

MANAGING DEFENSE RESOURCES. IS THERE A ‘LANGUAGE OF LEADERSHIP’?

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Focusing on President Barack Obama’s statement on defense strategy in response to \$450 billion cuts required by the Budget Control Act of 2011, the present article examines why a leader’s ability to craft and articulate a message that is highly motivational is so critical nowadays and epitomizes on the new language skills of leadership. Moreover, it looks at a concrete example of how a modern leader can bring about understanding, acceptance, commitment and confidence in his national missions through his/her choice of words, values, and beliefs. It also explores the importance of rhetorical techniques such as quotes, metaphors, rhythm, etc. in causing excitement and enthusiasm about the leader’s message to the nation.

Key words: *human resources management, defence resources management, language of leadership, management tools*

1. INTRODUCTION

Among the most valuable management assets, language holds a place apart. At any command level, it can be stated beyond any doubt that the language of leadership has always been a powerful management tool.

The era of managing by dictate is ending and is being replaced by an era of managing by inspiration. The ability to craft and articulate a message that is highly motivational has been included among the new leadership skills demanded of this era and has taken prevalence in recent years.

Our thesis is that the moments of crisis – such as making the public statement on the \$450 billion cuts required by the Budget Control Act of 2011 – can be turned into an opportunity for the leader to construct an appealing and motivating force for change and transformation in his organization.

President Barack Obama’s statement [1] has been chosen

as an example for the analysis which attempts to identify the elements defining a successful leader language-wise. For all those interested, the statement can be accessed using the following link: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/01/05/remarks-president-defense-strategic-review>.

In our approach to the analysis we started from the assumption that, according to the description provided by Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee (2004) [2], President Obama follows primarily the ‘visionary leader’ style, insofar as he ‘moves people towards a shared vision, telling them where to go but not how to get there - thus motivating them to struggle forwards’[3]. According to this description, the leader openly shares information, hence giving knowledge power to the listeners. This style is recommended by the quoted authors as best when a new direction is needed.

The US leader's profile would be incomplete unless another skill is added to his oratory art, i.e., the 'commanding leader' style [4]: this is about the leader who soothes fears and gives clear directions by his or her powerful stance, commanding and expecting full compliance (agreement is not needed). He needs emotional self-control for success and can seem cold and distant (the latter is not applicable to Obama's style, though). This approach is best in any organization – be it the nation-scale one – in times of crisis when you need unquestioned rapid action and with problem employees who do not respond to other methods.

Having established the leader's style, let us proceed to the following point of the analysis, by looking into the so-called '5 secrets of the language of leadership' [5] to check if and how they have been used by Obama, highlighting them in the actual presidential statement.

2. THE '5 SECRETS OF THE LANGUAGE OF LEADERSHIP'

Secret 1: **Begin strongly.** Impress your audience with an opening zinger [6].

"Good morning, everybody. The United States of America is the greatest force for freedom and security that the world has ever known. And in no small measure, that's because we've built the best-trained, best-led, best-equipped military in history – and as Commander-in-Chief, I'm going to keep it that way".

Secret 2: **Focus on one theme.** A speech is like a symphony. It can have three movements, but it must have one dominant melody.

"Indeed, all of us on this stage – every single one of us – have a profound responsibility to every soldier, sailor, airman, Marine and Coast Guardsman who puts their life on the line for America. We owe them a strategy with well-defined goals; to only send them into harm's way when it's absolutely necessary; to give them the equipment and the support that they need to get the job done; and to care for them and their families when they come home. That is our solemn obligation..."

"... So, yes, our military will be leaner, but the world must know the United States is going to maintain our military superiority with armed forces that are agile, flexible and ready for the full range of contingencies and threats..."

"... Over the next 10 years, the growth in the defense budget will slow, but the fact of the matter is this: It will still grow, because we have global responsibilities that demand our leadership. In fact, the defense budget will still be larger than it was toward the end of the Bush administration. And I firmly believe, and I think the American people understand, that we can keep our military strong and our nation secure with a defense budget that continues to be larger than roughly the next 10 countries combined".

Secret 3: **Use simple language.** Toss out the beat-around-the-bush jargon of bureaucrats and pick up your pace with personal, colorful language, tailored in our case to the nation-scale audience.

“In short, we’ve succeeded in defending our nation, taking the fight to our enemies, reducing the number of Americans in harm’s way, and we’ve restored America’s global leadership. That makes us safer and it makes us stronger. And that’s an achievement that every American – especially those Americans who are proud to wear the uniform of the United States Armed Forces – should take great pride in”.

Secret 4: Draw a picture in the listener’s mind. Transform dry abstractions like “private enterprise” into a powerful picture like *“the sturdy horse pulling along the cart of democracy”*, as Churchill did.

“...our troops... have served as a force for universal rights and human dignity”.

“Even as our troops continue to fight in Afghanistan, the tide of war is receding”.

Secret 5: End with an emotion. Express feeling from the heart when you cap your speech.

“Our men and women in uniform give their very best to America every single day, and in return they deserve the very best from America. And I thank all of you for the commitment to the goal that we all share: keeping America strong and secure in the 21st century, and keeping our Armed Forces the very best in the world”.

In conclusion, it can be stated that President Obama made best use of all the 5 secrets of the language of leadership in his statement.

The next step of our analysis is focused on the very language of leadership used in this example.

3. THE ‘LANGUAGE OF LEADERSHIP’

According to Conger (1991), the so-called ‘language of leadership’ can be broken into two distinct skill categories which translate into processes [7], as follows:

a. **Framing** – This essentially illustrates **the leader’s message**; it is the process of defining the purpose of the organization in a meaningful way.

b. **Rhetorical crafting** – **This is defined as the leader’s ability to use symbolic language to give emotional power to his/her message.** *“While the message provides a sense of direction, rhetoric heightens its motivational appeal and determines whether it will be sufficiently memorable to influence the day-to-day decision-making of an organization”*[8].

The main bricks to build on in order to create a meaningful frame for the mission of any organization are *the values* and *beliefs* of the respective organization (in our case the American nation) – especially those that reinforce commitment/acceptance and provide guidance for the future actions (i.e., the implementation of the \$450 billion cuts). Their wise choice by the leader to be used in his speech is an enabler of the leader’s vision acceptance and accomplishment. *“By selecting and amplifying specific values and beliefs, the leader further frames interpretations of events, problems, or issues as they relate to the vision”*[9].

Effective leadership consists in several core skills, among which we can identify the ability to use the values which can provide the participants in a

certain collective action with a sense of purpose. This ability of choice proven by a skillful leader is best illustrated when invoking those particular values which impact the audience strongly and thereby justify the leader's decision by the support the organization/public opinion later provides.

Several techniques [10] can be used in order to frame the actions and the missions, as follows:

Value amplification is the process of identifying and elevating certain values as basic to the overall mission. In our particular case, the values referred to and amplified by Obama in order to reach his goals are: respect for the soldiers, the war veterans and their families; pursuit of universal rights; human dignity; patriotism.

Using quotes is a value amplification tool by making reference to famous words uttered by famous American leaders:

"President Eisenhower once said—that 'each proposal must be weighed in the light of a broader consideration: the need to maintain balance in and among national programs'..."

This quote is immediately elaborated on in Obama's words and the idea of balance is reiterated: *"After a decade of war; and as we rebuild the source of our strength—at home and abroad—it's time to restore that balance"*.

Belief Amplification is about beliefs, i.e., ideas about which factors support or impede the actions taken to achieve those desired values. There are four basic belief categories that are important to organizational leaders in framing their missions and the activities related to them:

1. The Mission's Importance

The beliefs about the importance or seriousness of the mission are the primary focus for Obama's statement. They are repeatedly pointed out to increase the effect and create impact on the nation. His persuasive skills reach a climax when describing the current situation against the past mistakes:

"That's why I called for this comprehensive defense review – to clarify our strategic interests in a fast-changing world, and to guide our defense priorities and spending over the coming decade – because the size and the structure of our military and defense budgets have to be driven by a strategy, not the other way around. Moreover, we have to remember the lessons of history. We can't afford to repeat the mistakes that have been made in the past – after World War II, after Vietnam – when our military was left ill prepared for the future. As Commander-in-Chief, I will not let that happen again. Not on my watch".

Then he enumerates some of the major defense-related achievements made 'on his watch' (the same paragraph has been previously used as an example of colorful, expressive language):

"In short, we've succeeded in defending our nation, taking the fight to our enemies, reducing the number of Americans in harm's way, and we've restored America's global leadership. That makes us safer and it makes us stronger. And that's an achievement that every American – especially those Americans who are proud to wear the uniform of the United States Armed Forces – should take great pride in".

After having sensitized the audience in this way, he then frames his future vision as the only viable and most attractive pathway:

“We need a start, we need a smart, strategic set of priorities. The new guidance that the Defense Department is releasing today does just that. I want to thank Secretary Panetta and General Dempsey for their extraordinary leadership during this process. I want to thank the service secretaries and chiefs, the combatant commanders and so many defense leaders – military and civilian, active, Guard and reserve – for their contributions. Many of us met repeatedly – asking tough questions, challenging our own assumptions and making hard choices. And we’ve come together today around an approach that will keep our nation safe and our military the finest that the world have ever known”.

2. The Need for, or Root Causes of the Mission

The second dimension of beliefs relates to the root of Obama’s mission. To achieve strong intrinsic appeal, the President’s basic purpose must address the previously mentioned, deeply rooted values of the American nation, i.e., respect for the soldiers and their families; pursuit of universal rights; human dignity; patriotism.

“Now we’re turning the page on a decade of war. Three years ago, we had some 180,000 troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. Today, we’ve cut that number in half. And as the transition in Afghanistan continues, more of our troops will continue to come home. More broadly, around the globe we’ve strengthened alliances,

forged new partnerships, and served as a force for universal rights and human dignity”.

3. Stereotypes about Antagonists of the Mission are important for generating commitment and cohesion, insofar as they provide models of what the present state is not; thus stereotypes help define the future vision by contrast:

“At the same time, we have to renew our economic strength here at home, which is the foundation of our strength around the world. And that includes putting our fiscal house in order. To that end, the Budget Control Act passed by Congress last year – with the support of Republicans and Democrats alike – mandates reductions in federal spending, including defense spending. I’ve insisted that we do that responsibly. The security of our nation and the lives of our men and women in uniform depend on it”.

“... Some will no doubt say that the spending reductions are too big; others will say that they’re too small”.

4. Efficacy of the Mission

The beliefs about the efficacy of the mission are critically important. In essence, they build confidence in the entire mission. A leader will draw analogies, for instance, to earlier proven successes to confirm the likelihood of the current mission succeeding.

“And over the past three years, that’s what we’ve done. We’ve continued to make historic investments in our military — our troops and their capabilities, our military families and our veterans. And thanks to their extraordinary service, we’ve ended our war in Iraq. We’ve decimated al

Qaeda's leadership. We've delivered justice to Osama bin Laden, and we've put that terrorist network on the path to defeat. We've made important progress in Afghanistan, and we've begun to transition so Afghans can assume more responsibility for their own security. We joined allies and partners to protect the Libyan people as they ended the regime of Muammar Qaddafi".

To conclude this part, we can stress out once again that framing is the leader's interpretation of his or her organization's purpose with accompanying values and beliefs; moreover, it is an opportunity for the leader to construct an appealing and motivating force for change and transformation in his/her organization.

As stated earlier [7], the "language of leadership" can be broken into two distinct skill categories which translate into processes. Considering that the style of verbal communication is a critical distinguishing factor in whether the message will be remembered and endorsed, it is of utmost importance that **the art of rhetoric** be an intrinsic part of the language of leadership, insofar as the process by which the statement is made (i.e., worded and phrased) is just as significant.

It is again Conger (1991) [11] who calls such skills 'rhetorical techniques of inspirational leaders', supporting his idea by the greater impact leaders' words have when used as symbols:

"Apart from an appeal to emotions and ideals, inspiring leaders use a number of rhetorical techniques such as metaphors and analogy or different language styles

or rhythmic devices to ensure that the symbolic content of their message has a profound impact". [12]

Examples of such techniques are the use of metaphors, analogies, organizational stories, tailoring the language to the audience, alliteration, repetition, etc.

In the statement under analysis, metaphors and other figures of speech are used in order to provide vividness, clarification and to express certain emotions while interpreting reality. Notice for instance the following:

- 'the USA is the greatest force for freedom and security that the world has ever known' (hyperbole);
- 'the source of our strength – at home and abroad' (metaphor about the US military);
- 'the best-trained, best-led, best-equipped military in history' (triple epithet expressed by compound superlative adjectives and emphasized by the repetition of the intensifier 'best');
- 'profound responsibility', 'solemn obligation', 'historic investments', 'extraordinary service', 'fast-changing world' (epithets), etc.

The use of **metaphors** and of other **figures of speech** in a political statement is therefore ranked as very important in the dedicated literature [13]: it is highly rated as – judged against the effect it has on the audience – it consecutively causes puzzlement, emotion, insight and eventually resolution. It also adds vividness, persuasive strength and effectiveness to the communication process.

"The listener is not a passive receiver of information but is triggered into a state of active

thinking as they puzzle over the meaning of the story and attempt to make sense of it usually in light of their own situation. This process is so engaging that it fosters listener attention and interest". [14]

Sound-related elements of rhetoric are also noticed in President Obama's statement, e.g. repetition, rhythm, balance and alliteration. It is said a certain rhythm can often spellbind an audience: the ancient incantations are just one famous example. In his speeches, another American president, Roosevelt, often employed alliteration (i.e. the repetition of initial consonant sounds in two or more neighboring words or syllables). One example of **alliteration** taken from Obama's statement reads as follows: "We need *a start* – we need *a smart, strategic set* of priorities". It can be noticed that the repetition of sibilant sounds (st-, sm-, st-, s-) heightens the effect of the message by suggesting a whisper-hiss aural sensation and thereby creates an attention-holding rhythm.

Another instance of using alliteration is the phrase '*to put life on the line*' in which the repetition of liquid sounds in the [ai] diphthong environment suggests the likely glide into death of innocent soldiers if measures are not taken by nation-wide emotional involvement and acceptance of the solutions proposed for the defense-related issues.

Other effects created by **repetition and rhythm** in Obama's speech:

"It will be easy to take issue with a *particular* change in a *particular* program" (suggesting the President's

capacity to tailor the measures to the issues and expectations of the Americans and to bring about the desired outcomes).

"That *makes us safer* and it *makes us stronger*" (speaking about the indestructible unity between the President and the nation, reinforced by repetition of Verb+Personal Pro **us** and comparative form of abstract Adjective).

"... the *best-trained, best-led, best-equipped* military in history..." (inducing the idea of excellence of the US military).

"... *our* military – *our* troops, ... *our* military families and *our* veterans..." (the repetition of the 1st person plural Possessive Adjective is meant to show again empathy and total identification between the President and the nation). The same applies for "Our men and women in uniform give their very best **to** America every single day, and in return they deserve the very best **from** America".

Among the figures of speech that make up the leader's language in the statement under analysis it is noteworthy to highlight the different (and many) **ways of addressing the military**: every soldier, sailor, airman, Marine and Coast Guardsman; armed forces that are agile, flexible and ready; our men and women in uniform; those Americans who are proud to wear the uniform of the United States Armed Forces.

Examples of enumeration:

"... *asking tough questions, challenging our own assumptions and making hard choices*" (in which the structure Ving+Direct Object is repeated);

“... we've strengthened alliances, forged new partnerships, and served as a force for universal rights and human dignity” (in which the structure Transitive Verb+Direct Object is repeated).

“... intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, counterterrorism, countering weapons of mass destruction and the ability to operate in environments where adversaries try to deny us access (i.e., the capabilities that we need for the future).”

Another effective technique to stress out empathy and identification of the President with the people who elected him is the shift from the Personal Pronoun **THEY** (used in the first paragraph) to **WE** (used throughout the rest of the statement). This is a direct recall of the opening words of the famous Preamble to the Constitution of the United States, which say: ‘We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.’ In addition, it falls under the value amplification process previously referred to in this article.

The rhetorical techniques enforced by repetition used by Obama in his statement are best complemented by **the President's Pledge**, expressed repeatedly and in different words:

“... as Commander-in-Chief, I'm going to keep it that way”.

“We owe them [the military] a strategy with well-defined goals; to only send them into harm's way when it's absolutely necessary; to give them the equipment and the support that they need to get the job done; and to care for them and their families when they come home. That is our solemn obligation”.

“We have to remember the lessons of history. We can't afford to repeat the mistakes that have been made in the past – after World War II, after Vietnam – when our military was left ill prepared for the future. As Commander in Chief, I will not let that happen again. Not on my watch”.

“We'll keep working to give our veterans the care, the benefits and job opportunities that they deserve and that they have earned”.

“And I firmly believe, and I think the American people understand, that we can keep our military strong and our nation secure with a defense budget that continues to be larger than roughly the next 10 countries combined”.

Which are the reasons underlying this technique Obama uses with such ease? First, the role of repetition is to ensure recall. When it comes to an oral address, speech is more difficult to comprehend even for native speakers, in absence of some visual support. Once spoken, the speaker's words seem to fly away; it is only the listener's ability to remember them that ensures impact. “If the speaker makes numerous points, the listener is not likely to recall them all. The listener must be able to understand the speaker's ideas. The problem is that the listener has little time to pause for reflection”. [15]

Second, repetition focuses the listener on the key ideas meant to hit the target audience. Last, but not least, **paralanguage** [16] is an additional important factor to keep in mind in effective communication. Through appropriate paralanguage, one can communicate an image of self-confidence and power. In other words, Obama's powerful style of speech brings about the audience's perception of him as a more assuming, more goal-directed, and straightforward leader of the nation.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The present research has attempted to bring to surface the power of the spoken word and its role in the new approach to the language of leadership.

The general conclusion is that a modern leader can bring about understanding, acceptance, commitment and confidence in his national missions through his/her choice of words, values, and beliefs. Another conclusion brings to the fore the importance of rhetorical techniques such as quotes, metaphors, rhythm, etc. in causing excitement and enthusiasm about the leader's message to the nation: recent research [17] supports these ideas. It has therefore become obvious that the language of leadership plays a vital role in the acceptance and accomplishment of the leader's vision and in the expression of his mission.

In addition, the leader's persuasiveness is given by the latter's craftsmanship to shape reality by means of words conveying values, beliefs and

assumptions to ensure commitment and confidence in the mission.

Among the rhetorical techniques recommended in the dedicated literature, those based on metaphors, quotes, repetition and rhythm, and on framing have been exemplified in Barack Obama's statement. They were diagnosed as valuable enablers to conveying ideas in the most powerful ways.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

[1] Full transcript of President Barack Obama's statement on defense strategy in response to \$450 billion cuts required by the Budget Control Act of 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/01/05/remarks-president-defense-strategic-review>, 05. Jan. 2012.

[2] Goleman, Daniel, Boyatzis, Richard and McKee, Annie. *Primal Leadership*, HBS Press, 2004.

[3] *Idem*.

[4] *Ibidem*.

[5] Burkey, Richard. *Winston Churchill's 5 secrets to Speaking the Language of Leadership*, Apud: Roy Childs, *Emotional Intelligence and Leadership*, 2004. www.emotional-intelligence.htm

[6] a quick, witty or pointed remark or retort [author's note] (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/zinger>).

[7] Conger, Jay A. *Inspiring others: the language of leadership*. In: *Academy of Management Executive*, 1991, Vol. 5. No. 1, McGill University, pp. 31-46.

[8] Conger, Jay A., *op. cit.*, p. 32.

[9] *Idem*.

[10] Conger, Jay A., *op. cit.*, p. 36.

[11] *Idem*, p. 38

[12] *Ibidem*, pp. 38-40.

[13] See, for instance, Osborn, M.M. and Ehninger, D. *The Metaphor in Public Address*, In: *Speech Monograph*, Issue 29, 1982, p. 228.

[14] Winner, A.R. *The Spellbinders*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1984.

[15] *Idem*, p. 42.

[16] Paralanguage refers to the non-verbal elements of communication used to modify meaning and convey emotion, such as your tone, pitch or manner of speaking. An example of paralanguage is the pitch of your voice (author's note).

[17] See, for further reading: Bennis, W. and Nanus, B. *Leaders*, (New York; Harper & Row, 1985); Mintzberg, H. and Waters, J.A. "Of Strategies, Deliberate and Emergent", In: *Strategic*

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