

Watch Your Language!



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Why the words we use impact our ability to build a strong bench of talent.

Words matter. The conversations we have with employees can inspire professional growth and ignite positive change. The adjectives we select when discussing an employee's performance can make an impact on a person's ability to embrace feedback and grow. Words are the way we help our teams improve and thrive. Words are the foundation of effective strategic talent management, from selecting individuals to join an organization, to developing them, and pushing their performance as valuable members of the bench.

Our words matter, but the problem is the words we use are inconsistent with what we really mean. We use jargon, short-hand to save time or dodge issues, which inevitably compromises our ability to be deliberate, thoughtful and thorough in the messages we want to and should convey. We get lazy. We use words but we don't take time to choose words. We tend to fall back on professional jargon and generic labels rather than providing thoughtful, deliberate feedback. There's a cost to that. We enter a cycle of hiring the wrong people, delivering empty performance appraisals that yield paltry professional development, and then when the time comes to promote a leader because the company wants to grow there's no one next in line to fill the talent bench.

Words fuel and empower the cycle of acquisition, development and deployment. And when we are intentional in choosing the most accurate words for critical conversations we encounter as we develop leaders, the result is a business of ready performers prepared to launch. The life cycle of a business goes hand in hand with a full talent management system.

Here's how our words impact selection, performance evaluations and development, and how you can be more intentional and strategic as you communicate with your team throughout the talent management process:

Selecting Talent. What we say during the selection process—the single words we use to describe a candidate's skills, personality, experience and potential—will factor in to whether that prospect gets hired for the job.

Effective selection begins with the job description and the words you choose to describe a role. Generic job descriptions and vague goals for the position yield mediocre talent. That's why it's critical to gather your team to discuss what the position entails: the primary role and secondary functions the candidate will play with other departments. A thoughtfully written job description with words that are intentionally selected to define expectations sets the selection process up for success—and that carries on to onboarding, training, development and the entire talent management continuum.

By the same token, words used during interviews set the tone and deliver a message. Carelessly choosing words during candidate interviews might make your message sound artificial, too much like the party line, and turn top performers away. Meet as a team before interviews to assign questions and discuss how you will ask questions. What words will you use, what message will you send? Could questions be worded more consistently with the level of responses you seek?

Developing Talent. The quality of performance management depends on the quality of the conversation. It is not about the forms, or even the formality. Performance management emphasizes the value of the conversation: the responsibility and privilege of the owner/leaders to provide honest, clear direction. And the importance of implementing a performance management infrastructure so everyone in the company recognizes how goals, ratings and rewards are realized.

In performance management, what we write on an employee's performance appraisal can determine whether a promotion is approved or denied. Consider a typical performance appraisal and these common remarks:

“John lacks attention to detail.” Are we saying he has a tough time being focused, or that he needs to be more accurate, does it seem he doesn't care about quality output? Why does “attention to detail” matter in John's position? “Sarah is a strong communicator.” Does that mean she gains buy-in from her peers and managers? Or, does she instruct well? Perhaps she tells people what they want to hear to avoid conflict. Maybe she's charismatic, but not really communicating that well.

We're all guilty of using terminology that can feel empty, lazy or easy (“He has potential”). And we are all guilty of accepting empty terminology from others. The good news is, there are ways to put power back into the words we use and to ensure that managers across the enterprise are selecting the right terms.

One way to be consistent in our conversations is to expand your leadership vocabulary. Adopt a leadership dictionary filled with competencies that are defined in detail. This will help leaders select specific aspects of performance that a person does well (or not so well). Also important is emphasizing word choice. Drive home to leaders why selecting accurate, definitive words to describe performance is critical to identifying top performers and developing them to move up in the organization. Let leaders know: Their words matter. And, when selecting words to use in a performance appraisal, review the terms chosen and ask yourself: Were those the right words? Why did I choose those words? Are these words readily accepted and easy? Do these words mask a problem in the employee or perhaps might these words mask my own shortcomings?

Pushing Performance. If you are growing 10 to 20 percent every year, your top performers should be in new positions every three years. That means having a ready bench of talent who is prepared to *continuously* move up. Does that idea scare you? When this pace of development and promotion is shared with business owners, many of them balk at the idea and wonder, “How on earth am I going to do that? Promote my good people every three years? Who's going fill their roles? What are they going to do next anyway?”

Pushing leaders to formulate plans about deploying talent cultivates ready talent at multiple levels. As one layer moves up, another steps in, and still another prepares for launch. It's a cycle that builds bench strength, and in order for this to happen, the conversations we have with our people are critical. Again, words matter.

First, you identify leaders for specialized training. Then, you have the conversation—you gauge their interest, discuss their talents, identify areas for improvement, and discuss strategies for further development. Every conversation is different but the language you use must be thoughtful, intentional and accurate. (That goes back to the leadership dictionary we talked about.)

Use Words with Confidence. When leaders understand exactly what descriptors mean through a leadership dictionary, and practice grappling with a wide selection of words to choose from during performance appraisals, the entire team gains clarity. When we chose our words, we are more genuine in our message, more sincere in our purpose, and others will know that we put thought into the feedback we're offering, which in turn helps people be receptive of the message.