Gibbons, Margo Gouley, Robert Gouley, Guy Jarvis, Dane Jensen, John King, Almis Ledas, Frederic Lesage, Toms Lokmanis, Geoff Lyster, Jeff Medzegian, Michael Morrow, Geri Prior, Steve Reid, Jay Rosenzweig, Serge Roussel, Anne Sado, Daniel Skarlicki, Phillip Smith, Bruno Sperduti, Marcella Szel, Anna Tudela, Susan Uchida, Greg Wells, and Darren Yaworsky for their time, wisdom, and belief in this book.

This book was made possible only because Brian Wood, my agent, read my writing and used the language of leadership (direct, confident, and authentic!) to inspire me to take on the project. It was also made possible because Karen Murphy at Wiley said “yes” to the proposal and believed the book should be written. Thanks to both of you for believing in me.

The team at Wiley has been a pleasure to work with. Thanks go to Judy Howarth, Tiffany Colon, and everyone else at Wiley who provided support through the whole project.

I also had a local editor, Beth McAuley, who got the manuscript into top shape before I sent it off to Wiley. Her excellent editing allowed me to focus on the writing process. Thanks for being a crucial second set of eyes.

This book would not have been written without my father, Marc Egnal, a gifted writer and accomplished historian. Through high school, university, and in my early career he taught me how to write with clarity and precision. His many years of advice and patient guidance served me well when it came time to write this book.

Finally, deepest thanks have to go to my wife, Emily Mather. Over the year that this book was written she endured countless writing retreats and even consented to being interviewed. But more importantly, she provided tremendous moral support and encouragement. My wife has always been someone whose positive, caring, supportive words have inspired me to excel. She is my sounding board, coach, and the love of my life.

*Leading Through Language* has been a pleasure to write. It has created a deeper and more nuanced set of beliefs about language, which will lead to more effective coaching and teaching at The Humphrey Group. It has also reconnected

me with our intellectual capital in ways that renewed my love of our work. I hope you enjoy reading this book as much as I enjoyed writing it.

If this is your first experience with The Humphrey Group, I'd encourage you to connect with us so you can continue to build your leadership communication skills. We are online at [www.thehumphreygroup.com](http://www.thehumphreygroup.com). You can follow our firm on Twitter at @THG\_Inc and you can follow me at @THG\_Bart.

And now, *Leading Through Language...*

# INTRODUCTION

After 15 years of coaching executives and managers on how to communicate as leaders, I have reached a simple conclusion: jargon in the business world is getting in the way of effective leadership. Now, I could tell you why I believe this, but instead let me share with you three stories that illustrate this reality.

## STORY 1: “AM I BEING FIRED?”

My first story begins with a simple question posed to me two years ago by Jessica, a friend of mine who worked as a director of sales in a mid-size Canadian technology company: “Do you think I am being fired?”

She'd called me up for advice on a Friday afternoon because she had just had a very confusing conversation with her boss. She had been called into a meeting to discuss her group's performance, which she admitted was lagging due to the low performance of some of her sales reps. She had grown unhappy in the role and had been contemplating a move, but hadn't told anyone yet.

After 30 minutes of seemingly productive dialogue with her boss about how to make changes to her team to improve sales, she was feeling better. Then her boss said, “Well Jessica, we have to wrap up, and I'm glad we talked because we need to be aligned on our human capital strategy on a go-forward basis.”

Jessica paused, unsure of what to say to this, or even what it meant.

Her boss continued, “Look, I know your personal blue-sky growth plan sees you growing with an organization that's a

segment leader, and while we hope we'll get there, we're not sure when. I appreciate that, and as we rightsize our workforce, we're prepared to release you to the market to support you realizing your potential.”

He then glanced at his watch, said he needed to run, and left the room without giving her a chance to respond. She sat in stunned silence, trying to decipher what she'd just been told. At which point she called me. Was she being fired with cause? Offered a severance package? Or simply being asked if she was planning to leave in the near future?

## **STORY 2: “WE WANT HER OFF OUR ACCOUNT TEAM”**

My second story begins over coffee with Jeff, a senior partner at an international consulting firm. Jeff was based in Chicago but worked globally. I had gotten to know him when he and I were both hired by the same client and partnered to prepare an important board presentation. Now it was years later and we were catching up while Jeff was in Toronto to see another client. We were talking about talent development and Jeff was bemoaning the inability of his up-and-coming analysts and associates to instill confidence in clients when he brought them to meetings. I asked him to give me an example.

“Just last week, I brought Sandra, one of the brightest minds on my team, to a crucial meeting with Railway X. Railway X is an existing client with whom we are hoping to expand our work over the coming years. Sandra had already been doing great work for this client. She has an MBA from Stanford. She can build a financial model with her eyes closed. And she'd been doing the legwork for several months on the needs assessment for this client, and had built the model that was integral to our

recommendations. In the presentation I wanted to make sure she was front and center because, if we won the engagement, she would be leading the delivery team and working closely with the client.

“After I set the stage, I asked Sandra to explain our findings. It was – pardon the pun – a train wreck. She started off by saying, ‘Well, I’m not sure why I’m here because this was a real team effort but I guess someone has to share the results. And I should qualify what I’m about to present by saying these are just our conclusions and we could be wrong. But we do think there is maybe an opportunity to strip \$20M in costs out. Still, I’ll defer to Jeff on this one because he’s really the guy with deep expertise on the transportation sector.’

“The upshot of this,” he continued, “was that they immediately lost all confidence in her and turned to me for the rest of the presentation. But I hadn’t done the detailed work she had and so wasn’t able to provide the substantive answers they needed. In the end, we didn’t get the work, and they also told me they wanted Sandra off their account for our existing business because she seemed too junior.”

## **STORY 3: “WHAT EXACTLY ARE YOU SAYING?”**

Recently, I was invited by one of my clients, the CEO of a small but highly successful investment management firm, to sit in on his weekly leadership team meeting in Toronto. He asked me to take notes and then comment on the effectiveness of each presenter.

The meeting began with a young but senior asset management executive going on and on about how great their U.S. office in Boston was. He then paused for effect and summarized: “So, you see, it’s essential that we



leverage Boston on a go-forward basis if we are going to grow AUM.”<sup>1</sup> The audience looked around at one another, at him, and then again at one another. After about 10 seconds of silence someone started clapping, convinced the matter was mercifully closed.

I knew I was supposed to sit quietly, but if no one else would ask, then I would. I put my hand up and said, “Excuse me, what exactly does it mean to leverage your Boston office?”

The speaker fixed me with a puzzled stare, and then silently appealed to his CEO for help. When the CEO looked back at him with a blank look, the young executive realized no help would be forthcoming. He turned back to me, and with a deflated tone replied, “Well, I don't exactly know, but there must be something good we can do with them.”

## **THE RAMIFICATIONS OF JARGON**

These three stories have one thing in common: the language being used was getting in the way of leadership.

In the first story, Jessica's boss was unable to tell her directly that he didn't think she had what it took to develop her team, and that he was going to offer her a severance package. He used baffling corporate-speak to avoid telling her the truth, and he hoped that he could get her instead to resign and “pursue other opportunities.” Neither happened, and the result was three months of tension followed by a termination and litigation.

In the second story, Sandra's technical brilliance and expertise were undermined by her weak and self-deprecating language. The client could not see past her projected lack of confidence to the value she could deliver, and lost all confidence in her. Sandra's linguistic minimization was not only detrimental in this interaction,

but, as Jeff told me, ultimately held her back from advancing to partner, where her skills and sharp mind would have easily been the equal of others.

In the third story, the young asset management executive was using jargon to mask the reality that he hadn't developed anything of substance to share with his colleagues. The result was that his audience was confused, could not understand what he was saying, and ultimately felt a lack of confidence in his ability to play a growing leadership role in the firm.

## **JARGON IS EVERYWHERE IN THE WORKPLACE**

I wish I could say that these examples of linguistic ambiguity, self-minimization, and corporate jargon are isolated incidents, but they are anything but. In my 15-year career as a leadership communication coach, and now as the CEO of a firm whose sole purpose is to help our clients communicate as leaders, I am repeatedly confronted by individuals whose use of language confuses and alienates their audiences while undermining their ability to lead.

*The Concise Oxford English Dictionary* defines language in two distinct ways:

1. The method of human communication, either spoken or written, consisting of the use of words in a structured and conventional way.
2. The system of communication used by a particular community or country.

Implicit in these definitions is that language is used by people to communicate ideas in a way that is understood by the audience. It is the choice to use both a *structured* and

*conventional* set of words that allows both speaker and audience to grasp the ideas being expressed. It is a common system, chosen by a *community* or *country* to communicate together.

Yet, as anyone who has worked in the corporate world (or in government or the not-for-profit sector) can tell you, language is seldom a path to clarity. Instead, if asked to define language, most tenured corporate workers might describe it as follows:

- A jargon-filled, often baffling set of words, some of which actually exist and others which are constructed to demonstrate superiority and knowledge at the expense of the audience.
- A collection of empty clichés and confusing buzzwords that distract the audience from the lack of clear thinking being expressed by the speaker.
- A hieroglyphic-like amalgamation of acronyms and technical terms that few can decipher without consulting a corporate anthropologist.

As I've seen words and expressions like “synergies,” “leveraging,” “net-net,” “disintermediation,” and “core competencies” start overtaking words that can actually be found in *The Concise Oxford* or in *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary*, I've asked myself a few questions. Namely:

- Why is this happening?
- What is the impact of using these words?

And, perhaps most importantly:

- What can be done about it?

The short answer to these questions is that jargon, buzzwords, and corporate-speak usually exist because of a dearth of clear, powerful thinking. The impact of this language is that audiences are left confused, alienated, and uninspired. The solution is to use the language of leadership.

What is the language of leadership? Simply put, it is language that clearly and powerfully brings your ideas to life for your audience.

I chose to write this book to show you why you need the language of leadership and to teach you how to leverage the tools you'll need to reach your stakeholders – or, in plain English, to use words that engage and inspire everyone you speak with or write to.

# **IF YOU WANT TO LEAD AT WORK, THIS BOOK IS FOR YOU**

This book is written for anyone who wants to lead in the workplace.

If you are an executive who wants to inspire your organization to embrace your vision for the future and bring it to life, this book is for you. It will show you how to articulate that vision with words that energize your employees.

If you are a manager who aspires to help your team realize its potential, this book is for you. It will show you how to be purposeful when you speak to your team, and to use authentic, positive language that will enable you to reach and motivate your people.

If you are a technical expert who wants your ideas to be heard and acted upon, this book is for you. It will show you how to present your recommendations with language that is direct, passionate, and jargon-free. In short, this book is not just written for CEOs – it is written for anyone in the workplace who has ideas they believe in and wants those ideas to inspire others.

At The Humphrey Group, our mission is to help our clients lead every time they speak. We believe that leadership is not based on title or number of direct reports, but rather on a person's ability to inspire others to follow. We also believe that this ability to inspire is not innate but rather a skill that can be learned, developed, and mastered.

If you want to learn this skill, this book is written for you. It will show you how to consciously and deliberately define and communicate your ideas using jargon-free language that will engage and motivate others.