



Home

Mission ▾

Services ▾

Testimonials

Clients

About ▾

You Are Here: MAY 2002



Focus

A Newsletter published for clients and friends of Wagner Consulting Group

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Shared Language

Years ago, when my son was seven years old, we watched the movie *Coneheads* on television. Sharing this movie together had an unintended consequence: it allowed us to avoid the usual ritual struggle over bath and bedtime. When the time for Mike to retire approached, I spoke to him as a “parental unit” and told him to “detoxify his epidermis” and prepare for “snarfling.” He enthusiastically complied, and was soon asleep, probably dreaming of pointy-headed humanoids.

The parental unit gambit did not have a long useful life, but it did show the value of approaching a routine situation in an unconventional manner. The key to this success was *Shared Language* based on a common experience. Our new Shared Language was amusing, and I became a “new” Dad whose unfamiliarity demanded immediate obedience. A “leader unit” can use analogous techniques to improve the effectiveness of a business or other organization.

As I define it, Shared Language is not jargon. Nor is “common experience” the routine environment in which organization members operate. Rather, the common experience to which I refer is an activity or event played out beyond the deep ruts of everyday routine. The experience may be extraordinary or prosaic: reading a short book, watching a non-technical video, or participating in a retreat, for example. However structured, the common experience must offer each participant hope for some personal benefit.

The Shared Language needs only a few simple words, phrases, or character names. Examples include “Zapp!,” “It’s not just tax preparation, it’s tax reduction,” or Hem and Haw, characters in the popular business book *Who Moved My Cheese*. Its usefulness lies in providing group members a unique method of reaffirming commitments made during or following the common experience. So used, it becomes a powerful communication tool that can keep everyone’s eye on the same common goal.

The beauty of Shared Language lies in its simplicity. It reminds, but does not proscribe. The individual must choose appropriate action. It fosters an environment in which employees independently make the *best* decision *most* of the time.

The words of a Shared Language can be borrowed from others or developed within a company. The word supply is limitless, bounded only by imagination.

The Bottom Line: Shared Language reinforces the current strategic focus of a company or department, and can help improve profit. A Shared Language may already be in your corporate toolkit, ready for use. If not, you can invent or adopt one to address a specific challenge.

Tom Wagner

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