

USE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE TALK TO LEAD

Because the way we talk at work both reflects and creates our experience of it, our talk can freeze us in the past or spur change. You can steer your organization by attending carefully to the effects and uses of past, present and future talk.

An organization's stories are one form of past talk. In interviews with folks in one client organization, I heard stories about an unpleasant meeting that had come to symbolize the organization's problems. Because past talk anchors identity, it can provide helpful history or kill innovation. In this case, people hired in the decade since the problematic meeting knew the story and were following its lesson. "That discussion failed before, so we don't want to try it again."

Because past talk reflects morale, you can take the organization's pulse by listening to past talk. Past talk can also be deliberately focused to build morale. In one case, people were reeling from big changes in job roles. Judy Warriner Walke and I co-facilitated a meeting in which we invited groups from across departments to relate incidents of excellent customer service.

This past talk, deliberately focused on celebrating quiet heroes and small acts of service, assured people that while job roles had changed, people throughout the organization had proven their adaptability. Past talk built a bridge over which people could cross to the future.

Present talk reflects current norms. "This is the way we do things." By listening to present talk, you discover the organization's present character.

In order for present talk not to become a prison, continually ask, "What's behind the present talk?" and "Does it have to be this way?" For example, a client says, "Our staff doesn't get along." We explore what experiences formed this present. Through carefully structured conversation and writing, the staff learns how their impressions snowballed and froze into the eternal present that sounds like, "She's always this way." "He always does this."

Future talk tells us who we can be. It gives our workplaces creativity by asking, "What if we tried this?" and movement by saying, "We have the potential to be different."

Using the present tense to talk about the future brings that future near. In strategic planning, for instance, people state their vision of the organization as though these visions exist now. When I help a group to solve a problem, I encourage them to begin with an assertion like, "There must be a way for us to resolve this issue." They are saying, in effect, "We believe in and will work together to make a different future."

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Resource

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A client writes...

"Thank you so much for your research, preparation and facilitation of our Multicultural Plan discussion. With your expert assistance, we are off to an exciting and productive start..."

Judy Lochbrunner, President
Champlain Valley
Junior Service League