Navigating the Corporate Vocabulary (Knowledge Management, Part 5)

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Please note: This transcript has been edited for clarity.

> *Words matter. We use words to help share understanding and get things done, but words can also be an impediment. I am sure you have been in organizations where there is a lot of jargon, words, acronyms, idioms, and other constructs that mean something to members but little and nothing to anyone else. Jargon can be used to include and exclude, but that's the obvious case. Less obvious is the way organizations can miscommunicate using just basic terms. Consider 'fairness.' We all probably have a similar idea of what fairness means, but if we try to get everyone in an organization to describe their definition of it, many will struggle because it isn't a concrete term and few will define it the same way. So, when we try to make sense of the corporate knowledge of an organization, to what extent must we also make sense of the corporate vocabulary?*

> *My name is Tom Galvin and these are my Reflections on Management.*

So this is the first meta-narrative that I'm going to describe in full detail. This is the taxonomic meta-narrative, and the taxonomic meta-narrative is the story on how the organization uses language, uses its terms in order to convey meaning, and to describe what it considers to be the ideal experience of the members. Or of the customer or whoever external stakeholders that the organization is dealing with. It's amazing how easy it is to miscommunicate using basic terms. *Fairness* is one I gave in the introduction. Things like *readiness*, which is a term that everybody understands -- or is capable of creating a mental image of what readiness is or what it means to be ready to do something or to be prepared.

But unfortunately, the bureaucracy treats terms as requiring some degree of accuracy in how a term is defined so that rules, procedures, norms can be established, understood, shared, and promulgated throughout an organization. What I found is that within the organization you can have different departments or different communities of practice or different hierarchical layers who each have their own way of defining a particular term or applying it in their work. Which then means that one department struggles with communicating to another department. Or if you're talking about something that's across an industry, maybe the organizations within an industry carry different meanings to the same words. [This] can create confusion or an inability to see the same situation in the same way, [which] is sometimes … worse.

I've had experiences in transitions of leadership where a leader will come into an organization and will have their own ideas of what words mean and how they are accustomed to using those words. And they will try very hard to impose them on the organization, [to] say that "my" words are more important than how the words are used, or "my" use of those words are more important than the way

it's ordinarily used in the organization. And they try to do this perhaps through staff meetings to say (maybe not so directly), but this is basically when I say my particular pet phrase, this is what it means. And in a way try to expect that that the leader's use of those terms is what's going to be parroted throughout the organization, especially with external stakeholders, but also internally, and expect that everybody is going to kind of toe the line and that it will just naturally permeate and become the norm.

The trouble is, of course, that words matter at the local level, and if the leaders' use of terminology is different from what is salient for a particular function or a particular division or department, then it's going to either be resisted. Or the ordinary use of the word is going to continue to be used because that's what everybody expects. And even those within the inner circle who are kind of expected to be able to carry the leader's message may not themselves be totally comfortable with the leader's use of the terminology. And so, they may parrot the words, but they may not be as successful as conveying the meaning or not delivering the message authentically. It leaves questions open in the minds of some -- *well, what is really being said, or do they really believe the words that they're saying?* So this is a big challenge and … when I think about the challenges I've had in my various consulting efforts, or when I think about engaging with a diverse body of students who come from different experiences, language, the common terms really can get in the way.

And you hope that you can set up an environment of dialogue that allows for the uncovering of these different perspectives through different uses of words or different meanings attached to the same words. When I talk about a taxonomic meta-narrative now, what I'm basically talking about then is the sum total of the vocabulary being used and how it influences the organization's behavior, how it influences the organizational structure because it's a lens into the current state of the organization. And when I talked in the previous episode about going into an organization to observe or consult or advise, you know, the first thing I want to do is I want to make sense of what I'm seeing around me or what I'm hearing, especially what I'm hearing. What are the words that are being used and how does that help me describe the current state of the organization? And if I sense that there's confusion or there's a lack of commitment towards the way that certain ideas are expressed, I find that very, very interesting.

You know, in a school setting, just exposing the challenge of language and the challenge of the use of words is an important first step. And so what I thought I would do is [show you something]. For my students for many years I'd come up with an icebreaker that is specifically designed to highlight these challenges. It's been successful enough and it's simple enough. I think that it can really help. I mean, for me, I think it's not just demonstrating the challenge of language. It's also a good way to begin to exercise the sort of open, collaborative environment that we want. And this is fresh in my mind because by the time that this gets released, I will have done this exercise for the eighth time. So I'm going to describe it. I'll have the instructions for it in a sheet on the website. And you're free to use it.

It's a four-part exercise. And you can just imagine that if this is for a group of anywhere from, say, 12 to 20 to 24 people, this would be pretty easy to do. I haven't tried it with a larger group, but I probably will at some point. But let's just say it's just somewhere between 12 and 24 people. And you

want to have the room set up where you can easily have groups of four get together. It's a four -art exercise. And here's how it works:

The first part, what I do is I start at the individual level and each individual, everybody is given 3 minutes of silence. And what they are to do is to reflect, take notes, whatever they want to do. And they are going to come up with their personal definition of leadership. So if you want to do this yourself, try it out. I'll let you get 5 seconds of silence so that you can pause the audio and time yourself. Give yourself 3 minutes to think of what is your personal definition of leadership?

[pause]

Let's assume that those 3 minutes are done.

The second phase of the exercise is then a small group effort where I will have the groups of four be given either a whiteboard, if we have enough whiteboards or what we call butcher pads … . And then I tell the groups to go ahead and come up with a consensus definition of leadership. And the rules that I give them are simple. They get 12 words. They are not allowed to use acronyms, not allowed to use jargon. All small words count, and I give them 15 minutes to develop this. So each of the teams in 15 minutes come up with their consensus definition of leadership -- in 12 words. I'll pause again if you wish to pause the audio. If you want to try to do this on your own, go ahead.

[pause]

Okay. So now we're into phase three and phase three is pretty simple. We've done the individual, we've done the small group. Now let's do the whole group. So then what I do is I for my students, I usually pick somebody, but you want one person to be designated as the facilitator at this point. And the role is pretty clear. They have to come up with a consensus definition of leadership for the entire group.

Of course, you want each of the teams to give their definitions, and you want the definitions to be displayed somewhere so that it's easy to reference. But you have a separate whiteboard or separate working space where this one individual that is going to facilitate a discussion. So, I give them 15 words for hopefully understandable reasons, because when you consolidate now, you expect that there will be some additional ideas that that they'll want to be able to include and 12 words gets a little bit restrictive.

The other thing is that there's no time limit, or at least that's the indication that I give them. So, what I do is I give the facilitator a go signal and they just go. And however long it takes to complete the task of coming up with a consensus 15 word definition, you know, that's how long it takes. Now, in reality, I stop it at 30 minutes. I will say at probably about 25 [minutes], I'll start giving signals that it's probably about time because at 25 minutes -- by then, you hope chances are pretty good that everybody's had a chance to input if the facilitation is going well. But otherwise, I'm sitting in the back and I'm giving the stage to the facilitator.

I'll pause again for 5 seconds if you want to pause the audio and think about it.

[pause]

Okay. So one of two things has happened. Either they came up with one within 30 minutes or I end up just stopping them. If I stop them, then what I do is I'll try to hammer together what appears to be the closest thing to a consensus and put it up as the answer, and thank the facilitator for the hard job that they did.

And then this is the fourth phase and this is really the telling phase that I think kind of drives the point home. I then have every single participant identify the word or phrase -- or words or phrases -- that they feel uncomfortable with. If they think that they are totally satisfied with the definition, the 15 word definition on the board, then say "I'm happy." Otherwise, I want to know what is the word or phrase or multiple words and phrases that they're not comfortable with. This would be like if they if this definition were to be adopted, those would be the points of contention. What I do is I have them write it down. I say give them 15 seconds -- write down the word or phrase that you disagree with. Then I will go person by person and say, what was the word or phrase that you came up with? If they write it down, they're less likely to change their mind because I don't want them to be influenced by what seems to be the common threads, because a lot of times there will be the same word or phrase that a number of people will be uncomfortable with. And I mark it on the board, underline the word chosen and with tally marks indicating how many times a particular word was was highlighted.

I give them a break and then I write down on a board the times that it took for all of the phases three in the past. The fastest I ever saw was 8 minutes and 43 seconds. Two of the eight took all the way to 30 minutes and I had to stop them. Most of them are somewhere in the 20 minute range. And the thing that I found fascinating, most fascinating was that the ones that were the most successful, the ones where everybody seemed to be the happiest with the result, were the ones that took the full 30 minutes. The one that took 8:43? Well, this was a case where in a class of 16, three dominated the conversation and basically drove the consensus. The three of them were strong personalities and they were basically like minded and they just dominated everything. And in the phase four, as everybody is giving their feedback on what let them be uncomfortable? It was amazing. Half of the group, as I recall, said, "I wish I said something!" And it turns out that that particular group struggled to collaborate, struggled to work together as a good seminar, whereas the ones who took the full 30 minutes were more successful, they became much more open, [and the] dialogue was a little bit easier.

That wasn't one of [my original] intentions. Of course, you know, I'm talking about eight instances -- it's not exactly an empirical study by any means. But again, you get the idea that the way in which we wish we approach language can have an impact on how people deal with each other, especially when it comes to terms that can be a bit contestable. Leadership is fairly innocuous, but boy, do you come up with some different ideas of what leadership means! Think about some of the other words. Fairness is another one that I haven't tried but would be really fascinating to watch. The different understandings of what people have of fairness. [Note: readiness, justice, equality, diversity, inclusion, victory, success – all of these would be good candidates for this exercise, I think.]

Talking about the taxonomic narrative is going to take another episode. All I've done here in this episode is I've laid out the challenge, one of vocabulary, and getting people to open up about their

vocabulary, about the way that they use language. From my perspective, then, when I take this information, I've got to start parsing it, especially when I'm talking about in a consulting situation or an advising situation. And I've got to break it down to how does the language then give insight to how the organization is structured, what is its behavior, what's its culture? What are the ways in which it provides insight as to the problems that the organization is having? So the precise mechanism that I do that I'm going to get into the next episode, I hope you'll join me.

… And that's all for now. The views expressed are my own and do not necessary reflect the United States Army War College, the United States Army or the Department of Defense. Thank you for listening and have a great day.

All the Best!
Tom Galvin