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Neurolinguistics for corporate boards to reduce wasting resources

At board level, it is critical that the language used is constructive in order to allow optimum participation to make decisions (governance), to explain decisions (accountability) and to declare interests (transparency). It has been observed that board members - and even very scholarly members - tend to use words that can be interpreted as destructive. Words with negative connotations are not conducive to resolve conflict, to convince and to arrive at a common understanding and concern (politics).

Linguistics is the tool for unlocking potential, for inspiring people and for communicating effectively. Appropriate words can lay old grievances to rest. Reduced conflict during board meetings can save time and reduce waste of resources such as competencies, money and equipment. Waste of resources are associated with malpractices and mismanagement. But everything is not corruption.

However, mismanagement of language and scarce resources can contribute to corruption because the original or intended purpose of an idea is being made defective or impaired that could have been used more productively for adding value to higher priorities. Effective communication at board level can upscale competencies for a positive outcome. Appropriate language can be a leverage for so many unsolved challenges and negative perceptions. Words can unlock the worst or the best in board members.

MISMANAGEMENT OF LANGUAGE

From consulting for corporate boards, the following ineffective communication patterns have been observed that can be improved as follows:

"Mr X has a lack of exposure to..." There is seldom a complete lack of something. This could rather be phrased as "Mr X has limited exposure to..."

When deliberating issues members tend to say "I agree with Ms...", namely with a specific person. In order to focus more on issues and less on people and to make issues less emotional, it is more appropriate to express support for ideas rather than people. A more appropriate response would be "I tend to support

Johan Coetzee

the issue of access to local markets." Rather than saying "I am completely against the idea of...", It would be more appropriate to say "In reflecting on the issue, I have an alternative idea, namely..." Do not place blame on the board or Mr Y. Systemic problems such as poverty, development and corruption cannot be simplified to one root problem; it consists of multiple sets of problems or sets of problem areas that are interconnected and interrelated.

"The only way to solve this problem is to..." There is very rarely only one way of solving any problem. Problems can be multi-dimensional. Rather propose your idea as an alternative.

"My idea is the best and your idea is not good. His idea is bad." Nothing is inherently good or bad, because it depends on the context. Board members should refrain from using words such as "good" and "bad", which stimulate overly negative responses, and instead use words that are more neutral, e.g. "appropriate" or "inappropriate". Also, refrain from making ideas personal. Focus on an idea only, irrespective of whose idea it is.

Board members need to unlearn certain communication habits and words – neurolinguistic programming - that may be interpreted as destructive and/or negative. Board members should acquaint themselves with more advanced communication skills, conflict-management and negotiation skills in order to be more effective at board meetings.

Politeness and diplomacy can change attitudes more effectively than inappropriate words that can be interpreted as overconfidence, arrogance and even aggression. The approach should not be to win every argument, but to create mutual understanding. Critique needs to be balanced with a proposal to change and/or to improve.

jcoetzee@nust.na