

thinking aloud

What are words worth?

*Our **Precision Business Psychology paper** outlined Crelos' approach to work with people in organisations. This draws on the many recent, unpublicised advances in research psychology, particularly in the neurosciences. It aims to transform these insights into practical interventions driven by core business imperatives. These will inform not only the work of specialists but also the fundamental role of leaders in maximising human performance.*

*We will be releasing a number of thought leadership papers, attempting to tease out how precision business psychology transforms strategic organisational thinking. Our first paper addressed a specific application: **Talent**.*

This second paper looks at an underlying issue: the language we use to discuss, describe and make decisions about people at work. This might seem somewhat abstract. We hope this paper will show that language is at the heart of working with people in a technical HR context but just as much in leadership and other management.

Working with people, as opposed to machines, systems or products is unique. One of our main tools is language. The 'raw material' we're leading, managing, developing or recruiting answers back, uses language and reads between the lines.

So, we need to use language carefully to achieve what we want and the language we use about people at work often makes this most subtle and expert job more difficult.

How could we improve it?

Talk about people

Given the increased fascination with psychology in the media and a more nuanced understanding of psychology's role in maximising performance, whether at work or in areas such as sport, many of these words are becoming more common.

Talk about people is made up from many types of words.

- **Technical Terms** These are drawn from psychology, the social sciences and, occasionally, academic business studies: 'psychometrics'; 'cognitive dissonance'; 'neuroticism' are examples.
- **Everyday terms aspiring to precision** 'Competence', 'personality', 'test', 'objective-driven performance' are just four of the thousands of examples.

'Human resources' is itself an example of common words put together to form a 'technical' term. People who deal with people at work have always felt uneasy about what they call themselves. The invention of the term 'human resource' reflected the

times: the area needed to move closer to core business disciplines; it was perceived as 'soft' and needed to signal a more stringent, technical approach. 'Leadership' is another word which has come to mean something more technical and specific in recent years.

- **Organisation Developed Terms, Acronyms and Titles** These range from:
 - internal marketing driven titles for initiatives: 'Blast Off' and 'Operation Bulls eye' might be (uninspired) examples;
 - abbreviations which mean something ' in-house': for instance 'Have you done your C36?' might mean 'Have you filled in your appraisal form?';
 - acronyms brought in from business thinking, public policy and professional sources – ROI is a favoured one at the moment.

These aspire to precision. Acronyms and initials act like terms in an equation. You either know what they mean or you don't: they're exclusive, designed not for wider communication but for internal solidarity.

To sum up

The language we use to talk about people at work is made up of different sorts of words from different sources. They share a concern with precision. The words either meant something very precise originally or were reinvented to mean something precise in the organisational context.

However, in many cases, these words have become so widely and imprecisely used that they have little explanatory or differentiating power.

We highlighted an example of this in our paper on talent. Talent has come to mean a variety of things, including:

- Existing leaders – who need support and growth
- High performers – who need to be attracted and retained
- Future leaders – the thorny issue of succession
- 'Boffins' and specialists – whose knowledge means special treatment; there's a supply and demand issue
- Entrepreneurs or potential entrepreneurs – since these are 'stars' – rare and special
- Outsourced organisations – since talent is expensive and you can't employ it all
- Everyone – since everyone contributes and everyone has a talent

If someone uses the term, which group are they actually referring to?

There are examples throughout the people enterprise:

- What is a competence: an observable behaviour, a skill, an internal ('soft') attribute? The very success of the competence movement means we no longer use the word in the same way David McClelland intended.
- What is a test? There are many academic definitions but we're not all academics. How is a test different from an assessment or a tool?

- Which version of world class performance are we looking at in this company report as opposed to the one written last year?
- This survey measures 'engagement'; so does this one. Are they talking about the same thing?
- Emotional intelligence seems to mean something different to every expert that writes about it.

There is an unavoidable move to confusion. An industry has grown up to provide advice and training in precision: in writing a competency framework, setting 'SMART' objectives, formulating a job or person specification or addressing a disciplinary issue.

Why are words important

As we say above, talking about the meaning of words may seem rather academic. It isn't. We recognise language's effect on organisational areas.

Language as the core business tool

'Communication' is one of the core soft skills organisations look for in leaders, new hires, potential managers: it's also a skill identified as in short supply among school leavers and graduates.

Leaders' ability to communicate in a certain way has a direct, measurable impact on all aspects of an organisation's performance. Their ability to talk precisely but with flexibility to different audiences is one of the four or five central attributes of successful leadership.

If people are a key differentiator, they differentiate by how they do things and one of those ways – particularly in a service economy or in looser organisational structures– is through words.

Ideologies of language

Language carries an ideology: a set of implied underlying assumptions which transmit themselves without listeners or speakers necessarily being aware of this fact.

We outlined above some of the reasons why the term 'human resources' was introduced. As social, cultural and business attitudes have changed, the term has caused increasing uneasiness among both practitioners and employees. People do not see themselves as equivalent to financial resources, plant or stock. This view implied by the term is often seen as an insult.

Leaders, psychologists, HR managers and consultants understand that this implied model limits our ability to engage with people and harness areas such as creativity, innovation, will and wider expertise. People feel undervalued or viewed as 'cogs in the machine'. The use of the term 'Human Resource' may in itself adversely affect issues such as staff engagement. Hence recent attempts to change this discipline's name which signposts a wider change in organisational views of people.

Another nexus of words illustrate a similar 'ideological' battle: 'training', 'learning' and 'development'.

Training is something done TO someone.

Learning is something someone DOES by interaction with someone else. Both terms refer, ultimately to instilling concrete things: skills, ways of behaving, knowledge.

Development fits better with the view mentioned above: that organisations must harness the whole person to unleash true differentiation. Development is central to succession planning, talent development and the raising of management performance. It implies something more

'organic' and 'individual'. It's also less precise. Development could and does mean almost anything. Our understanding of the term should be informed by a better understanding of research into human development. For instance, individuals' life long transition from an 'I' viewpoint to a 'We' viewpoint has huge implications for the effectiveness of team development activities.

So, although the word 'training' often no longer fits what we're trying to achieve, increasing use of the word 'development' has resulted in a reduction in information.

That our words are 'blunt' or 'the wrong size' or carry the wrong implicit messages is pretty serious. The fact that we can improve our people language is a huge opportunity.

Language Registers

The concept of 'language registers' helps us understand what's going on.

We use language in different ways in different contexts. We don't use the same words, tones or structures at home, in the board room, with a bank manager, at a sports ground.

Some people adapt their talk consciously or unconsciously. Others pride themselves on being the same person everywhere, but are unaware that they are subconsciously adapting. We sometimes deliberately break these register rules: talking very informally in formal situations for instance to 'wake people up'. At other times we do it unconsciously and disastrously by misjudging the mood of a meeting.

In essence we use different 'registers' in different situations in which different kinds of language are used to achieve different ends with different audiences.

At the risk of oversimplifying, we can talk about two basic registers which influence our talk about people at work.

Language of Ordinary Life

Words in this register have life stories like our own. They go through a lot of experiences; are attached to lots of things; change; gather associations; sometimes die.

We invent new words which live complex lives BEFORE they reach a dictionary: 'wiki' is a recent case in point.

In what context a word is used will make a difference to what it means: 'license' will mean something different in a court of law and in an article on teenage morality, though they both tap into the same idea 'allowing somebody to do something.'

Some associations are about an individual's very specific experiences. In our ordinary life, how we use words and what for, changes and defines their meanings. Since we're talking to or writing for many different sorts of people with different experiences this leaves huge spaces for misunderstanding. But it also means language is fluid, subtle, constantly evolving. Language used in this way can just get the job done but it can suggest, imply and evoke rich associations.

Technical/scientific language

This aims at exactly the opposite effect. The audience and purposes of the words used in scientific contexts are defined (an academic paper for other research physicists, for instance). The people communicating share certain foundation ideas and purposes. They use, and coin new words precisely, to get rid of the messy personal associations that make communication in ordinary life imprecise. Words, terms and phrases are defined very tightly. Everyone can assume a word's meaning and evaluate the argument in which it's used. If words do change meaning it's because the evidence has changed.

Words used in this technical/scientific way become 'hard counters' in very specific formats of communication – research papers, conference presentations etc – and their very inflexibility is their point.

Words move between the two registers

Quantum means something very specific in physics:

An elemental unit of energy. Its energy value is $h\nu$, where h , Planck's constant, is 6.62×10^{-27} erg-second and ν is the frequency of the vibrations or waves with which the energy is associated. cf photon. Just to get slightly less technical. The smallest discrete amount of any quantity (plural: quanta).

But this word has moved into common and business talking, hence: "We've made a quantum leap forward". Does this mean we've made the smallest discrete movement ahead that's possible? No, it means we've moved a very long way or it discards the whole idea of quantity and suggests we've made a 'fundamental qualitative change'.

Words move between the two registers.

If they move from common talk into technical language they get very tightly defined. Thus physicists use of the words 'strangeness' and 'charm' do not refer to odd and rather engaging subatomic particles – they are specific, technical measures of particles' behaviour.

When words move the other way – from technical/scientific registers to everyday speech – anything can happen: they can end up meaning the opposite of what was intended; be applied to completely separate fields; be misunderstood.

This transfer can happen within rather than between fields of activity. To take an example from the financial aspects of organisational performance, *leverage* – a word which originated in the physical sciences – was defined quite precisely to mean:

"Use of debt to increase the expected return on equity. Financial leverage is measured by the ratio of debt to debt plus equity."

The word continued to be used in expert financial circles in this sense but was taken up in other areas of business to mean something much more general, as in the phrase: "Have we got the leverage to do this?" It had become a metaphor based on its original meaning, indicating 'the power, resources and/or influence to achieve something'. So, within one organisation the same terms are used with a technical and a more generalised meaning.

These two registers can be broken down even further to look at the ways artistic, non-native, religious and legal registers, for instance, interact. Influences are complex and a number of different registers affect each other at any one time.

These transfers enrich language but they also cause problems in communication.

People and Science

We have argued in our paper on *Precision Business Psychology* that formal and informal work with people within organisations needs to be put on a more scientific footing. This would suggest a move to a more technical register.

But there are two linked reasons why this is not the whole solution.

- Given the policed nature of their language, hard sciences such as physics and chemistry have little problem with this issue of language shift. Quantum moves from nuclear physics into a range of other registers but that new looser meaning does not feed back. Feedback from looser meanings largely occurs in the social sciences (in which we

include business thinking) where new technical words are often adapted from everyday speech and more tightly defined. Social sciences engage with a far wider cross-section of people than, say, theoretical physics: the flow is two-way. In other words, you can't suddenly surround psychological and sociological words with barbed wire: they will drift.

- Referring back to our discussion of 'human resources', all social sciences, including psychology, face the problem that people dislike being objectified. They do not see themselves as subjects for technical study. Science-founded business consultancy risks negative reactions. This is one of the communication challenges facing *Precision Business Psychology* as well as HR and Occupational Psychology in general.

Numbers

Numbers are a way of overcoming some of these problems. Numbers do not suffer 'meaning slip', they communicate more effectively within specialist discourses and their qualities are known and amenable.

Accurate numbers and skilled numerical manipulation – as we've argued – underlie effective management of, decisions about and work with people as much as in any other business function. They help to define problems and measure effects without the interference of subjective associations.

But they too pose problems which limit their effect in solving the issue of failed or imprecise communication.

- Describing people in numbers raises the problem outlined above: they resist being treated as scientific objects: they are more than 'numbers'.
- Low levels of numeracy. This is a fundamental problem for business in general and human interventions in particular. Numerical education and understanding lag hugely behind practical requirements. People in general aren't able to draw information from numbers in the same way that they can from words. This leads to a number of problems including over-interpretation. People assume numbers are 'more accurate' than words and tend to place more trust in them. This can lead to inferring information which either isn't there or which is less certain than is assumed.

Numbers **are** important in the people exercise, and certain professions and people find numbers more conducive than words in understanding situations.

Nonetheless, for the reasons outlined above, numbers do not offer the whole solution.

We'll now look at one particular example of this situation in depth to show the way verbal confusion can infect our ability to communicate about key people issues.

Personality: a case study of words used about people at work

Why personality matters

Personality is central to work with people at work because it is central to people's self-understanding, and their understanding of each other. Most of us believe and act as though we have reasonably consistent personalities. Much organisational talk is about individuals' personality whether this is in the form of criticism of another's behaviour or an evaluation of whether someone will be able to cope with a bigger job.

Personality tests are used increasingly widely to understand this aspect of employees and plan careers, development and promotion. Personality characteristics become more important the more senior the job someone is doing.

The model(s) used by most personality tests originated in the first half of the 20th century and we can refer to two key figures.

Allport

In his classic book *Personality: a Psychological Interpretation* (1937) Gordon Allport, an American psychologist, commented that personality was 'one of the most abstract words in our language.' He suggested there were 50 distinct meanings of the term and proposed a definition as follows: "Personality is the dynamic organisation within the individual of those psychophysical systems that determine his unique adjustments to the environment." Having defined it, the next task was to analyse it.

Allport's and Odbert's identified 18,000 personality-describing words. They then isolated around 25% of these as adjectives which they said described observable permanent traits.

Cattell and the 16PF

In 1946 Raymond Cattell, a Scottish-born but Illinois-based expert in personality, worked further on these word lists and identified 16 factors that people use to describe themselves. This is the genesis of the Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire (16PF), a test which Cattell created to measure human personality in **all** situations. Cattell's work underpins some of the most widely used personality tests used in organisations now: the Occupational Personality Questionnaire (OPQ™) from SHL Group Ltd is among the best known.

Cattell was undertaking a scientific study. The early forms of 16PF reflect this as well as an underlying ideology that psychology was something done **to** people by experts (the 'men in white coats' model). Since its original publication the test has been revised a number of times. The changes in the terms used to model human personality are a case book study in how words slip in and out of different registers and escape from specified meanings.

Very roughly this worked as follows:

i. Analysis and categorisation of common terms

This is the stage described above, Allport's and Cattell's effort to 'tame' common words and phrases about personality.

ii. Translation of these common words into scientific terms

Cattell was acutely aware of the dangers of misinterpretation if common words were used. So if you had been tested on early versions of the 16PF you would have come across some of the following terms denoting aspects of human personality we are more used to seeing (these latter are in brackets):

Affectothymia: (High warmth)

Desurgency: (Low liveliness)

Parmia : (High Social Boldness)

Harria; (Low Sensitivity)

Cattell invented (often portmanteau, Latin-derived) scientific terms to avoid language slip.

iii. The move from description to application, and wider use back translates these terms

16PF was used in a huge variety of contexts and in some research, clinical work such tongue-twisting scientific terms were acceptable. In business contexts they were a problem. Individuals can't relate a term like Harria to their own experience of themselves or to other people.

The Occupational Personality Questionnaire (OPQ) builds on Cattell's work but, among other things, translates the language use to described personality into more everyday words. Since OPQ was avowedly designed to be a test for business, this language was business-oriented.

This development opened the floodgates for new tests and revisions of existing ones. New editions of the 16PF have removed Cattell's specific terms and replaced them with more everyday words: warmth, rule-consciousness, social boldness, openness to change.

These common terms are tightly defined in specific ways in manuals so the strategy is one we have described: to use common words but police them by contextualised, specific definitions and intensive training to help users internalise the specific meanings.

iv. The Results

Personality modelling is an example of the wider problem we have outlined above: a confusion of registers and therefore imprecise communication about core terms, which we use to model, measure and intervene in people's performance at work. There are a number of reasons for this. Some of the main ones are:

- the very success of HR work and of testing as a core element in it, mean more people are exposed to their outcomes. Many of these people will not have been trained on a specific test and its definitions, and therefore will import their own;
- the break down of the 'men in white coats' model under the influence of changed values and technological innovation. Increasingly, test reports are shared, fed back or given to test subjects with less preparation;
- slightly different definitions of the same term in different tests, reflecting different theoretical stances or research findings;
- confusion between common use and specific use. A good example here is Introversion/Extraversion. This is a scale used in most personality instruments and is discussed widely in team building, organisational change, job fit, leadership recruitment and performance management consultancy. Introvert and extrovert are not everyday words but most of us have our own definitions: introverts like their own company, don't shine in social situations, are to be found reading a book etc; extroverts are the life and soul of the party and make good salespeople. Yet, in a number of tests, introversion/extroversion are defined in terms of direction of energy: do other people draw energy from you or do you draw it from them. In this account an introvert can operate in crowds, be engaging, sociable and entertaining: but they'll need to recharge their batteries after a social event. At the end of a five hour meeting, extroverts will be more energised than they were at the beginning. These are only two broad models of introversion/extroversion: they mean something substantively different. You can imagine – there certainly are – organisations in which these and more models are both being used with no awareness that the same words are denoting fundamentally different things.

Other Topics

The above example from measurement highlights the issue, but verbal confusion generalises across people talk. Debates about what we mean by competence, the change from David McClelland's original tightly drawn concept, highlight this. Terms such as emotional intelligence, the ability/ aptitude/ trainability/achievement axis, leadership, entrepreneurship, values etc have all undergone the process of being refined technically then slipping into wider, less precise usage. In some cases it is difficult to grasp whether they mean anything substantive, even though huge weight is out on them in modern HR and business thinking.

So what do we do? Some thoughts on actions

You can control language to some extent: this is a technique used by political dictatorships and cults. But George Orwell's Newspeak – a language kept in a maximum security cell – is an impossibility. It's also, as the Orwell example shows, not an attractive prospect.

Language diversity allows us to think new things and think in new ways.

But – as the hard sciences show – some precision in technical areas helps rather than hinders communication. We've outlined two strategies in this paper.

- Using newly coined or technical / scientific terms;
- Specific definition of common words and training in that definition.

They offer insights and part-solutions but how do we begin to start sharpening up the language we use with people about people, without losing creativity?

Everything we've said suggests large scale initiatives either won't work – language change is too powerful a force – or will take too long. Large scale attempts to analyse the words we use and show how they relate to each other (a meta analysis of all personality scales and what they mean, for instance) would be interesting but it's difficult to see how this would feed through to practice.

The new science of complexity suggests that large scale change emerges from lots of small repeated behaviours. So, these suggestions draw on all the strategies we've discussed in this paper. No one is the magic bullet but together they begin to suggest a more all-embracing strategy:

Define things and insist on definitions

When a human attribute is being measured or analysed, we need to demand precise definitions of key terms. They should be included in documents as a matter of course. Look at alternatives. It's important to insist on the same strict discipline when using consultants and other outsourced suppliers.

Introduce more numerical literacy

Numbers contribute huge stringency to analysing issues and suggesting solutions. But we've outlined some of the problems with numerical information above. Numeracy components in development programmes benefit people discussions: they'll also feed into every major discipline in the company from purchasing to forecasting.

Staff need to be more sensitive when translating numbers to words

We have to make these translations to discuss findings of surveys and analyses, and to talk to the wide variety of people employed in an organisation. But done badly, the translation can introduce huge imprecision. This is an area that needs more work but, in particular.

- We need to question carefully the link between an executive summary and action plan and how it's been drawn from survey or assessment data.
- Suppliers to explain how IT-generated reports are derived from numerical data before large scale IT people solutions are adopted.

Welcome 'different' writing

The way we write for business builds on school, college and university models and is reinforced by very set guidelines laid down in business. These include writing very briefly; impersonally; stressing recommendations rather than options. This doesn't allow us much room to use language to analyse situations subtly, come up with new ideas, differentiate ourselves. Too many people fall back on writing complicatedly to prove we're clever. This is a bigger problem for communication than is realised.

When managers, consultants and leaders learn to write better it increases organisational blood supply.

The best short treatment of how to write clearly, even in a technical area, is George Orwell's *'Politics and the English language'* which is included in the Penguin Selection volume of his essays. It is still used in training courses for journalists, copywriters and technical writers and provides simple rules for writing simply and more clearly.

Use of analytical techniques like the 'Fog Index' and other readability indexes (see http://www.writersservices.com/wps/s1_readability_score.htm) can help simplify language and tailor it to the particular audience.

Simplified language helps discrimination. Whereas artificially complex language makes it difficult to sort out whether a word is being used technically or precisely – everything seems technical – simplified language allows us to discriminate more easily how a word is being used.

We should also start to remove the insistence on brevity at all costs, especially if we are the consumer of reports. Our requirement for 'one side of A4' or a short, sharp, to the point meeting about a major initiative is understandable given work and time pressures. But these rules have become barriers to real understanding. Depending on the subject you may need a one side A4 note or a 25 page report. A subject should take as long as the subject deserves.

Concentrate on internal 'messaging'

Once they've been decided on major people initiatives often fail because of lack of genuinely engaging internal marketing. If this messaging fails rumour and suspicion take over. Internal messaging: it should be treated as any marketing exercise.

Responsible managers need to think about audiences and involve communication specialists. They need to involve people who are sensitive to registers of language and its workings. As HR and Consultancy increasingly applies scientific findings (see *Precision Business Psychology*) and this language cascades through an organisation, we need help in translation. If Precision Business Psychology, people management, leadership and HR in general should aspire to base itself on science, it must also understand that 'verbal art' in the most general sense has a place.

Consultants, developers and other experts must come clean and be explicit

Equally, suppliers and consultants must make this contextualising information available. These points argue for more training (or development on background principles of managing people post initial qualification, not on specific approaches or tools. This would give practitioners a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of what's at stake. The move onto the web has allowed suppliers to replace hard information and context with clever graphics. We need to resist this.

More theoretical and applied research by the genuinely disinterested

The blurring of boundaries between research and commerce in people solutions mirrors a similar blurring in social science disciplines and in the academic sector in general. Firms use research to establish brand, to back up or develop marketing claims and to innovate; researchers do practical work to make money, to gain access to large pools of research subjects and to inform practice.

There are many advantages to this: not least a linkage between genuine hard findings and practical rather than ivory tower solutions, Benefits of real findings come quicker. Indeed, Crelos see this link between research and practical application as central to their role.

But there are dangers. Users and clients may not be aware of the status of research and how disinterested it is. What seems to be a hard finding for a model or technique may be special pleading.

This short list of practical ideas will, we hope, elicit other suggestions, agreement and disagreement. Contact Ali Gill (ali.gill@crelos.com) if you want to contribute to the debate.