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## IN-focus

### Language in focus



Dr. Meryl McQueen

Language is a mirror: it reflects relationships between individuals and organisations. Language is a magnifying glass: it focuses and shapes our social reality. Language—communication, discourse, conversation, dialogue—is at the crossroads of possibility. It is the arena where we work out our compromises, negotiate relationships, trade, set up families, embark on fearless ventures, and make the world a better place. Language is also the junction of communication and power—where words, metaphor, innuendo, implicit agendas, and explicit points of view collide and compete for space in our understanding.

Shared language can create opportunities for working together for positive social change; misunderstandings can build barriers to progress. By taking the time to harness the power of language, we can encourage better communication and fuller connections; by sticking to three simple rules, we can use language more directly to promote collaborative effort.

One critical element of communication is personal contact: who the stakeholders are, and whether or not they have a personal stake in the success of the joint project. In an ongoing relationship, the individuals involved are central to the work at hand. Working closely in a peer-to-peer environment will accentuate the direct 'people' connection and minimise communication mishaps. Personal contact can also increase levels of trust, commitment, and mutual benefit in these relationships.

The second rule is language matching. Language matching is the process of deliberately using the other person's language to foster better communication. For example, listen carefully to how your stakeholder describes a potential project. Ask questions if you do not understand their sector- or organisation-specific jargon, and then use that same language. The groundwork of building shared definitions, combined with actively engaging the other person, means that you will be speaking each other's language in no time. This is a give and take process—the language that develops will usually be a hybrid of what everyone brings to the table. Language matching encourages equal power sharing and demonstrates how words can take on new meaning when they are infused with cooperative spirit.

The third and most important rule is social identification. Social identification is the extent to which people understand and identify with others. Positive social identification usually leads to high levels of mutual support and understanding; negative social identification can result in combative or at least difficult communication. Using the inclusive 'we' is an effective demonstration of positive social identification. Literally, this language choice is the opposite of 'us and them.' By



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selecting language to put ourselves 'on the same side' as potential partners, we set up a dynamic of shared goals and investment in success. It is much easier to bridge the organizational culture divide if we start from the premise that similarities and learning opportunities far outweigh differences and potential conflict.

Perceptions, reactions and our worldview hang on how we navigate through the communication minefields. Language can be a powerful tool for mutual support and social development, and is an indispensable part of ethical decision-making. It's as easy as one-two-three.

Dr. Meryl McQueen is a Sydney-based writer and an expert in cross-sector alliances. You can read more about her work on language and power between nonprofits and business at [http://au.geocities.com/dr\\_meryl\\_mcqueen/phd/](http://au.geocities.com/dr_meryl_mcqueen/phd/). She has also conducted research in ecolinguistics, nonprofit management education, cooperatives, and social capital. You can reach Meryl at: [dr\\_meryl\\_mcqueen@yahoo.com.au](mailto:dr_meryl_mcqueen@yahoo.com.au).

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