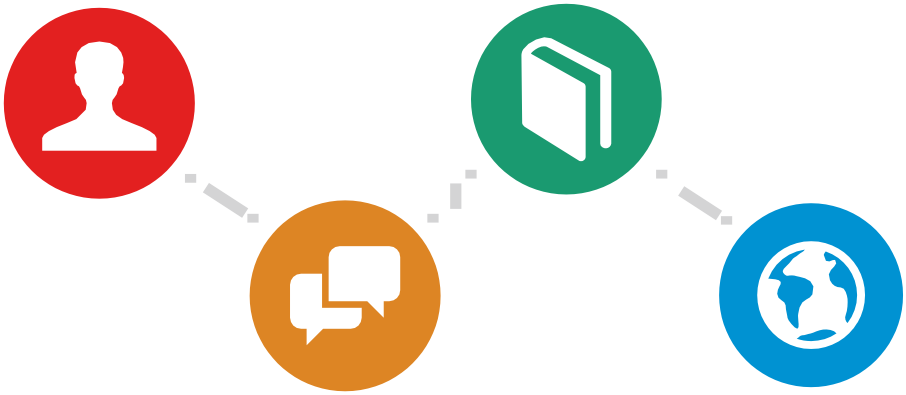
AN INTRODUCTION TO

GENERATIVE LANGUAGE

*Expanding Leadership through **Speech Acts***

BY TONY V. ZAMPELLA



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"Unlike descriptive language, which offers evidence for its claims, *generative* language offers no evidence, only authority—creating from nothing, from no evidence—spoken from the depths of responsibility and integrity."

— Tony Zampella

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CHAPTER ONE

Generative Language:
Speaking that acts, listening that creates

At Bhavana Learning Group we work with learners in the philosophy and pragmatics of language. We hold a particular relationship to language as generative. We explore *our way of being human in language* through *ontological inquiry*. This inquiry has learners experiencing the generative properties of language as action, stretching learners beyond the command of a new set of wordsor vocabulary. We use generative language in a manner that develops our mind as*an intentional system of thought and meaning.*

> *"Fundamentally, the critical difference between leaders and others is the way leaders create reality intheir speaking; the way leaders speak."*

This paradigm shift—from language as descriptive to language as creative— fundamentally alters the way we speak, listen, and act. We develop the properties ofgenerative language through linguistic speech acts such as declarations, offers, promises, requests, assertions, and assessments, which both disclose and create the way language shapes reality in our speaking and listening.

These linguistic categories reveal creative properties of language observed in action,which find us relating to reality through interpretations and distinctions in action or Speech-Acts. American philosopher, John Searle, contributed to the philosophy of language. He developed a theory of Speech Acts as "the minimal units of linguistic communication, occurring in sentences and conversations." In his book *Expression and Meaning*, Searle suggested five general categories of speech acts that are common to all cultures:

1. We tell people how things are
2. We try to get people to do things
3. We commit ourselves to doing things
4. We express our feelings and attitudes
5. We bring about changes in the world through our utterances

Action emerges out of our relationship to language as generative. Thinker and author Fernando Flores suggests that "a leader generates a credible interpretation of the present; declares the possibility of a different future; and is able to generate trust in others. Without language, these actions could not be performed."

Once embodied, individuals will relate to their listening *as* creation and their speaking *as* action. Once proficient in this *inquiry*, these properties can be applied to any discipline, situation, or circumstance.

> *"The profound nature of what's possible when we situate ourselves as co-creators in language alters how we act and learn and enhances our ability to serve others."*

In this way, it is possible to see generative language as the "*language of leaders*hip." Fundamentally, the critical difference between leaders and others is the way leaders create reality in their speaking—the way leaders speak. For themlanguage **is** action. Not action as content, but as context: their view of reality defined by a capacity to honor their word in choices to act and forward action.

In every field, discipline, artistic endeavor, and business, leaders can see action andwill act, while others speculate, evaluate, explain, assess, complain, etc. Without the ability to act, we cannot serve. Ultimately, leaders serve either the well-being of others or a future not yet conceived.

For instance, John F. Kennedy's **declaration** that, "this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth" created that possibility in the hearts and minds of all Americans. Inside that speaking, our country became aligned in a vision that occurred with no evidence to offer to those seeking it.

Unlike descriptive language, which offers evidence for its claims, *generative language* offers no evidence, only authority—creating from nothing, from noevidence—spoken from the depths of responsibility and integrity.

The profound nature of what's possible when we situate ourselves as creators in language alters how we act and learn and enhances our ability to serve others. All speaking and listening in this domain is grounded in your words as the source of action and is intentional. **It cannot be spoken by those with a weak relationship totheir "word."** Here, even the responsible choice to listen is a conscious choice that forwards action. Indeed, in this mindset, a leader's ability to think, reflect, and observe at a deeper level aligns choices, focuses attention and intentions, and is the source of action.

CHAPTER TWO

Declaration: *Creating possibility from your speaking.*

In his book, *Coaching to the human Soul*, Alan Sieler presents **Declarations** as "a commitment to generate a new context for action, and … commitment to the generation of a different reality." The speaker of a declaration has the authority rather than evidence for their speaking.

As an act in language, Declarations:

1. Create a context for new possibilities to explore.
2. Create a context for new direction or future.
3. Create a commitment to generate new action.
4. Constitutes all these openings in the personal, interpersonal and social domains.

Consider these famous declarations:

Martin Luther King's declared future: *"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."*

John F. Kennedy's declared future that *"this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth."*

MINDSET	CONDITION	INTENTION	GOAL	OUTCOME
DESCRIBE the Future	Accuracy of speaker's knowledge, and ability to observe.	**Clarity** based on evidence from the past.	Improve planning and understanding.	**Strategy** or plan for *Action*.
DECLARE the Future	The integrity of speaker's word, and commitment to act.	**Possibility** from the speaker's authority.	Create context for action and direction.	**Action** from the *Future*.

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In his speaking, JFK created that possibility in the hearts and minds of all Americans. His speaking opened our imagination, focused our attention and intentions, and aligned resources, that shifted agreements to create the urgency to act. Stunningly, the metal to create a spaceship for such a journey had not been invented. JFK had no evidence for his speaking. He was willing to stand for it. So powerful, it became reality years after his death.

So, declarations create a context to focus and prioritize our attention, imagination and action. The only question is, what are you willing to say? What keeps you from declaring it?

CHAPTER THREE

The Power of Promises

The beginning of any year finds us making declarations about the future. Such declarations involve our ability to make and keep promises. Often by February, circumstances get in the way of our best intentions. Perhaps this has as much todo with *how* we promise as *what* we promise.

To honor promises, we must understand the set of assumptions and expectations that accompany any promise. In our work, we define a promise as *a commitment to another to fulfill a condition of satisfaction through specific action by a particulartime*. Promises, agreements, and commitments alter the future; they add meaning to our word, which defines our trustworthiness.

"Promises, agreements, and commitments alter the future; they add meaning to our word,which defines our trustworthiness."

Consider that all financial transactions depend on promises, allowing us to purchase food; to own, lease, or rent dwellings and transportation; to use utilities;and even to acquire a college education. Moreover, our relationship with time is formed by how we manage our promises. We become overextended because we have overpromised and are not aware of it until it is—and we are—too late!

To be generative, **promises** require a strong responsibility to our word; yet, daily we often deliver dozens of promises unintentionally. Strengthening promises requires fortifying our word by increasing our awareness of how we routinely promise**.**

First, **a promise follows a request**. Answering "yes" to any request is a promise,which brings forth a set of expectations. Often we nod "yes" just to move on toanother topic; or we say "yes" but only as it relates to ideal conditions, and we really mean: "yes, but …." Be clear what you mean when you say yes.

Second, **we overpromise to look or feel good**. Often, we make promises to impress someone or to seek agreement. Here, we curry favor, which engenders long-term frustration for the sake of instant gratification.

Third, **we overpromise, which overextends us**. Because it is uncomfortable to say "no," we overextend our capacity to deliver on our promises and find ourselves outof time, always "owing" others and trying to keep up with others' expectations.

EXPECTATIONS

To build trust and generate commitment in others, consider the followingexpectations *prior* to promising:

Who: To whom am I promising? Will he or she hold me accountable? This is important because our word can only grow strong and reliable when it is held accountable.

What: Precisely what am I promising to fulfill? Is there shared agreement betweenthe listener and me as to what is being promised?

Time: Specifically, when will I deliver on this promise? Do I have time to deliver aspromised? How will my fulfilling or not fulfilling this promise alter the future?

Specifics: Is there a specific place or are there other conditions required to deliveron this promise? Am I willing to be held accountable for these specifics?

Competence: Am I competent to deliver on this promise?

Context: Do I appreciate that content is context-dependent? For instance, in some settings, just accepting a business card is a promise to follow up or make a call.

Choice: Being powerful requires remaining *at choice* – empowered to choose in anypossible situation – even if that means revoking the promise.

Power: Powerful promises find speakers at choice by revoking or renegotiating apromise; and by promising to promise, by setting a date/time (promising) to respond (promise) when one can agree to it.

When revoking any promise, it is best to do so 'closer (as soon as known) to issuing the promise than delivering on it. Revoking a promise closer to its due date results in more fall out and upset to clean up, and restore one's word.

Repeated revoking of promises will diminish one's reliability and trustworthiness.

SPEECH-ACT: Promise

PROMISE: (Response to Request): The person Promising is the Speaker.

1- Committed Speaker	2- Committed Listener	3- By When (date/time)	4- Conditions of Satisfaction	5- Shared Obviousness
1. **Committed** to bring forth action by specific time. 2. Presumed **Competence** to perform specified action(s). 3. To be **Sincere*** in wanting actions performed. 4. **Present** in the moment. **Focused** on matter at hand. 5. Willing to be held **accountable.**	1. **Present** in the moment. **Focused** on matter at hand. 2. Willing to hold the speaker **accountable.**	1. **Include Date and Time** (clarify agreement to manage). 2. Creates **Future** 3. Establishes **Reliability** 4. Generates **Commitment**.	1. Visualize/Clarify and describe what does completion look like? 2. Clarify/describe what you want fulfilled (not how to do it). 3. Clarify necessary details, conditions or expectations for completion.	1. Surface any assumptions; reveal tacit knowledge. 2. Clarify any unspoken expectations. 3. Clarify concerns: what matters most. 4. Discern level of **Involvement** (priority of concerns).

***SINCERE** = Our public conversations (speaking) matches our private conversations (intentions), constituting our **Integrity**.

TRUST: We develop trust through assessing four conditions: *Competency, Sincerity, Reliability, and Involvement.* To maintain trust, **Revoke** or **Renegotiate** a Promise, as close as possible to issuing it (speaking the original Promise). Trust is impacted when Revoking or Renegotiating a promise expands the closer to (or over) the deadline.

CONTEXT is decisive: The context (listening) discloses which properties (#1 - #5) are explicit or implicit.

PRACTICES

All new learning requires steps that are awkward, requiring time to integrate andform them as normal habits:

- First, **pause before agreeing** to any promise. Pausing helps us to embody eachrequest and to hear it as a commitment.
- Second, when pausing, **listen to your gut**. Are you sure about the promise? If not, "promise topromise": tell the person, "*I will get back to you*" at a specifictime, and then be prepared to do so.
- Third, **check your time**. Schedule each promise and related actions in your calendar system.
- Fourth, take the time to accept, decline, or negotiate any or all aspects of eachrequest. Consider negotiating requests into parts to be delivered. Schedule each part of a request at the time due.
- Soon, this process will earn you a reputation for being trustworthy and generating commitment. As for this New Year, try resolving to relearn the fundamentals of promising to strengthen your word, and the rest will fall into place.

CHAPTER FOUR

Get Past Fear and into an Abundance of Requests

The previous chapter introduced linguistic products referred to as “speech acts,” which are the byproduct of operating in a generative mindset. Generative languagerequires a shift in our relationship to or view of language from descriptive (to describe events) to generative (to create events).

Among the most relevant, powerful, and useful of these linguistic products are **promises** and **requests**. Each involves the act of speaking that is an action itself.

> ‘‘How *many* requests does it take to coordinate action, and generate commitment to bring forth a desired future?’’

Both of these speech acts—promises and requests—spoken intentionally, bringforth a particular future and possible commitment, establish conditions of satisfaction (deadline, location, and other expectations), create context, define credibility, and enable us to coordinate action.

While in the previous chapter we explored **promises**, in this chapter, we willexplore **requests**.

How *many* requests does it take to coordinate action and generate commitment tobring forth a desired future? High-performing leaders, managers, and sales professionals understand how speaking and listening *consistently* to requests develops a mood for trust and results and begins to attract people who are able to coordinate action.

To increase awareness, let’s begin by discussing some common *impediments* tomaking requests.

IMPEDIMENTS

The most commonly observed impediments to receiving or making a request involve our fears and often include:

- fear of rejection (being declined)
- fear of looking helpless (looking dependent, “needy”)
- fear of looking incompetent (not knowing or looking foolish)
- fear of owing someone a favor (losing control)
- fear of imposing, or being seen as demanding (losing respect, admiration)
- fear of not being liked or accepted (losing dignity, feeling unable to decline ornegotiate)

Which of these fears stop you from making or receiving a request?

Peak performers understand that powerful requests are based on choice. To work with power is to remain at choice. This means that a request *must* include the element of choice both when making and when receiving a request. Specifically, a request is powerful only when it can be accepted, declined, or counteroffered (negotiated).

And when a request is declined, high-performing leaders and managers do not dwell onthe apparent rejection, but rather ask, “What’s next?”, and then they make a second orthird request. In business, requests occur as favors, demands, delegation, etc. When making or receiving a request, remember to remain “at choice” – empowered to choose in any possible situation – with an expectation to **accept**, **decline**, or **counteroffer**. Making a request with this intention in mind will engender trust and foster authentic power.

EXPECTATIONS

Building trust and generating commitment in others require effectively coordinatingaction with others. Consider the following expectations *prior* to making a request:

Who: To whom am I requesting? Are they paying attention sufficiently to listen to thedetails of my request? Will I hold him or her accountable?

What: Precisely what am I requesting, and am I sincere about wanting it? Is thereshared agreement between the listener and me as to what is being requested?

Time: Specifically, when do I want the request delivered? How will fulfilling or notfulfilling this request alter the future?

Specifics: Is there a specific place or are there other conditions required to deliver onthis request? Am I willing to hold others accountable for these specifics?

Competence: Is this person fulfilling this request competent to deliver on it as intended? Have I given him/her a chance to tell me that s/he is not competent or to askfollow-up questions on the request?

Context: Do I appreciate that content is context-dependent? For instance, in many settings, just nodding or staying silent implies a commitment to fulfill a request.

SPEECH-ACT: Request

REQUEST: The person Requesting is the Speaker.

1- Committed Speaker	2- Committed Listener	3- By When (date/time)	4- Conditions of Satisfaction	5- Shared Obviousness
1. **Committed** to have a future action performed by someone else. 2. To be **Sincere*** in wanting actions performed. 3. **Present** in the moment. **Focused** on matter at hand. 4. Willing to be held **accountable.**	1. **Present** in the moment. **Focused** on matter at hand. 2. Willing to hold speaker **accountable.** 3. Presumed **Competence** to perform specified action(s).	1. **Include Date and Time** (clarify agreement to manage). 2. Be willing to **follow up** on Date & time. 3. Prioritizes **Future** 4. Creates **Urgency**. 5. Establishes **Reliability**	1. Visualize/Clarify and describe what does completion look like? 2. Clarify/describe what you want fulfilled (not how to do it). 3. Clarify necessary details, conditions or expectations for completion.	1. Surface any assumptions; reveal tacit knowledge. 2. Clarify any unspoken expectations. 3. Clarify concerns: what matters most. 4. Discern level of **Involvement** (priority of concerns).

***SINCERE** = Our public conversations (speaking) matches our private conversations (intentions), constituting our **Integrity**.

TRUST: We develop trust through assessing four conditions: *Competency, Sincerity, Reliability, and Involvement.*

GRANTING BEING: *Power & Choice*. A request leaves everyone at choice. To be generative, power and choice are synonymous. A request is an act that is free to be 1) **accepted**; 2) **declined**; or 3) **negotiated** (counter-offered). Without choice, only force or control is present, occurring as a demand or command (which can be valid), or coercion or manipulation (which feels like force).

CONTEXT is decisive: The context (listening) discloses which properties (#1 - #5) are explicit or implicit.

PRACTICES

To practice, observe how you relate to requests through these questions:

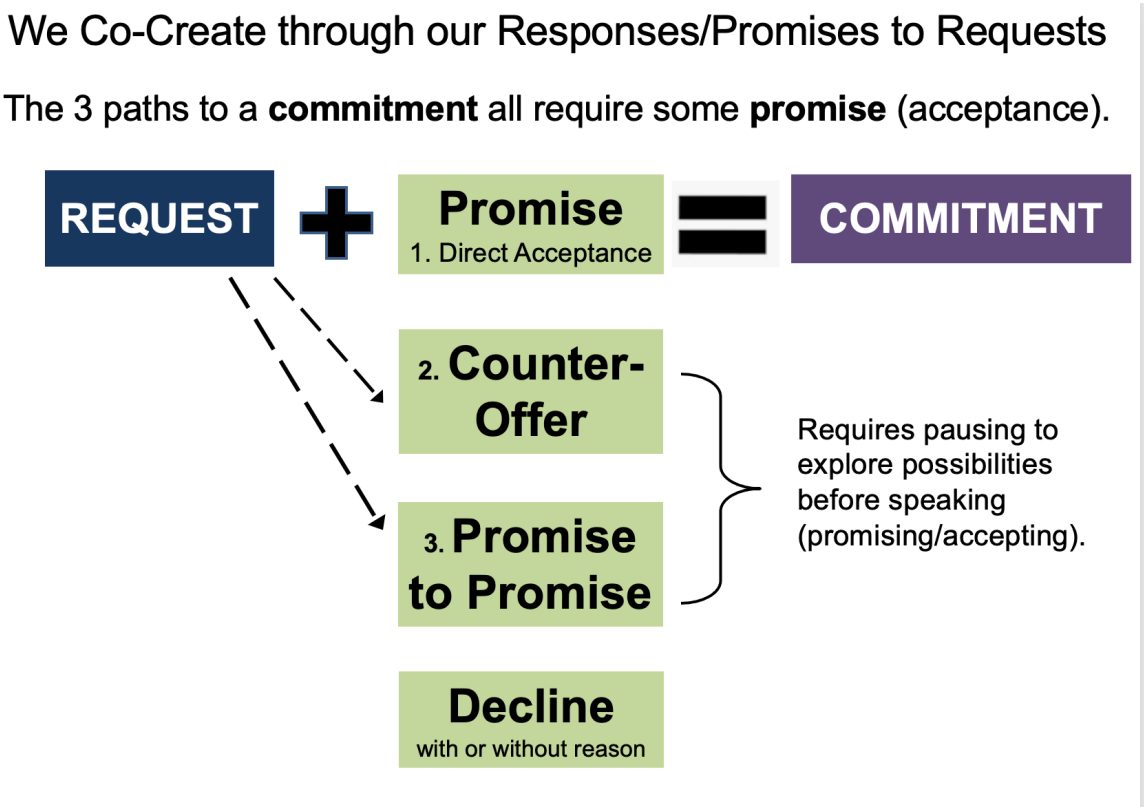
1. Are you tepid or timid about making a request? Do you engage only in “safe”requests (those requests that are predictably answered “yes”)?
2. How do you receive requests? Are you overwhelmed or stuck when receiving requests? What expectations or fears do you have around receiving a request?
3. How long does it take to respond to (accept, counteroffer, decline) a requestfrom others?
4. If you are unable to receive a request, respond to and act on it, you are probably unable to make requests, as well.

Finally, remember this paradox: bringing forth any compelling future or initiating any change in the "drift of life" depends on requesting until rejection. Whether you wish to sell a product, to secure a better job, to publish a poem, or to start your own business, it depends on your ability to handle rejection.

Rejection is the price we pay for the arrival of our dream or next goal. To break through rejection requires that we continue *to request for that goal or accomplishment and all its related conditions* until rejected.

If you wish to be published, secure a loan, or start a venture, only rejection stands between you and that goal. Handling rejection stretches your resolve to move past the fear in setbacks to bring about a possibility into reality. Counting rejections along the way can be a practice that requires dozens of requests daily.

Below is a framework for managing the *responses* or *promises* to *request* to create and fulfill *commitments*.



CHAPTER FIVE

The Promises of an Organization

This chapter explores how the *act of promising* affects organizations. Recall that wedefine a promise as *a commitment to another to fulfill a condition of satisfaction through specific action by a particular time*. Promises, agreements, and commitments alter the future, add meaning to our words, and define our trustworthiness.

Promises in Organizations

Another way to view organizations is as a network of agreements. The strength ofits agreements determines the capacity of the organization to coordinate action, which is required to successfully serve clients, create new products, and to initiate change.

> "In most cases, we promise for the moment; however, the listener hears our words with the fullforce and weight of an impending future."

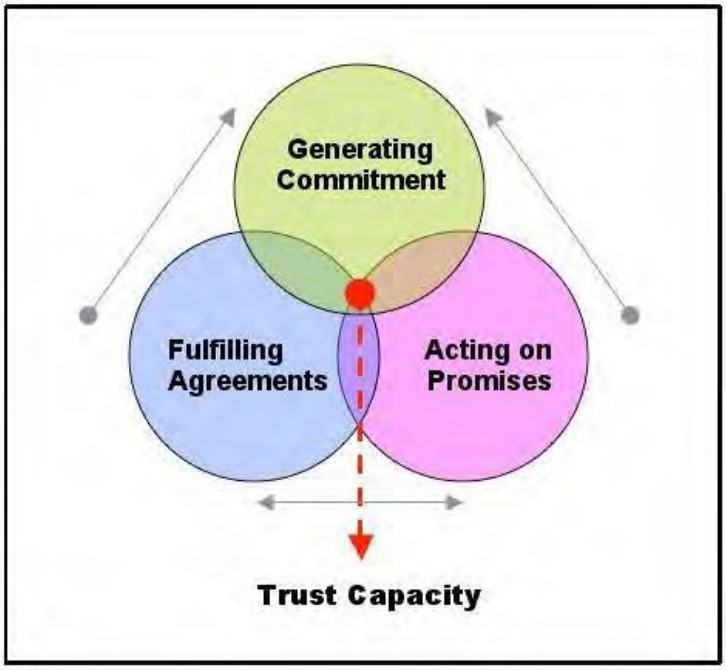
Promises are the seed for coordinating action. Acting on promises is perhaps the greatest responsibility of any organization. We are often very casual with promises: we promise to keep deadlines, to check information, to take up the slack—even to be discrete. In most cases, we promise for the moment; however, the listener hears our words with the full force and weight of an impending future.

Something happens when individuals can act on promises with consistency; it leads to a level of competency, reliability, sincerity (integrity) and involvement —elements used (often subconsciously) to sense and measure trustworthiness.

Promising responsibly doesn't imply perfection; it means operating at a level of awareness that is intentional and proactive. At this level of awareness, we are first to see the need to break a promise, which enables us to revoke promises quickly, providing greater choice to others.

CYCLE OF PROMISES

Acting on promises, consistently, creates a mood of trust:



Acting on promises consistently—whether accepting, negotiating, or revoking them—creates a level of credibility that increases capacity to make agreements.

Acting on agreements consistently with *competency*, *reliability*, and *sincerity* increasesour capacity to generate commitment in others.

With **enhanced commitments**, we generate more intentional action, develop motivated and inspired colleagues, and create a mood of greater levels of trust to act,even in the face of uncertainty.

Many organizational change programs neglect this simple fact: organizational change is about human interaction. Individuals only venture into the unknown when they feel confident. Often, confidence is the result of trusting one's capacity to act on promises.

Without this confidence to act people wait for hard evidence, for others to act, and tosee if people really mean what they say.

Waiting becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, giving permission for others to wait. Inaction takes a heavy toll on organizations: missed opportunities squander time and financial resources; expectation of inaction lowers morale, discouraging initiative; andthe consequence of inaction fosters resignation, encouraging cynicism.

Reversing this dynamic begins with building capacity to *act on promises*. To practiceacting on promises, explore the articles and papers found on our website: **www.bhavanalearning.com**

CHAPTER SIX

Speaking and Listening that disrupts the Predictable Flow of Life

Gaining mastery with promises and requests provides an opportunity to invent futures beyond the predictable flow of life. These opportunities to venture beyondthe predictable include making **bold promises**, making **unreasonable requests**, and **listening for requests *to transform complaints into requests***. We present these three opportunities as follows:

1. BOLD PROMISES *disrupt the normal flow of life* and our normal view of life. A bold promise is a promise we are committed to fulfilling but stretches us beyond our limitsof knowledge or experiences. Said another way, it is the promise we do not yet know how to fulfill but the making of which usually causes us to become more, to view and engage our resources differently, or make requests of others in a way that might be new for us.

Making bold promises beyond our knowledge or our comfort zone also points tonew areas of learning and a new capacity to build.

In making bold promises, we alter the predictable future: we stretch ourselves beyondour frames of reference and our worldviews and we challenge our own past—based knowledge.

> "*In making* unreasonable requests *we challenge assumptions and expectations about 'the way it is' or what's impossible.*"

2. UNREASONABLE REQUESTS *disrupt the normal flow of life* and our normal view of life. These are requests that lie beyond a predictable or anticipated response. Considerthat we usually make requests we can count on: those that give us a predictable response—that is, to receive some kind anticipated "yes" answer, or at the very least an expected counteroffer. An unreasonable request, however, is unpredictable and leaves us vulnerable in that we do not have any idea what the response might be.

For example, if I am expecting a 5% raise, I might predictably request a 10% raise and then negotiate a middle ground. But requesting a 20% raise would be unheardof, even unsettling; yet, such a request brings forth conversations I might otherwise avoid or ignore:

- I might learn what is holding me back
- I might become present to situations so fixed in my current role or the perception of my role that I now see an opportunity to reinvent the role
- I might choose to move on, or I might receive the raise

In any case, I will become aware of situations not otherwise available to me had Inot made such an unreasonable request.

In making **unreasonable requests** we alter the predictable future: we challengeassumptions and expectations about "the way it is" or "what's impossible," we challenge our own past-based knowledge and thereby confront our own self- perceptions and views. We surprise ourselves about what's now possible.

> *"The most common hidden requests lie inside of complaints. Listening for unspoken requests empowers us to transform the past into a future."*

3. By LISTENING FOR REQUESTS*, we disrupt the normal flow of life* and our normalview of life. Requests, though, do not always arrive neatly packaged as clear requests. Often, these may occur as explanations, descriptions, or stories. For instance, at a team meeting a colleague might ponder how nice it would be if we could accomplish a certain goal or project that has been sitting around for a year.

Inside that casual expression might lie a hidden request. And there lies anopportunity to connect, coordinate action, and co-create a future.

The most common hidden requests lie inside of complaints. Listening for unspoken requests empowers us to *transform the past (complaints) into future (requests).* Wetend to resist complaints, input, and even feedback about any result we've produced, a process we've engaged, or action we've taken. **Complaints**, however, have within them hidden **requests**.

Responding to a complaint as gossip or an unproductive complaint just adds mass to its negative charge, making it more real or keeping it in existence. Such responses will likely lead us to becoming defensive, explaining ourselves, or justifying an action. The best we can hope for is to agree with the complaint, which leads to no action and thus no possible future. It finds us simply understanding the past.

Complaints become generative in the ear of the generative listener. Through anact of listening, we experience the hidden request and create a productive complaint, which shifts the conversation from the past (complaint) to the future (request) or perhaps a set of question that invite a request.

Creating a productive complaint is as simple as pausing, breathing and connecting to the ground, and asking the complainer: What can I do? What would you like? What request do you have? Do you have a suggestion? Do you see a way we can resolvethis?

Leaders always have a choice to what they pay attention, to whom they listen, and which conversations they empower. They do not just create or take action, leaders grant being that focuses on the possibility of leadership in others. This is not possible without language.

This is a subtle but significant aspect of leading. Leaders who pay attention to unproductive complaints will attract disempowering conversations, such as stories, explanations, whining, or gossip. For these leaders, the "juice" in life is in the stories about others, or the company, or the situation. Unfortunately, this focus can also lead to resignation, cynicism, or complacency.

Leaders who focus on requests will set a tone, creating a mood or expectation **of results**. For these leaders, people offer productive complaints with the expectation of being part of a solution or moving an item forward, rather than dwelling on "that's just the way it is."

Listening in this way requires practice and an awareness that the people working for you already have access to requests to alter their future. What's missing is usually someone who can listen to those hidden requests.

"Leaders always have a choice to what they pay attention, to whom they listen, and which conversations they empower."

Anthony V. Zampella is an educator, activist, consultant, writer, and researcher in the field of adult learning, unlearning, and leadership development. His work integrates Western learning models, generative listening methods, contemplative practices and Buddhist psychology.

As an Integral theorist, Tony examines the connections between language, listening, and learning in cultivating leadership cultures.

His firm, Bhavana Learning Group, is a pioneer in "ontological learning," which employs a phenomenological examination of the nature and experience of being as distinct from conventional learning that studies "empirical" evidence. First-person or ontological learning cultivates an "existential awareness" that alters perceptions from an interdependent mindset.

Tony writes a regular blog, **Unlearning Curve**, for learning and development professionals." He also contributed to the textbook: *Complex Situations in Coaching: A critical Case-Based Approach*, Routledge, (2019).

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In every field, discipline, artistic endeavor, and business, leaders perceive action and will act, while others speculate, evaluate, explain, assess, and complain, etc.

Without the ability to act, leaders cannot serve.

Generative Language situates everyone for action, as the **language of leadership**.

*Coaches and consultants at the **Bhavana Learning Group** are trained in ontological learning and generative language. We work with coaches and design learning programs to embody and practice, our model and methodology to create a mood of action and, over time, cultivate trust through generating commitment, increasing performance, and enhancing relationships.*

Consistent application of generative language changes us as observers *into* thinkers and listeners*, thereby altering our individual context as to who we are as learners and the world we perceive.*

To engage resources, programs, services, or materials found on our website:
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