

HOW THE WAY WE TALK CAN CHANGE THE WAY WE WORK

BY: ROBERT EGAN AND LISA LASKOW LAHEY
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Ronald Heifetz, long a leader in professional education, has identified two specific kinds of challenges that adults face: technical challenges, and adaptive challenges. The first requires specific concrete skills to meet, often of a technical nature. The second is the kind of challenge that admits of no simplistic or mechanized solutions. A classic example of the difference would be between healing a broken arm and healing heart disease. In the first, a technical challenge exists – how to adequately re-align the broken bone and keep it stable while healing occurs. In the second, a complex set of factors is at work. While a doctor may be able to prescribe certain kinds of medication, or perform various surgical procedures, in the long run healing is a complex process of reshaping daily practices of diet and exercise, as well as reactions to stress and anxiety.

For many years now, churches and other religious organizations facing difficult challenges have been offered a surfeit of *technical* fixes. There are recipes for engaging conflict, lists for reshaping organizational charts, personality inventories for managing parish councils, and new technologies for shaping worship. Yet few books, if any, engage the underlying -- and thus more difficult to name and address --- *adaptive* challenges that individuals and organizations face. One of the most important books of adult learning theory published in the last two decades did just that, Robert Kegan's *In Over Our Heads: the Mental Demands of Modern Life*. But Kegan's book is complex, and embedded in a set of literatures that many pastors and other religious leaders find hard to penetrate. Many of my own students read the book only because it is required of them, and then only grudgingly.

Finally that obstacle has been lifted, at least in part, by the appearance of this book, which is a collaboration between Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey. She is one of his colleagues in the Change Leadership Project at the Harvard

University Graduate School of Education. *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work* is an engaging, and most of all, accessible book. Resting firmly on the substantial scholarship and deep insight of Kegan's earlier research, it refuses to succumb to simplistic, technical answers to what are deeply rooted, adaptive challenges. Yet it is also a profoundly friendly book. Most of us are familiar with the genre of the self-help book, and many of us – if we're honest – long for that kind of technical fix even though we know it is not feasible. Kegan and Lahey invite people into that space, recognizing our needs for both reassurance and hope, and then proceed to challenge us beyond it.

The authors argue that real change requires a transformation in the way we understand and engage our own internal assumptions. This necessitates a shift in our patterns of practice with others. They outline a deceptively simple method for naming one's competing commitments, identifying the underlying assumptions that feed these commitments, and discovering viable alternatives. Understanding the myriad ways in which language shapes knowing, and thus to a large degree reality, they invite readers into a new set of languages that positively real alternatives.

Most organizations, for example, live with a constant level of individual complaint, voiced just out of earshot and frequently contributing to low organizational morale something K&L identify as "BMW, or bitching, moaning and whining." Yet complaint arises in large measure from a commitment to something else. As the authors write, "we would not complain about anything if we did not care about something. Beneath the surface torrent of our complaining lies a hidden river of our caring, that which we most prize or to which we are most committed" (20). This is their first language shift: from one of complaint to one of commitment.

They commend seven such shifts, four of which are internal or personal languages, and three of which involve social mechanisms. Some of these shifts will most likely be familiar to readers, such as moving from a "language of blame" to a "language of personal responsibility." But several are in some ways counter intuitive. We have all learned well how to practice "constructive criticism," but Kegan and Lahey make a compelling case for something they term "deconstructive criticism." This criticism creates a space in which people within

an organization can begin to engage a very different idea or position by being able to set aside their own position long enough to seriously engage another's.

Readers who are familiar with Kegan's earlier work will recognize pragmatic and compelling examples of his theories. In particular, they will note his description of adult development proceeding along a spiral path that requires people to move beyond being "had" by a specific frame of mind, to "having" it. It has been my experience that even students who were not able to comprehend Kegan's theories found this book led them gently enough through a series of experiential exercises so that they began to comprehend the power of language to shape personal and social interaction.

Although there is nothing explicitly religious in this text, anyone involved with religious institutions and communities of faith will recognize many of the difficult dynamics the authors identify. Given the pressing need for communities of faith to revivify their core commitments, and to do so in the press of multiple and competing adaptive challenges, this book has enormous implications for the process of re-engaging theological languages at the heart of that process. More than anything, it provides a tangible method for engaging adaptive challenges and seeing them for what they are – unique opportunities for learning and growth.

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