



Kambium



KAMBIUM WHITE PAPER

Framing Change

The Strategic Power of Words in Shaping Organisational Transformation

Abstract

This white paper examines how language shapes the success or failure of organisational change. Drawing on research from behavioural science and real-world examples, it demonstrates that word choice, framing, and communication style directly influence employee engagement, resistance, and trust. The paper identifies common language pitfalls, offers practical tools for leaders, and provides actionable strategies to make language a catalyst for effective, sustainable transformation.

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Executive Summary

The Strategic Role of Language in Change

In an era where transformation is a constant, the difference between successful and stalled change often comes down to communication. Language is not simply a vehicle for information. It is a strategic lever that shapes how people perceive, trust, and act on change initiatives. Leaders who understand and intentionally use language can accelerate engagement, reduce resistance, and drive sustainable outcomes.

Why Words Matter

Research from behavioural economics, cognitive linguistics, and organisational psychology demonstrates that the words leaders choose (whether in framing, metaphors, or emotional tone) have a measurable impact on employee mindset and behaviour. The framing of a message can inspire hope or trigger anxiety; metaphors can clarify complexity or create confusion; emotionally intelligent language can build psychological safety or erode trust.

Despite its power, language is often treated as an afterthought in change management. This oversight carries significant risks:



Misinterpretation

Ambiguous or poorly chosen words can create confusion, leading to misaligned expectations and disengagement.



Erosion of Trust

Euphemisms, jargon, or inconsistent messaging can foster scepticism and diminish credibility.



Increased Resistance

Negative framing or emotionally detached language can trigger defensiveness, anxiety, and active pushback.



Lost Opportunity

When language fails to inspire or clarify, organisations miss the chance to build momentum and unlock discretionary effort.

Why Language is Often Overlooked

In the rush to deliver results, language is frequently treated as an afterthought and a matter of style rather than strategy. Communications are drafted to inform, but not always to inspire, clarify, or build trust. Leaders may assume that the facts will speak for themselves, or that a well-designed plan will naturally win support.

However, research and experience show that the words chosen to frame change can have a profound impact on how people interpret, accept, or resist new directions. Ambiguous terms, negative framing, jargon, and emotionally detached language can all undermine even the most well-intentioned initiatives.

Common Language Traps

Despite best intentions, many change efforts are undermined by six common language pitfalls: ambiguous terms, negative framing, euphemisms, jargon, absolutes, and impersonal language. These traps can create confusion, foster scepticism, and disengage teams at critical moments.

A Practical Approach for Leaders

This white paper provides a practical framework for leaders and change agents to audit, refine, and align their change communications. Tools such as language audits, framing techniques, and emotionally intelligent messaging are explored in depth, supported by real-world case studies and actionable recommendations.

Unlocking Organisational Potential

By mastering the language of change, leaders can clarify vision, foster genuine commitment, and unlock discretionary effort across their organisations. The intentional use of language is not a soft skill; it is a core competency for anyone responsible for guiding transformation.

Reflection Prompt

How might your choice of words be shaping how people respond to change in your organisation?

The Science of Language and Change

Amid organisational change, leaders often focus on strategy, structure, and process; believing that if the plan is sound, results will follow. Yet, time and again, even the best-designed initiatives falter not because of flawed logic, but because of how change is communicated and received. Employees don't just react to the facts; they react to the way those facts are presented. The language used in change communications is not a neutral conduit. It is an active force that shapes perception, emotion, and ultimately, behaviour.

Despite this, language is frequently overlooked or treated as an afterthought. Leaders may assume that clarity is implicit, or that the right words will naturally emerge. Science, however, shows that language choices have profound, predictable effects on how people interpret and respond to change.

The following theories and models collectively demonstrate that language is not a neutral tool. It is a powerful force that shapes perception, emotion, and behaviour at every stage of change. Leaders who understand and apply these insights can use language as a strategic lever to guide their organisations through uncertainty and transformation.

Framing Theory

Framing theory, developed by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, demonstrates that the way information is presented (the "frame") significantly influences decision-making and perception. In organisational change, framing can determine whether a message is received with optimism or anxiety. For example, describing a restructuring as a "growth opportunity" rather than a "cost-cutting exercise" can shift employee focus from fear to possibility, even when the underlying facts are unchanged.

Cognitive Linguistics and Mental Models

Cognitive linguistics explores how language activates mental models which are internal representations that shape how people interpret and respond to information. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's work on metaphors shows that metaphors are not just stylistic devices but fundamental to thought. In change, metaphors like "journey," "pivot," or "burning platform" quickly shape expectations and emotional responses. If leaders and employees have different mental models, the same message can be interpreted in conflicting ways, leading to misunderstanding or resistance.

Psychological Safety

Amy Edmondson's research on psychological safety highlights the importance of language in creating environments where people feel safe to speak up, ask questions, and take risks. Language that validates emotions, invites input, and acknowledges uncertainty fosters psychological safety. In contrast, language that is dismissive, absolute, or punitive can suppress engagement and innovation.

The Ladder of Inference

The Ladder of Inference is a model that explains how individuals move from observable data to beliefs and actions through a series of mental steps, often unconsciously. Language plays a critical role at each step, influencing what data is noticed, how it is interpreted, and what conclusions are drawn. In change, ambiguous or loaded language can accelerate faulty inferences, leading to resistance or misalignment.

Polarity Management

Polarity Management theory suggests that many organisational tensions are not problems to be solved but polarities to be managed. The language used to describe these tensions such as “stability vs. change” or “control vs. empowerment”, can either polarise teams or help them see the value in balancing both sides. Effective language helps teams navigate complexity without falling into binary thinking.

Neuroscience of Language and Emotion

Neuroscience research shows that language directly affects emotional and physiological responses. Words associated with threat or uncertainty can activate the amygdala, triggering stress and defensive behaviour. Conversely, language that conveys empathy, clarity, and shared purpose can activate reward pathways, increasing motivation and openness to change.

Reflection Prompt

How have you seen the framing of a change initiative influence its acceptance or resistance in your organisation?

Language Traps and Word Choice Pitfalls

Even well-intentioned change leaders can undermine their efforts through subtle but powerful language missteps. Here are 10 language pitfalls commonly encountered in change communication, each with a brief explanation, a practical example, and a suggested mitigation or counter-strategy for leaders:

Ambiguous Terms

Pitfall: Using vague or undefined words creates confusion.

Example: “We’re going to streamline operations.”

Mitigation: **Be specific and transparent.**

Better: “We will review our processes to reduce duplication and may adjust some team structures.”

Negative Framing

Pitfall: Emphasising loss or threat triggers defensiveness.

Example: “If we don’t change, we’ll fall behind.”

Mitigation: **Reframe to focus on opportunity.**

Better: “This change positions us to lead in our industry.”

Euphemisms That Mask Reality

Pitfall: Softening difficult news erodes trust.

Example: “We’re rightsizing the organisation.”

Mitigation: **Use clear, direct language with empathy.**

Better: “We will be reducing roles in some areas and will support affected employees.”

Jargon and Technical Speak

Pitfall: Specialised terms exclude or confuse.

Example: “We’re migrating to a cloud-based SaaS platform.”

Mitigation: **Translate into plain English.**

Better: “We’re moving our systems online so you can access them from anywhere.”

Absolutes and Extremes

Pitfall: Words like “always” or “never” shut down dialogue.

Example: “This solution will solve all our problems.”

Mitigation: **Acknowledge complexity and invite input.**

Better: “This solution addresses many challenges, and we’ll continue to learn and adapt.”

Impersonal or Detached Language

Pitfall: Lacks empathy, making change feel transactional.

Example: “Resources will be reallocated.”

Mitigation: **Acknowledge the human impact.**

Better: “Some team members will move to new roles, and we’ll support everyone through the transition.”

Overpromising Outcomes

Pitfall: Making unrealistic claims damages credibility.

Example: “Everything will improve immediately.”

Mitigation: **Set realistic expectations.**

Better: “Some improvements will be immediate, while others will take time.”

One-Way Communication

Pitfall: Delivering messages without inviting feedback leads to disengagement.

Example: Sending a change memo with no opportunity for questions.

Mitigation: **Encourage dialogue and feedback.**

Better: “We welcome your questions and will hold Q&A sessions to address concerns.”

Mixed or Inconsistent Messaging

Pitfall: Contradictory messages create uncertainty.

Example: Announcing “no major changes” one week, then unveiling a restructure the next.

Mitigation: Ensure consistency and alignment in all communications.

Better: “We are evaluating our structure and will keep you informed as decisions are made.”

Ignoring Emotional Impact

Pitfall: Failing to consider how language makes people feel increases anxiety.

Example: “This will be a disruptive process.”

Mitigation: **Validate emotions and offer support.**

Better: “We know this will bring change, and we are committed to supporting you every step of the way.”

Reflection Prompt

Which of these language pitfalls have you encountered and how might you address them differently next time?

Mental Models and Metaphors

Mental models are the internal frameworks people use to interpret the world and make decisions. These models are shaped by personal experience, culture, and prior knowledge. In the context of organisational change, mental models influence how employees interpret new information, assess risks, and decide whether to support or resist change.

Mental models and metaphors are powerful but double-edged tools in change communication. Leaders who take the time to understand and align these frameworks can reduce resistance, foster engagement, and make complex change more accessible.

The Power and Risk of Metaphors

Metaphors are more than stylistic devices; they are powerful tools that help people make sense of complex or abstract concepts by relating them to familiar experiences. For example, describing a change initiative as a “journey” can evoke a sense of progress and adventure for some, but may also suggest a long and uncertain road for others. Similarly, a “burning platform” metaphor can create urgency, but may also trigger anxiety or fear.

Aligning Mental Models

When leaders and employees have different mental models, the same message can be interpreted in conflicting ways. This misalignment can lead to misunderstanding, resistance, or disengagement. For example, if leaders describe a change as “agile transformation,” some may see it as empowering, while others may recall previous experiences of chaos or lack of structure.

Practical Strategies for Leaders



Test Your Language

Before rolling out a change message, ask a diverse group of employees what key words or metaphors mean to them. This can reveal hidden assumptions or unintended interpretations.



Clarify and Define

Provide clear definitions for terms and metaphors that are central to your change narrative. For example, explain what “agile” means in your specific context.



Use Multiple Metaphors

Recognise that no single metaphor will resonate with everyone. Use a variety of metaphors and analogies to reach different audiences.



Check for Consistency

Ensure that the metaphors and language used in all communications are consistent and reinforce the intended message.

Reflection Prompt

Which metaphors and key terms used in your change communications could be interpreted differently?

Emotionally Intelligent Language

The Role of Emotion in Change

Change is not just a rational process; it is deeply emotional. People experience uncertainty, loss, hope, and anxiety during transitions. The language leaders use can either validate these emotions and build trust, or dismiss them and increase resistance.

What is Emotionally Intelligent Language?

Emotionally intelligent language is communication that recognises, validates, and responds to the emotional realities of those affected by change. It is clear, empathetic, and transparent. It avoids jargon, minimises euphemisms, and acknowledges both challenges and opportunities.

Why It Matters

Research shows that emotionally intelligent communication fosters psychological safety, which is essential for engagement, innovation, and resilience. When people feel heard and understood, they are more likely to participate constructively in change.

Practical Strategies for Leaders



Acknowledge Emotions

Name and validate feelings. For example, “We know this change may cause uncertainty, and that’s a normal response.”



Be Transparent

Share what is known and unknown. For example, “We don’t have all the answers yet, but we will keep you informed as decisions are made.”



Use Inclusive Language

Emphasise collective effort and support. For example, “We will work through this together.”



Balance Optimism with Realism

Recognise challenges while highlighting opportunities. For example, “This will be a difficult transition, but it also opens new possibilities for growth.”



Invite Dialogue

Encourage questions and feedback. For example, “We want to hear your concerns and ideas.”

Reflection Prompt

Can you incorporate more emotionally intelligent language into your next change communication to better support and engage your team?

Language Audits and Framing Techniques

A language audit is a systematic review of your change communications to ensure clarity, consistency, and emotional resonance. Leaders can use this tool to identify and address language pitfalls before messages are shared widely.

Checklist for Auditing Change Communications:

- ✓ Are key terms and metaphors clearly defined and consistently used?
- ✓ Is the message free from jargon, ambiguous terms, and euphemisms?
- ✓ Does the language acknowledge both challenges and opportunities?
- ✓ Is the emotional impact of the message considered and addressed?
- ✓ Are statements realistic, avoiding overpromising or absolutes?
- ✓ Is the communication inclusive, using “we” and “together” where appropriate?
- ✓ Is there an invitation for feedback or dialogue?

How to Use It:

Before sending a major change communication, review it against this checklist. Consider piloting the message with a small, diverse group and asking for honest feedback on clarity and tone.

Framing Techniques for Leaders

Framing is the deliberate shaping of how information is presented to influence perception and response. Effective framing is honest, empathetic, and aligned with organisational values.

Key Framing Techniques:



Positive Framing

Emphasise opportunities, strengths, and shared purpose rather than focusing solely on risks or threats. Positive framing helps people see the benefits and possibilities that change can bring, fostering hope and engagement.

Example: Instead of “If we don’t change, we’ll fall behind,” use “This change positions us to lead and unlock new opportunities for our teams.”



Contextual Framing

Place the change within a broader organisational narrative, such as growth, adaptation, or long-term strategy. Contextual framing helps employees understand why change is happening and how it fits into the bigger picture.

Example: “This initiative is part of our ongoing commitment to innovation and customer excellence, ensuring we remain competitive in a changing market.”



Balanced Framing

Acknowledge both the challenges and the support/resources available. Balanced framing builds credibility by recognising difficulties while reassuring people that help is available.

Example: “We know this transition will be challenging, but we’re providing training and support to help everyone succeed.”



Audience-Centric Framing

Tailor language to the audience’s mental models, concerns, and aspirations. Audience-centric framing ensures messages resonate and address what matters most to different groups.

Example: For frontline staff: “This new system will make your daily tasks easier and reduce manual paperwork.” For managers: “You’ll gain better visibility into team performance and workflow.”



Metaphor Selection

Choose metaphors that clarify the message and resonate with your organisational culture. The right metaphor can make complex change more relatable, while the wrong one can create confusion or anxiety.

Example: “We’re embarking on a journey together, with clear milestones along the way,” rather than “We’re jumping into the deep end.”



Iterative Framing

Regularly revisit and refine your framing as the change progresses. Iterative framing allows you to adapt messages based on feedback and evolving circumstances, keeping communication relevant and effective.

Example: “As we move through each phase, we’ll update you on progress and adjust our approach based on your feedback.”

Recommendations for Leaders

Make Language a Strategic Priority

Treat language as a core element of your change strategy, not an afterthought. Assign clear ownership for change communications and ensure leaders at all levels understand the impact of word choice, framing, and tone.

Invest in Training and Coaching

Provide training for leaders, managers, and communicators on the science of language, framing techniques, and emotionally intelligent communication. Use real-world scenarios and role-play to build confidence and skill.

Embed Language Audits in Change Processes

Incorporate language audits into your standard change management toolkit. Before launching major communications, review messages for clarity, emotional resonance, and alignment with organisational values. Pilot messages with diverse groups to surface unintended interpretations.

Foster Feedback Loops

Create mechanisms for employees to provide feedback on change communications. Encourage open dialogue, listen actively, and be willing to adapt language based on what you learn. Use surveys, focus groups, or informal check-ins to gather insights.

Model the Desired Language

Leaders set the tone. Use clear, empathetic, and inclusive language in all communications. Acknowledge uncertainty, validate emotions, and reinforce shared purpose. When leaders model best practices, others are more likely to follow.

Recognise and Celebrate Progress

Acknowledge teams and individuals who demonstrate effective change communication. Share success stories where language made a positive difference, and use these examples to reinforce learning across the organisation.

Build Language Awareness into Leadership Development

Integrate language awareness and communication skills into leadership development programs. Make it an explicit competency for those responsible for guiding change.

Reflection Prompt

What is one action you can take this month to improve the language of change in your organisation?"

Conclusion

Language is not a peripheral concern in organisational change it is a central lever that shapes perception, trust, and action. The science is clear: the words leaders choose can either accelerate engagement and commitment or trigger resistance and confusion. By understanding the theories behind framing, mental models, and psychological safety, and by actively avoiding common language pitfalls, leaders can transform the experience and outcomes of change.

Practical tools such as language audits, framing techniques, and emotionally intelligent communication are not just “nice to have” they are essential for building clarity, credibility, and resilience. When language is used intentionally, it becomes a catalyst for alignment, innovation, and sustainable transformation.

As you lead your next change initiative, remember: every word counts. Make language a strategic asset, and you will unlock greater trust, engagement, and success across your organisation.

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