

A Management Professor Explains Why You Should Stop Explaining Everything

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[Source Illustration: Pixabay]

Today we obsess over metrics and actionable insights. Our desire to be good leaders compels us to overcommunicate the details. But science suggests that overexplaining by communicating details as leaders may stifle our power and our team’s creativity.

Do you notice how great leaders speak on lofty abstract topics like belonging and innovation? During her time at Facebook, Sheryl Sandberg said, “Our mission is to give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together.” Ginni Rometty, former CEO of IBM, said “We see a world where AI augments human intelligence.”

The power of abstraction

Researchers at UC San Diego explored how powerful people think. Power here was not someone’s formal position in an organization, but the person’s belief in their own capability to create impact. Their personal power. Personal power is the aura that makes leaders like Indra Nooyi and Nelson Mandela powerful, regardless of whether they are standing onstage or sitting in jail.

The researchers discovered that powerful people think and speak more abstractly. They see the big picture. This big-picture view allows them to navigate new environments and set a course forward. Powerful people see the forest from the trees.

It's no coincidence that we conflate visionaries with leaders. Research suggests that abstract language is perceived as more powerful. Abstract speech like visions is the natural language of leaders. And it is natural for others to respect those who speak to visions. It's all in the language.

Less powerful people focus solely on concrete details, the trees. Focusing on metrics only, for example, less powerful people often miss the big picture. Those who focus solely on details are thus less suited to guide high-level strategy.

Harvard scientists studied what makes startup pitches successful in securing investor funding. They found that pitches containing more abstract language were seen as more investment-worthy. One reason abstract language had more impact is because it created higher perceptions of future growth. For example, in my research on startups, I found that over 70% of successful pitches contained a vision, signaling wider opportunity.

But the Harvard scientists postulated from the data that abstract language also made speakers appear more powerful even when growth potential wasn't a factor. Speaking abstractly alone wins respect.

Powerful leaders make powerful teams

A senior executive at a major energy company once shared that his success derived from explaining to employees how their tasks on projects connected to the organization's wider goals. By sharing his big-picture view, employees saw him as a strong leader. But perhaps more importantly, when employees understood how they fit into the big picture, it allowed employees to derive meaning from their work, empowering them as well.

Abstract language also empowers teams by inspiring greater creativity. One important leadership concept in the U.S. Military is the Commander's Intent. Commander's Intent outlines the roles of senior and subordinate commanders when executing missions.

Under the Commander's Intent, the role of the senior leader is to identify and share the abstract goal. The role of the subordinate leader is to interpret and execute the goal. By communicating abstract goals, senior leaders empower subordinates with the agency to test various creative solutions. The agency is empowerment. When Indra Nooyi headed up PepsiCo, she cautioned that leaders need to focus on a core message and avoid overwhelming audiences with details.

Some leaders are hesitant to delegate the details. These leaders get stuck in micromanaging. The inability to delegate and the desire to micromanage are often states of disempowerment because they derive from fear. This fear saps our personal power, and it saps the power of those below us to contribute creatively.

It behooves powerful leaders to delegate the details. While leaders may have clear visions, subordinates working in the trenches of innovation know the nitty-gritty details best.

We live in a world of data deluge, but leaders must remain focused on the big picture to appear powerful. When direct reports receive abstract instructions, they are empowered through both clarity of purpose and the freedom to direct creative energy toward the best solutions.