

## A Few Words to Get Us Started

**Abstract** In this chapter, we introduce the inception, foundations, research findings, and current inquiry about motivating language theory. This theory was originally conceptualized by professor Jeremiah Sullivan as a communicative path to enhance follower motivation and related outcomes through mindful and strategic leader speech. These forms of talk are embedded in meaning-making (giving significance and cultural guidance to work), empathetic (sharing human bonding at work), and direction-giving (dispelling ambiguity and transparently sharing work expectations) languages. The three dimensions of ML represent most types of leader to follower work-related speech and elicit the best results when the leader walks the talk, employees accurately perceive what the leader intends, and all ML dimensions are used appropriately.

**Keywords** Motivating language theory · Leader communication  
Meaning-making language · Empathetic language · Direction-giving language

### OVERVIEW

In this chapter, we introduce the inception, foundations, research findings, and current inquiry about motivating language theory. This theory was originally conceptualized by professor Jeremiah Sullivan as a communicative path to enhance follower motivation and related outcomes

through mindful and strategic leader speech. These forms of talk are embedded in meaning-making (giving significance and cultural guidance to work), empathetic (sharing human bonding at work), and direction-giving (dispelling ambiguity and transparently sharing work expectations) languages. The three dimensions of ML represent most types of leader to follower work-related speech and elicit the best results when the leader walks the talk, employees accurately perceive what the leader intends, and all ML dimensions are used appropriately.

Empirical tests are convincing about motivating language's reliability, validity, and influence. Findings show significant and positive links between ML and employee job satisfaction, performance, creativity, willingness to express voice, self-efficacy, intent to stay, and lower absenteeism among other outcomes. These tests have also been conducted in diverse settings and countries. Topics for future motivating language investigations include applications for part-time workers, multi-level analyses, ML processes, ML training effectiveness, companion employee feedback loops, and national culture as a moderator.

### WHY MOTIVATING LANGUAGE WAS CREATED AND HOW IT IS DEFINED

We often hear that the boss needs to communicate better. But what does that really mean? To further muddle such fuzziness, a leader's communication is too often an assumed, marginalized behavior that lacks emphasis and explicit guidelines in management scholarship, teaching, consulting, and practical advice. Ironically, research tells us that leaders spend the majority of their time communicating. Most of this communication—up to 80% according to studies (Mintzberg 1973; Tengblad 2006; Van Quaquebeke and Felps, in press; Wajcman and Rose 2011)—is spent talking. In reality, oral communication is a prime way that leaders accomplish their goals (Gronn 1983), especially when talking with subordinates (Van Quaquebeke and Felps, in press). As stated in the introduction, our working definition of leadership is influencing others to reach goals.

Language is a crucial part of leader communication, especially when it flows through speech. Talk empowers leaders to articulate their visions, intentions, and goals. Just as important, talk allows leaders to reach out and connect with followers and other stakeholders. Effective leader speech inspires community and shared purpose among organizational

citizens. Think about the powerful words of good leaders who have motivated and inspired you. On the other hand, ineffective leader talk is dysfunctional and dispiriting. Evidence shows that poor or abusive leader oral communication is linked with the voluntary departure of employees (very costly) and their failure to speak up about critical issues leading to negative consequences, i.e., the tragedy of the Columbia space shuttle (McClean et al. 2013; Morrison 2014).

Drawing from a vast body of research, we can conclude that leader talk is highly relational and impacts employee psychological states, including motivation (Van Quaquebeke and Felps, in press). These psychological states are in turn expressed with distinctly positive or negative outcomes, for the follower, the leader, and the organization, along with its stakeholders and customers included (Mayfield et al. 2015). Our book will focus on how to foster the positive outcomes for both employees and organizations by giving a constructive, systematic framework for leader talk called motivating language (ML). This chapter begins our journey by offering a background and overview of motivating language theory (MLT). By the end of this chapter, you will understand why motivating language has been developed, its conceptual framework, its three-core dimensions, and its links with desirable results for employees and their organizations. You will also grasp the scope of ML, namely what it can and cannot do as well as where we need to direct future research.

As we begin, we emphasize that motivating language does not advocate monologues! MLT stems from the belief that leadership is both relational (built from interpersonal connections) and reflexive (has the responsibility to be ethical, authentic, and to engage in creating shared meaning) (Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011; Fairhurst and Connaughton 2013; Jian and Fairhurst 2017; Monnot 2016). Within this framework, motivating language focuses a lens on what a supervisor can vocally contribute to distributed or interactive leadership. As the chapters unfold, you will see how leadership inquiry (respectful and open questions), mindfulness, and encouragement of a follower's voice are all part of what constitutes MLT.

Motivating language was initially conceptualized as *motivational language* by professor Jeremiah Sullivan (1988). This highly accomplished scholar proposed a linguistic framework for enhancing employee motivation. Drawing from the axiom that a leader's spoken words will elicit psychological responses by followers, Sullivan asserted that more

extensive and strategic language choices by leaders will be perceived as helpful, then in turn nurture higher motivation and desirable follower attitudes and behaviors, such as performance, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. The potential benefits of such talk are unfortunately restricted in common leadership theory and practice by limited, automatic applications. Many predominant leadership theories marginalize spoken communication and take their cues from the Ohio State and University of Michigan studies, which are constructed around two leadership functions, task, and people orientations (Miner 2005; Van Quaquebeke and Felps, in press; Yukl 2013). And, a lot of managerial talk relies on task orientation, a more narrow spectrum of spoken language that sets goals and outlines task expectations with lower impact on employee motivation.

Sullivan believed that these constraints can be lifted when leaders mindfully expand their linguistic ranges. To create this enriched leader communication model, he used linguistics theory to define three leader speech categories (Mayfield et al. 2015) as follows: (meaning-making language) those that “facilitate cognitive schemas and scripts, which will be used to guide the employee in his or her work,” (empathetic language) “those that implicitly reaffirm an employee’s sense of self-worth as a human being,” and (direction-giving language) “those that reduce employee uncertainty and increase his or her knowledge” (Sullivan 1988, p. 104). Sullivan predicted that employee motivation and other valuable outcomes will grow when leader talk combines all three dimensions effectively.

### *Meaning-Making Language*

To better explain why Sullivan’s model is so tantalizing, we begin by presenting each dimension of ML, accompanied by examples and theoretical foundations in management and other social science research. These theories are drawn from multiple disciplines. When theoretical understanding is necessary to grasp ML, we have defined the models. Otherwise, these theories are cited to support ML and are not necessary for understanding it. Still, we do encourage their further exploration in the associated references.

*Meaning-making language* is a compelling tool that—based on evidence—is not frequently expressed. In brief, meaning-making talk grafts a follower’s personal goals with a higher purpose through work. This

form of speech lets an employee know that her/his talents are uniquely appreciated and helps that person guide these skills toward organizational contribution. To effectively use meaning-making language, leaders must overcome personal psychological noise to raise their own awareness of follower strengths and aspirations. Drawing from this awareness, leaders communicate respect for a follower's unique abilities and hopes and offer guidance on how to intersect these attributes with work goals. In doing so, the leader must also paint a lucid picture of organizational vision, values, and cultural norms. Communicating an inspiring vision and congruent set of values are paramount. Most of us want to believe that our work serves a higher cause.

Often, such talk is informal and conveyed through metaphors and stories. For example, tales of organizational heroes and heroines who go above and beyond to serve a commendable organizational purpose (as well as narratives about those who have failed to do so) are all forms of meaning-making language. Importantly, meaning-making language also informs a follower about cultural rules that must be respected in order to succeed. When a boss tells an employee that the CEO's annual dinner is a command performance or that a representative from information systems must be included in the new product task force, meaning-making language is happening. This ML dimension also reduces the traditional boss-subordinate power differential because it requires the leader to actively affirm a follower's strengths.

Meaning-making language meshes well with transformational leadership because it is instrumental during times of organizational entry, assimilation, and change. Followers experience considerable sense making when they enter and find their niches in an organization. Change at work also evokes similar questioning. Meaning-making language responds to this inquiry by sharing mental models, skills coaching, and organizational norms. Relatedly, meaning-making language evokes organizational identification (a sense of belonging in the work place) and self-efficacy (felt confidence in one's abilities) because followers are treated as *persons of consequence*. Lastly, meaning-making language imbues significance to what a follower accomplishes on the job.

Meaning-making language springs from theories in management, psychology, and communication. It is firmly rooted in the management theories of interpersonal sense making, the job characteristics model (task significance, task identity, and experienced meaningfulness of work), positive leadership, and transformational leadership (Bass and Riggio

2006; Cameron 2012; Dutton and Spreitzer 2014; Mayfield et al. 2015; Sullivan 1988; Weick 1995; Wrzesniewski et al. 2003; Yukl 2013). In psychology, meaning-making echoes Viktor Frankel's logotherapy, where the ultimate human aspiration is to embrace meaning (Frankl 1985, 2006; Pattakos 2010). In communication, this dimension of ML draws influence from Jablin's models of workplace entry and assimilation, symbolic interactionism, and the communicative construction of organizational culture (Blumer 1986; Jablin 2001; Smircich 1983; Smircich and Morgan 1982).

### *Empathetic Language*

In comparison to meaning-making language, the second dimension of ML, *empathetic language*, is more rarely used. Our research data show that it is the least commonly spoken of all three ML dimensions. This observation is curious because when we bring our whole selves to work, we are more engaged and productive. Existing studies also sustain this contention. When empathetic language is not present, an employee's natural response is self-compartmentalization at work, which suppresses emotional ties with the boss. Such constriction augurs poorly for giving one's best to the job. When an employee doesn't bring the whole self to work, creativity and innovation suffer.

So what exactly is empathetic language? It refers to the leader's ability to walk in another's shoes, to connect emotionally with a follower. Through empathetic language, a leader bonds with a follower in a wide array of scenarios. They can be positive, such as an accolade when a worker executes a challenging task successfully, "Good job, Dana!" Or these situations can be negative, such as giving reassurance when a worker encounters a setback in project progress, "I know this is tough, but you can overcome this setback." Many times, a leader's use of empathetic language conveys a certain vulnerability and humility, too. The leader has to be willing to lower the employee-boss power differential in order to identify with an employee's experience through speech. He or she becomes more (and refreshingly) human through such openness. The scope of empathetic language is not limited to task-related events either. Empathetic language includes messages of support, compassion, and shared happiness for personal life events. For example, a leader using empathetic language would communicate heartfelt concern about a serious illness in a follower's family. Another type of empathetic message

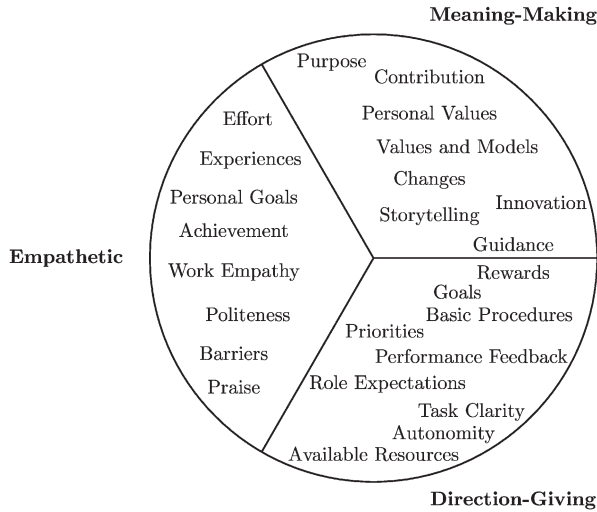
would be to congratulate a follower about their child's scholarship award.

Although the use of empathetic language is uncommon, a number of management and other social scientists have demonstrated its benefits, including higher follower performance, job satisfaction, and engagement (Cameron 2012; Dutton and Spreitzer 2014; Dutton et al. 2014; Goleman 1998; Miller 2013). Empathetic language is closely tied to the theories of positive organizational behavior, people-oriented leadership models, compassion in the workplace, the supportive factor in path goal theory, empathy in emotional intelligence, and compassionate communication (Dutton and Spreitzer 2014; Dutton et al. 2014; Goleman 1998; House 1971; Miner 2005; Sullivan 1988; Yukl 2013).

### *Direction-Giving Language*

The third dimension of ML, *direction-giving language*, dominates most leader talk, and its role is vital in effective leader communication. Direction-giving language is a key to getting the right things done in the right ways—in other words, effectively and efficiently. This form of speech dispels ambiguity through transparency. The leader articulates all the information that is important for performing one's job. Specifically, direction-giving language clarifies the actions needed to reach the organizational vision and its goals (including a task's time, quality, and process requirements) and the rewards that are associated with attaining them. In addition, direction-giving language comprises task feedback, which—if given constructively—has the potential to enhance employee learning, self-efficacy, and performance. Another advantage of direction-giving language is the reduction of role ambiguity and its partner, stress. We lose valuable time and energy when we worry about how to fulfill our work requirements.

In a sense, direction-giving language offers us the psychological safety of knowing what is expected and what to expect in return. An example of direction-giving language happens when a boss details an assignment to an employee including how it fits into the big organizational picture, what successful assignment completion looks like, how the results will be measured, processes and policies that should be followed in task fulfillment, preferable and acceptable time frames for assignment delivery, and reward contingencies. Direction-giving language should also continue throughout the task and after its completion via coaching and constructive task feedback. Similar to the preceding two ML dimensions,



**Fig. 2.1** A graphical representation of motivating language’s three facets and their aspects. The figure shows the major aspects of each motivating language facet within each area. This figure has been released under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) license by Milton and Jacqueline Mayfield. For full information go to <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

direction-giving language adds equilibrium to the power balance between a leader and follower. Information is power, and with direction-giving language, such power becomes more accessible.

Management and social science literature are replete with theories that refer to direction-giving language. It is embedded in task identity, feedback, and the critical psychological states of experienced responsibility for a work outcome and knowledge of work results in the job characteristics model (Hackman and Oldham 1980; Sullivan 1988). Direction-giving language is also related to goal setting, expectancy, and (directive leadership) path goal theories (House 1971; Locke and Latham 1990; Miner 2005; Sullivan 1988; Vroom 1994; Yukl 2013).

All of the three preceding motivating language dimensions are shown graphically in Fig. 2.1. Before going any farther, we now introduce four assumptions for motivating language that optimize its positive influences for employees and their organizations. *The leader must walk the talk.*

Evidence and human behavior tell us that credibility comes from actions that reflect spoken words. This assumption has been tested with conclusions that high motivating language leaders are viewed by followers as having strong behavioral integrity and credibility (Holmes and Parker 2017). More support for this assumption comes from numerous social science studies which show that people rely on actions for sense making cues when they perceive a disconnect between actions and words. The next assumption is that *motivating language reflects most leader-to-follower work related communication*. This same assumption springs from Sullivan's translation of linguistics theory and its boundaries (Sullivan 1988).

Two other assumptions partner with motivating language. *Followers must accurately decode the leader's intended message. Even though the domain of ML is confined to leader talk, employees must correctly understand what the leader is trying to say.* To incorporate this assumption, measures of motivating language use are often based on follower input. (The motivating language scale is drawn from employee perceptions, for instance.) There is also an implicit feedback loop from employees to the boss since high-ML leaders must be keenly aware of follower experiences to use dimensions such as meaning-making and empathetic language well. We envision this sensitivity to include open-ended questions and active listening. Nonetheless, this feedback loop has not been explored to date.

Lastly, Sullivan proposed that *all three dimensions of motivating language must be strategically coordinated to achieve the best results*. This assertion has been backed by empirical research (Mayfield et al. 2015; Sullivan 1988). The integration most likely happens over time and is influenced by organizational events. For instance, a leader would probably use more meaning-making language with new hires and during times of organizational transition. During periods of more organizational stability, direction-giving and/or empathetic language might prevail. Moreover, a kind and caring boss can give lousy directions and fail to communicate how a task aligns with the overall company objectives. In such a case, we predict that there will be weaker positive outcomes, if any. Fortunately, we believe that motivating language is a learned skill, so its appropriate combinations can be acquired through training and development.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS: WHAT WE DO AND DO NOT KNOW

Motivating language has been tested through both quantitative and qualitative methods. But the most commonly used measure is the motivating language scale (Mayfield et al. 1995). This instrument has consistently demonstrated robust reliability and validity in several applications and diverse settings over the past twenty-four years (Mayfield and Mayfield, in press, 2017). Both the original and an updated, revised MLS will be discussed in Chap. 9, which treats ML evaluation. Other qualitative methods have been used for exploring motivating language too, including conversation and content analysis.

Motivating language research findings are promising and bode well for improving employee and organizational well-being. (Chapter 7, on evidence-based benefits, gives more in-depth treatment of these results.) Cumulative motivating language studies show significant positive relationships between ML and employee job satisfaction, performance, engagement, self-efficacy, self-leadership, creativity, innovation, perceived leader competence, communication satisfaction of one's leader, lower absenteeism, voice, intent to stay, and effective decision making (see Chap. 7 for details). Although motivating language generally refers to the communication channel of spoken words, Wang and colleagues (Wang et al. 2009) found that ML could be expressed in writing to nurture creativity in virtual teams. These authors made this discovery with a quasi-experimental design, thus suggesting causality.

All of these findings come from application of a relatively new model. So much remains to be known. In most studies, motivating language has been investigated on a dyadic level of analysis (immediate boss to a direct report) with a focus on individual (employee) outcomes. Yet, a few scholars have looked at ML at team (group) and organizational levels of analysis and uncovered convincing outcomes, including higher performance (Holmes 2012; Wang et al. 2009). These extensions are fruitful areas for future research.

Despite motivating language's benefits, there are limitations and uncharted territory that need clarification. (These unanswered questions will be addressed more fully by Chap. 10 on future directions.) One germane topic is the influence of ML on part-time workers. A study showed that while motivating language improved part-time employee job satisfaction, it did not boost their performance (Mayfield and Mayfield 2006). Also, the MLT model is limited to oral leader communication.

True, there is a strong relationship between motivating language and employee willingness to express voice (a follower's confidence to speak up about work issues). Still, voice cannot fully represent two-way communication (Mayfield and Mayfield 2017). Thus, the relationship between motivating language and employee feedback is an open area that is ripe for investigation.

Other important progress needs to be made on questions about motivating language processes, training, and modifications in non-USA national cultures. (Training and development potential is a main topic of Chap. 11.) Regarding ML processes, some meaningful steps have been taken. Holmes and Parker (2017) found that behavioral integrity and credibility are significant antecedents. Relatedly, Mayfield and Mayfield (in press) used a simulation to suggest that motivating language spreads pervasively throughout an organization when top leaders model it. Still, more relevant insights need to be gathered.

For training, conducting longitudinal instructional effectiveness tests, ideally with control groups, will enhance ML knowledge and application. We cannot overemphasize our vision of motivating language as a learned behavior. Many leadership communication problems are not intentional. Rather, they reflect an educational deficit that can be corrected through effective training and coaching. Lastly, we need to find out more about how motivating language is modified within a cultural context, particularly national ones. To date, we do know that motivating language generalizes to other national cultures such as Mexico, Japan, Taiwan, Kuwait, China, Australia, Turkey, and Poland (see Chap. 9 for details). What we need to discover are the possible ways that national culture changes the use of motivating language. For instance, how is empathetic language expressed in low-context cultures that don't place high value on emotions at work?

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