



Declarations

A Speech Act

“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. These are: *Declarations, Assumptions, Assertions, Promises and Requests.*

Exercise: Read these declarations out loud and feel into the effect they have. The implications are historical.

“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.”

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 knows 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 Speech Acts: *the Declaration, the Request, the Promise, the Assertion and the Assessment* are at the crux of our communication with one another. They are the primary currency of all organizations, all teams, all families, all countries. Aware or not, we use The Speech Acts – the name Fernando Flores used to distinguish the language moves we humans make every day to form conversations, and our world. And these conversations lead to actions that would not have been possible prior to speaking about them. It is well worth the time and attention to learn how to Master the Art of the Conversation.



Requests

A Speech Act

“Will you take out the trash before you leave for work?”

Requests, we make them every day. “Will you get that report from Karim’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 resource.)
- 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?

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