



## Language Matters

If someone had tried to tell me thirty-five years ago that my effectiveness as a leader would often hinge on something as “inconsequential” as word choice, I’d have rolled my eyes and written them off. “As long as I can convey an idea in general terms that everyone can understand,” I would have said, “I’ll do just fine.”

And I would have been dead wrong.

The truth is, leaders rise and fall by the language they use. Sometimes whole visions live and die on the bases of the words the leader chooses for articulating that vision.

When you put the right words to a vision or a principle, it becomes axiomatic. It begins to live! It becomes memorable and powerful. It becomes weight bearing, and eventually everyone around you champions it. They defend it with vigor. They give to it and pray for it. Around Willow Creek Community Church I can say “Hire tens” to a senior leader or talk about “the umbrella of mercy” with volunteers or rave that a recent event was an “only God” moment to a member of the congregation, and they get what I’m saying immediately. It’s like speaking in shorthand—“insider” language that deepens community and creates clarity and a special sort of solidarity.

The very best leaders I know wrestle with words until they are able to communicate their big ideas in a way that captures the imagination, catalyzes action, and lifts spirits. They coin creeds and fashion slogans and create rallying cries, all because they understand that language matters. Axioms bolster a culture and steady it against the winds of change. Choose the right words and you’ll set up everyone you lead for a level of effectiveness you never though could be achieved.

Strange though it may seem, I often take long walks around our campus in search of one key word for a leadership talk I’m working on. One word. I’ve been known to devote an entire transatlantic flight to nailing a single sentence for an important vision talk that I need to give to Willow. Sound psychotic to you? The point I’m making is that words really do matter. And leaders must pay the price to choose the right ones, because when they do, the payoff is huge.

*an excerpt from Axiom: Powerful Leadership Proverbs, by Bill Hybels, Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2008, pp17-18*

