

# “THE POWER OF WORDS”: A RESPONSE

(TO AN ARTICLE ABOUT FERNANDO FLORES)

In the January 1999 issue of *FastCompany* magazine, one of the main stories was about Fernando Flores, an icon in the coaching world. With anticipation and excitement I approached the article, eager to learn more about how he uses the power of words, and particularly **Speech Acts**, in service to the transformation of people and organizations. I soon found it to be a story that would take me for an unexpected review of my values and beliefs—about people and coaching.

## The Context

The basic context of the article was this: Flores was called to intervene in a company on the verge of failure, with the task of bringing them into accountability for their destiny as a company and as individual executives leading the company. We know that in good times companies are complex and potentially riddled with blind spots, shadows, and dysfunctional behaviors, yet take a company fighting for its life and it's a minefield. That's when Flores was called in to do his magic. An intervention with a company in free-fall, potentially on the verge of failure, is dicey and takes a carefully conceived strategy. The executives' careers and the livelihoods of their employees are on the line, and their backs are against the wall, so they welcome the help from Flores. His reputation precedes him; he's known for getting results.

Flores loses no time, and once in their midst he bores down in a way they are unaccustomed to. He peels back the layers quickly, gets at some brutal assessments, and goes for the jugular. Horse whisperer, he's not.

## Making and Keeping Promises

After about half of the article, I had to put it down and take a walk. I had to think over what I was reading because it was challenging some core beliefs I held for myself and about coaching. As I walked I began to ferret out some distinctions. In the article, Flores kept digging into the importance of promises—to others and ourselves. But, why was I having such a hard time with the way Flores was using promises? Something didn't fit. What was it about his style that rankled me, leaving me with a feeling of disorientation and cognitive and somatic dissonance?

After a while, in the context of how this scenario was playing out, a surprising conclusion came to me: *Keeping promises isn't necessarily a good thing*. In fact, in the way Flores was using them, I saw promises and commitments as being morally neutral—and *keeping* those promises as little more than an aesthetic point. What I began to see is that what *really* mattered was the content of the commitments. And, maybe keeping some promises wasn't good at all. To see why, consider this. Today around the world, scores of formal and informal hate groups, terrorists, and neo-fascists are making commitments and promises to bring harm to innocent people. In a narrow way, we can certainly recognize how keeping promises reinforces relationships and communities. It's important to know that what you say you'll do, you actually do. Promise-keeping builds trust and a sense of cohesion, yet when using the example of terrorists or fascists, that trust and cohesion serves destructive purposes. In cases like that, I hope every one of those commitments is broken. That would be a good thing and most people would understand why.

## The Form, Content, and Context of Commitments

When we engage in making and carrying out commitments that affect others, we engage in acts with moral content. Promises that serve dignity, the good of the human community, the health of the ecosystem, the well-being of generations to come—those are commitments worthy of moral praise. Promises made in opposition to those kinds of values are suspect, at best, and violent at worst.

In “The Power of Words,” a tipping point for me in Flores’ strategy for transformation pivots on his *forced* imposition of rules and his demand that his script be followed. On top of that, to ensure compliance without deviation, he doesn’t hesitate to employ humiliation for reinforcement. Something is gnawing at me as I ponder his tactics.

When, as consultants or coaches, are we justified in using dictatorial power, if ever?

Almost a year after this *FastCompany* feature, a well-regarded article by Daniel Goleman (“Leadership That Gets Results,” March-April 2000) appeared in *Harvard Business Review*. It was a follow-up to his earlier piece on emotional intelligence. In it he cites new research from Hay/McBer that identifies six major leadership styles: Coercive, Authoritative, Affiliative, Democratic, Pacesetter, and Coaching. The one titled “Coercive” fits Flores’ style, at least in this instance. Coercive leadership demands immediate compliance; it can be used in times of crisis to kick start a turnaround; and it has an overall negative impact on the culture, according to the Hay/McBer research. They found that it could be legitimately used to shock people into changes that are needed immediately—for survival (whether that be due to a natural disaster or a financial one). Depending on the context and outcomes, this style can either make or break the leader who uses it, especially if he or she continues to use it once the crisis has passed. Reading Flores’ intervention style in this context helps me make sense of his method. It’s

a kind of shock treatment delivered by someone in a temporary power position.

History shows that humans have a deep antipathy towards being treated in dictatorial ways. We resist forced subordination of any kind. Our emotional responses are fear, anger, and sadness or more extreme forms of these. Our bodies feel the indignity of domination and prepare to respond with fight or flight. Wars are fueled over it. So how is it that we are to accept this kind of behavior from a person like Flores, who appears devoted to integrity and truth? The only way that I could minimally accept what he was doing was as a temporary strategy to save a company’s leadership and their company from collapsing. Even then, he crossed some lines that are, for me, inviolate. I believe that a few of his actions are unethical and bring confusion to the boundaries of behavior within the coaching profession.

## Power and Dignity

Keep these things in mind: in Flores’ transformation process, he’s the dictator. He’s to be *obeyed*. Only him. Close up, here’s what he does. He singles out one person in the group, Tomas, and makes him the focus, a teaching point. He asks what he, Tomas, thinks of what Flores is doing. Tomas is game, and initially up for the challenge. Tomas says, “I hate your style.” Flores first accepts his assessment, as required by his own script, and then Flores responds, “...you are an asshole, but less of an asshole than you were two minutes ago.”

The difference between the language of Tomas and Flores is instructive. Tomas’s comment focused on a *judgment* about Flores’ style, not his person or identity, while Flores’ goes to the *identity* of Tomas—and degrades him as an asshole. To drive home the intention and sureness of his words, Flores publicly drills this one into Tomas’s consciousness: “You have opinions you know nothing about. If you give me permission, I will train you. If you agree to be trained and don’t follow my lead, I will kill you.” To me, that punctuated point has an edge of sadism.

Flores' language startled and alarmed me. It is definitely the language of power, but crucial parts of it are violative, and unnecessarily so. They are attacks against a person's *self* and *dignity* instead of particular *behaviors*.

Is the method Flores uses one that is worthy of adopting with others? (His strategy holds similarities to the "est" movement in California in the 1960s, where participants were publicly humiliated for requesting a bathroom break prior to its scheduled time. In these situations, both the individual and the group are tamed, and in the process their capacity to maintain autonomy and moral agency is diminished.)

If an intimidating method like Flores' results in good (e.g., cracking open a person's well-preserved self-deception and gets at some hard-to-arrive-at truths) then what keeps us from using the same method elsewhere—with our spouses, children, staff, managers, political leaders, even other countries? If it works in one setting, why not use it in others?

I've read Flores' *Understanding Computers and Cognition* and *Building Trust*, co-authored with Terry Winograd, and appreciate his contributions to coaching and public discourse. They are substantial. He explores the hidden structure of language and how it succeeds or fails in serving humans. He knows that the crucial connector between people is commitments—and indeed that point of connection deserves respect. But in his discovery of the power of commitments he fails to grasp, in my opinion—at least in this case, the moral considerations that would determine whether a particular commitment is a good thing or not. In so doing he makes a fetish of them, separating them from the very factors that govern their moral praiseworthiness.

To be persuasive about the value and importance of commitments, I believe he needs to wed the honoring of commitments with the primacy of dignity. Otherwise, we have to swallow the notion that humiliation is a good thing—if it brings about some other outcome that we seek. Yet, humiliation does not suddenly evaporate for

Tomas (or his colleagues) even if it leads to a useful outcome. If we negotiate dignity for victory, then what is that success worth? Attack the behaviors, yes, but do so with measure and proportion, and not at the expense of dignity. I believe that it would've been possible to achieve everything that Flores achieved in the intervention *without* the coerciveness he employed in applying the power of words. In my judgment, he wasn't using the power of speech acts; he was using the power of intimidation. In doing so he undermined the actual power of speech acts.

### A Takeaway Puzzle for Coaches and Consultants

For coaches and OD consultants, Flores (at least in this article) turns on its head the notion that creating safe space is of primary importance. He's aggressive, relentless, armed with penetrating assessments that he uses as weapons, not tools. He tells people who they are, who they aren't, what they should and shouldn't do, what they know and don't know, and he does so with the intention of bringing them more into alignment as individuals and as a team. The outcome, he hopes, not only includes alignment, but trust. But, to the end, he strikes me as a stern father figure who sets down the law and forces compliance. That dominance internalizes in the child (or executive, in this case) a certain outward mimicking that looks and sounds strong (like the father), yet lacks courage at the core.

If Flores's strategy had evoked in the executives a courage borne of their own interiors, ultimately bringing them to stand their ground against his indignities and, in the process, finding their own power, then I would've trusted the transformation. In this story, in this case, he didn't do that, and I simply don't trust the integrity of the process or the durability of its outcomes. This kind of transformation does not feel authentic, lacking a mature, self-directed keel in the water essential for personal governance and wise leadership that resonates from the inside out.