



## The Speech Acts

### Language is Power

*“We will go the moon.”*

**Language happens to be of the most powerful tools** leaders – and all of us – have at our disposal. It is what we say that distinguishes us from all other creatures.

**Language is action.** Fernando Flores is one of the thought leaders who distinguished language as not simply a tool we use to describe a world that already exists, but rather *an action that produces a world and a future that would otherwise not have existed.*

**Agency becomes possible.** Speaking as creation is a profound shift in understanding our relationship to the world. It implies we are not describers of an objectively knowable world, fixed and the same for everyone. Rather, we are designers and authors of a world with which we interact. *Our speaking actually makes things so!*

The implications are staggering, as you might imagine. The reality that language shapes our world has been backed up by all of the latest research in Quantum Physics and Philosophy. (For more on the underpinnings of the current thinking in leadership and management today, please [contact us](#).)

**The Speech Acts** is the name Flores gave the five primary moves human beings make in language every day. Below we lay out a discussion, inquiries and practices for each of them:

- *Declarations*
- *Assessments & Assertions*
- *Promises*
- *Requests*

#### A Bit about Flores:

Flores was born in Talca, Chile. He became finance minister in the government of Chilean president Salvador Allende and then spent three years as a political prisoner after the military coup of General Augusto Pinochet. Forced into exile after negotiations on his behalf by Amnesty International, he moved with his family to Palo Alto, California, and worked as a researcher in the Computer Science department at Stanford University. He subsequently obtained his PhD at UC Berkeley under the guidance of Hubert Dreyfus, Stuart Dreyfus, John Searle and Ann Markusen. There he developed his work on philosophy, coaching and workflow technology, influenced by Heidegger, Maturana, John Austin and others. His thesis was titled “Management and Communication in the Office of the Future.”

# Declarations

*"One day all men (and women) will be judged by the content of their character and not the color of their skin."*

*"India will be free."*

*"I now pronounce you husband and wife."*

**Exercise:** Read the above declarations out loud and feel into the effect they have.

**Language and practice make it so.** This last quote is a great example many of us have experienced directly or indirectly. Does marriage exist out there somewhere? Is it the piece of paper you sign? Can you go and find a marriage? NO! Marriage is a declaration made in language and backed up with a certain set of practices we all agree constitute being married. There is no marriage out there somewhere. It lives in language and practice.

## Assess Your Declarations, a Leaders' Inventory

Take stock of your relationship to how you speak, the declarations you make and have made, and their effects on your life and work.

- What declarations have you made that now become context, and for which you have invented powerful practices?
- What declarations have you made that no longer serve you, that still run your life? This is a way to look at what is old, in the background or in conflict with our current declarations.
- What is the biggest declaration you have ever made?
- What declaration is lurking in the background that you know needs to be made, and that will alter everything?
- What declaration, if made, would catalyze a huge breakthrough in your team, in your organization, in your life?

**Leaders make declarations no one else will dare to make.** They are out on the skinny branches, going where others are afraid to go. They are willing to experiment, to learn in their mistakes and make new declarations.

*"The thought manifests as the word.*

*The word manifests as the deed.*

*The deed develops into habit.*

*And the habit hardens into character;*

*So watch the thought and its way with care;*

*And let it spring from love born out of concern for all beings. As the shadow follows the body,*

*As we think, so we become."*

*~The Buddha*

# Assessment and Assertions

## Two Companion Speech Acts

*"Language is an ACTION. It produces a future and a world, which unspoken, would not have existed."*

**Assessments and assertions are not the same thing**, though most of us think of them as such, and use them interchangeably. This confusion can cause significant personal suffering, and can cripple performance and team coordination in an organization. We hold the power to create speech actions that move our communities and teams forward. Understanding how assessments and assertions differ offers us the key to unlocking that power.

### What is the difference?

**Assertion:** A statement that is either true or false.

**Assessment:** An opinion or judgment made for the sake of coordinating action, or to justify a feeling.

*"Gravity keeps things planted on the earth."*

That statement is true. We can provide evidence to support the claim and prove its validity. If we can disprove its validity, the statement is still an assertion. It's just a false one.

Assertions are statements that can be witnessed and can resolve a doubt opened by a question (implicit or explicit).

*"That is an effective marketing tool."*

At first glance this might actually look like an assertion, but it is not! We might be able to provide evidence to support our claim; however, to declare something "effective" is actually an assessment made by an observer with a certain history and set of standards about effectiveness that do not match all other people's standards. There is no doubt you could find someone who refutes the claim and provides other supporting evidence for the assessment.

**We are assessment-making machines.** It is part of our hard wiring.

*"I can trust her with my life."*

*"He's not very competent when it comes to deadlines."*

*"Tomorrow will be a better day."*

**An assessment can be grounded or ungrounded.** "Grounding" means that you have a basis for judging that your judgment is useful, based on: 1) A history of past action; 2) Specified standards; or 3) There are not opposing assessments that are as well grounded.

**Make the distinction.** We are mammals capable of making assessments that will ensure our very survival – *"The bear can't get into the house."* That said, we are constantly churning out assessments about ourselves and others as if they were true assertions and then make decisions and take actions based on them. When we do not take time to distinguish the types of assessments we are trafficking, we hinder our prosperity. Understanding the origins to our definitive actions gives us power.

**Assessments and Powerful Leading.** Leaders are paid to make powerful, grounded assessments – about the future, about their organizations, about their industry and about other leaders. The more powerful and grounded a leader's assessments, the more value she offers.

The mark of a leader lies in one's ability to discern which assessments are useful and which are not. Assessments are always made by an observer, and knowing who you are as an observer makes you more powerful. Knowing that assessments are born of thought and feeling is critical.

### **Assessments in Action, a Leaders' Inventory**

1. As a first step, take some time to be an observer, and watch and listen to the statements made by others. Can you tell the difference between an assertion and an assessment? Take notes and code what you hear around you.
2. Then, reflect on your relationships: Can you think of the assessments you have made about your boss, your colleagues, your team, any one else that are currently informing your actions? Do you hold them like assertions? Do you have grounding, or "evidence," to support your assessments?
3. Use the following questions as fodder for this inventory.
  - Are you an effective leader?
  - Where are you making powerful, grounded assessments?
  - Where are you listening to assessments you ought to decline?
  - Where are you not paying attention to someone's assessments that you ought to hear?
  - What assessments are you withholding that would serve? And of whom?
  - What assessments are you harboring, about whom, that do not serve?

## **Promises**

*"When [Mrs. Mallard and her baby ducklings] reached the pond and swam across to the little island, there was Mr. Mallard waiting for them, just as he had promised."*

*~Make Way for Ducklings, by Robert McCloskey*

**To make a promise is a profound act**, and we swim in a sea of them every day. Promises make and break reputations. They power businesses and organizations. Within each promise lies the possibility and vulnerability of trust, and the hope of a desire fulfilled. Therein also lies a key to our leadership challenge: to be responsible for our promises, to become skillful at negotiating and re-negotiating them, and to manage our reactions. Because trust and hope are intrinsic to the nature of promises, when promises are broken, the costs are high.

**So how do we manage these precious resources?** How do we relate to our daily promises in ways that inform and strengthen our integrity, our trustworthiness, and consequently, our relationships?

**Integrity is not about keeping all of our promises all the time.** It is about what we say and do, and how we BE, when we break our promises. How do you BE when you break a promise? Do you get defensive? Do you hide out? Do you blame someone else? Do you apologize?

Things change. Life alters our path and we need to re-align our promises to match current reality. With that said, *how* we go about the re-alignment process is the key to maintaining trust in relationship and being in integrity with ourselves.

**Somatic Practice.** Connect to your body. Then think about Mr. Mallard and the baby ducklings in the quote above. What gets evoked in you? You may think: "Nice, a father who keeps his promises." You may notice you feel a sense of relaxation. Your heart opens. You may think, "Ah, that is so great."

Read the sentence again; maybe even out loud. What do you notice in your body? What is your automatic narrative that pops up when you hear that Mr. Mallard kept his promise to be there when he said he would be?

**Noticing your reactions will offer a direct inlet to your own relationship with promises.** When you observe the feelings evoked during a moment when promises are being made and broken, you can begin to sense where you feel solid about your word, or whether you need to re-negotiate your promise to fit new circumstances. You will recognize the impact of broken promises others have made you, and be able to discern how to best manage your reactions.

### **Assess Your Promises, a Leaders' Inventory**

Sink into your body as you read the following questions and observe your relationship to promises:

- What does the word "promise" evoke for you? Are you cynical about it? Are you trusting?
- What is a promise?
- Which promises do you make that you know you won't keep?
- What are your reasons for not keeping them?
- From whom do you accept promises when you know they won't be kept? Which promises are they? What is the impact on you?
- What promises are you currently living in that you are now breaking?
- What promises do you need to revoke or re-negotiate to get back into integrity with yourself and the person you promised?

Becoming masterful at managing your promises will dramatically improve your effectiveness, solidify your relationships, and deepen your honor and dignity.

## **Requests**

*"Will you take out the trash before you leave for work?"*

Requests, we make them every day. "Will you get that report from Jack's office?" "Will you drive the kids to school today?" "Will you ask Mary if she spoke to her client yet?" At home or at work, requests reside at the heart of conversations that empower action.

**A request is an action made in language (and body) that creates a future that would not have existed previously.** You ask: "Will you marry me?" and whether the answer is Yes or No, you have created a future that would not have existed had the request not been made. Requests propel future action, and action is what makes things happen. For example:

1. Requests lead people to make "promises" to fulfill on them.
2. Promises made and fulfilled build trust and forward critical action.



3. Promises made and broken breach trust and cost people and organizations time and money and heartache.
4. A declined request leaves the person asking in a position to complete the action herself or in need of asking someone else.

If you deconstruct each of these processes you can see that many, many breakdowns that occur between human beings begin with an unexamined understanding of what is happening when making a request of another person. So, what *is* in a request?

**The Anatomy of a Request.** A request must include:

- A speaker and a listener.
- A shared understanding of the request being made.
- A time by which the request must be fulfilled. (This is one element of a request we often miss and it creates a huge amount of wasted resources.)
- Clear conditions of satisfaction.

### **Assess Your Requests, a Leaders' Inventory**

Since requests beget action, and leaders are in the business of causing people to take action on behalf of a mission, let us apply the rigor and distinctions that can have our requests be potent, effective, efficient, and inspiring. Take some time with this Leaders' Inventory below.

- Do you make powerful requests of others who are in condition to fulfill on that request? Do you ever make a request of someone who you know is not really able to fulfill on it?
- Do you make requests of those competent to fulfill, but whom you know will not because they chronically over-promise?
- If you make the request and you know they won't fulfill, are they responsible for the breakdown or are you?
- Do you make requests no one listens to or takes seriously?
- When you make requests, do you get a clear promise back from the other person with clear conditions of satisfaction (meaning that you clearly state what will have you say that the request has been fulfilled)? E.g. If they take the kids to school at 11am, is that fulfilling on your request?
- Do you make requests that cause people to go beyond who they currently know themselves to be?
- Do you make requests that empower others to be greater than they currently are? Do you make requests that lead people to discover something new?
- What requests do you accept again and again that you ought to be declining? What requests do you decline to make that, if you made, would force you to grow?
- What new actions you will be taking as a result of your reflections?

Not only can Requests be used to forward action, they create a new possibility for a person to live into, thereby providing access to their professional and personal development.