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Business English as the language of leadership

by Ben Dobbs (BD Communications Ireland, Corporate Leadership and Communication Trainer**)**

Business English and business communication course trainees will often be managers who, whether they are first-line managers, middle managers or at C-level, will often be managing and leading in English. Especially when working internationally or in intercultural contexts such as mixed nationality teams where the lingua franca of communication is English.

As far as language learners are concerned, this leadership communication may occur between native speakers and non-native speakers or between non-native speakers only when no other common first language is available. In terms of their language and communication training, this raises interesting questions of training content, tasks, materials and purpose if the essential competences and multiple functions of leadership are to be developed in the content of language training. These range from the traditional areas of Business English such as running meetings and presenting to more modern phenomena such as coaching and more practical tasks including managing tasks, time and change.

Leadership language: Learning put these terms into practice..

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What is Business English Really For?

I would invite you to consider what this entity we call "Business English" is actually for and what purposes it serves in the harsh reality of real world usage outside of the safety of the training room. The answer should depend on our client participants and their general goal or specific objectives at the time of the training. Though ostensibly, we move beyond the matters of the linguistic and paralinguistic, and indeed the purely functional, into the areas of the intercultural and interpersonal. While it is important to recognise key competences for meetings, presentations, negotiations, interviews and so on, it must also be recognised that Business English is likely to be serving as the lingua franca of leadership and management in many situations of international business communication. These may include; international virtual project teams; expatriate managers at C-level; expatriate team leaders and team members; day-to-day functioning in international or global companies; working in any organisation dealing with international markets or stakeholders.

Differentiating Between Management and Leadership

Management and leadership are not synonymous despite what many may think. A belief that holding a managerial position automatically brings with it leadership is erroneous, demonstrates a deep misunderstanding and could justifiably be observed as a pre-cursor to failure or an indicator of developmental needs. Numerous sources from the publications of business leaders and academics, which address clichés that can be found on online social media and at business event talks, demonstrate that differentiation, however this may occur, is required between leadership and management. Broadly speaking, and without originality or too much critical thought or creativity, we could say that the following definitions, while not serving to silence any debates or establish any new paradigms, do give what may be considered the key principles of each;

'Management: exercising decision-making power and influence by virtue of authority given in the form of a role or position assigned to an individual within an organisation. Typically based on procedure, title and position within an organisation's hierarchy.'

'Leadership: not necessarily dependent on position assigned but upon the ability of inducing a desire or willingness in others to follow through motivation, inspiration, trust and desire. Typically based on vision and charisma of an individual. This may come from traits, skills, approaches, style or qualities.'

Communicative Training Needs

Of course, language skills and systems are not all that are required in leadership and management communication. Besides being able to function in traditional business English areas such as meetings, presenting and conference calls, when communicating in English in a managerial or leadership capacity, a manager or leader should be in possession of suitable interpersonal and intercultural competences. The former would include the need to influence, make and achieve support for decisions, the giving and receiving of feedback, establishing trust and rapport and listening and handling conflict

"Use the client as a resource through detailed and ongoing needs analysis before, during and after the course in order to inform future developmental needs, make recommendations and identify the best forms of future intervention."

while the latter may include control and awareness of directness levels, power and hierarchy, time and other cultural variables.

It would be hoped that an effective manager would be in possession of these, however, there is a world of difference between communicating across and managing cultural and personality differences in an L1 and an L2. While, for example, a manager communicating in their first language will find it easier (personality factors aside) to control their level of directness or indirectness, a high level of linguistic complexity or awareness is required to produce such utterances in another language. The result of which may be that being a generally indirect and diplomatic manager in their L1, they may come across differently in their L2 regardless of their true intention due to the additional complexity required to produce indirect or more diplomatic utterances in English (including use of negative opposites of adjectives, modals, hedging and so on).

Working with Leaders – Ideas for Course Providers

Where then does this leave the course provider? Some advice for working with participants in the numerous contexts mentioned above would be;

Investing in the appropriate training and qualifications in order to upskill teachers to trainers and trainers to executive and leadership coaches. Training through task-based approaches succeeded by reflection and appropriately focused peer and trainer feedback is preferable to a passive flow of information a teaching approach may take. Coaching techniques can also be integrated, especially if working one-to-one.

Utilise leadership training materials (by theme or purpose) in Business English training as a source of language and discussion, so that they can be selected or adapted for suitability of level and in which both the content of leadership and the language in the text are relevant to the trainee.

Develop language as a vehicle for the intercultural, interpersonal and managerial skills needed for working internationally and for advancement of leadership.

Work with models and analytical and planning tools - such as SWOT analysis, PESTLE analysis, Gantt charts and so on, these can be used as explicit carriers of language while implicitly promoting critical strategic thought and utilising the course participant as a resource in a realistic manner and way that is relevant to their working life and the actual strategy and mission of their organisation.

Using coaching approaches such as, non-directive questioning, which will allow the participant to make their own decisions and plans when discussing or presenting their workplace challenges.

Use the client as a resource through detailed and ongoing needs analysis before, during and after the course in order to inform future developmental needs, make recommendations and identify the best forms of future intervention.

Guarantee confidentiality as far as appropriate and make a contract or agreement to this end including non-disclosure provisions.

Provide developmental feedback only on areas of communication, (challenge if necessary) but do not suggest or imply your view, remember your role and focus. The participant knows their job, context and goals better than we ever could. Besides, our place is as language or communication experts rather than as business advisors or management consultants (despite the pretensions some training centres may have!).

Build training sessions around key themes that will develop both language and communication on the one hand and management and leadership on the other. These may include change management, time management and delegation, leadership styles and accountability, coaching and mentoring, conflict handling and strategy as well as key business functions such as presenting and negotiating.

Working with Leaders – Ideas for Teachers, Trainers and Coaches

Besides their own specific needs in terms of grammar, vocabulary and lexis, pronunciation, skills and functions, some key areas to meet the needs of those managing and leading in English may be;

Language for managing time and allocating work, delegating in a way suitable for the situation, the personalities and cultures involved, alongside more general time management tools and approaches.

Giving clear instructions and setting goals/targets, stretch these targets and objectives in a suitable format and giving an effective briefing to a team.

Motivation and motivating others, facilitating team development, team building and team management.

Articulating a vision and influencing and inspiring others around it.

Talking about and representing the company, brand, department or team including presenting the company.

Reporting and "managing up" (influencing others higher in the hierarchy of an organisation).

Giving briefings and leading meetings in terms of procedures, style, protocol and communication.

Providing and receiving feedback and models for making feedback most effective.

Adjusting language for different situations such as crises and thus adjusting leadership style to meet the needs of the situation.

Language, tools and strategies for creative problem-solving and decision-making in English, including explaining and justifying decisions which have been made, gathering support for the decisions, answering questions and overcoming objections and influencing in a positive way.

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Language for conflict management and theories of conflict, types and causes of conflict and handling conflict.

Coaching and mentoring language, models and methodologies, alongside language for other developmental interventions and related issues that impact upon development of individuals and teams.

Procedures and language for chairing meetings which may be typical face-to-face meetings or virtual meetings by video conference or conference call.

Functional language and associated skills, tactics and approaches for negotiating.

The above are, in nearly every case, more than a matter of language only. Besides language skills and systems, there is also additional theory and content needed which requires further skills, knowledge and ideas from the trainer in order to ensure that the competence is developed to the best effect.

Conclusions

So, we can see that managing and leading, when English is the language of management, leadership, of more general business communication and interaction, it involves wide ranging needs and possibilities beyond the somewhat limited scope of language only. Training providers can respond to these needs in their work with clients and course participants in order to both provide a service of relevance as well as actual real-life usage.

Futher Reading:

Evans, Vaughan (2013) Key Strategy Tools: The 80+ Tools for Every Manager to Build a Winning Strategy. Harlow: Pearson Education.

Lunenburg, Fred C. (2011) "Leadership versus Management: A Key Distinction - At Least in Theory" in International Journal of Management, Business, and Administration, Volume 14, Number 1.

Maxwell, John C. (2011) The 5 Levels of Leadership. New York: Center Street.

Northouse, Peter G. (2012) Leadership: Theory and Practice 6th Ed. London: Sage.

Whitmore, John (2011) Coaching for Performance: GROWing Human Potential and Purpose 4th Ed. London and Boston: Nicholas Brealey.

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