They Are What You Call Them

Commentary: When people have job titles such as 'clerk' or 'processor,' it's no surprise that they feel like unimportant cogs in a big machine. Sometimes changing the level of employee engagement begins with what a job or department is called. Just ask a worker if she'd rather be called a food service associate or a barista.
By Jon Picoult

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Many years ago, when I assumed one of the first service management roles in my career, the leaders in the organization described a key challenge with which they had been struggling. It was a refrain that would be familiar to any organizational leader: How do we get our employees engaged, excited and invested in the work they're doing so their motivation (and, consequently, their performance and our customers' satisfaction) is maximized?

Not long after describing this key management challenge to me, my new direct reports took me on a tour of this Fortune 100 company's service unit to meet and greet the staff. I was introduced to "mail clerks" and "processors," among others, and thus received my first glimpse into how powerfully words and labels could shape the thoughts and self-perceptions of employees.

Thoughts shape language—and vice versa?
Most people would agree that thoughts shape language. It's part of our daily life: We think of something we want to communicate, and then our mind translates those thoughts into language that helps us get our point across.

Less appreciated, however, is the converse concept: Language shapes thought. This is the notion that the words we use actually influence—if not constrain—our view of the world. For example, do people's perceptions of a rainbow actually differ depending on how many words their native language has for its hues? Are members of an isolated Amazon tribe that only has words for the numbers "one" and "two" unable to distinguish between groups of items numbering four and five?

In academic circles, this concept, known as "linguistic determinism," has been debated for decades and remains controversial. Fortunately, business leaders need not resolve this debate in order to benefit from it. While linguistic determinism is far from an absolute in the business arena, managers would be well advised to build their awareness and appreciation for how this hotly debated academic concept could affect their organizations' real-world performance.

Connotations and contradictions
At the service organization where I worked, the true perils of poorly selected business language became apparent when I spent one-on-one time with our employees. The mail clerks viewed themselves (and were viewed by others) as the lowest of the low. To hear it from them, they were at the bottom of the totem pole in the most mind-numbing, inconsequential job available in the entire organization.

The story only got worse with the "processors," who were the people who actually transacted business for our customers via phone or mail. Most of these folks viewed themselves as paper pushers, small cogs in a mega-machine with no ownership (or responsibility) to maximize the satisfaction and loyalty of our clients. Quite to the contrary, they viewed themselves as processors in the truest sense of the word: assembly-line workers accountable for a small piece of the puzzle, with performance measured by how many transactions they churned out each day.

Sadly, the very words that management was using to describe these employees' roles had negative connotations for them that were completely at odds with the behavior and spirit management was trying to cultivate. Clerks and processors, from the employees' perspective, weren't there to think, analyze or improve things. They were there to produce widgets and keep their heads down.

Their interpretation was not all that surprising, once you consider the formal definitions of these terms, which include phrases such as "keep records," "perform general office work" and "handle through an established routine." Couple such concepts with the words' negative connotation in popular culture and it's no wonder that the labels fostered drone-like behavior.

Articulating a higher purpose

If worker-bee job titles can negatively affect how individuals think about their jobs and their engagement in them, the good news is that people also can be positively influenced by the words used to label their function or describe their contribution. Helping employees to see some higher purpose in their work is widely viewed as an important driver in their job engagement. Many executives and managers recognize this, and attempt to articulate and reinforce that higher purpose in their all-employee presentations and even in one-on-one conversations.

While those communication avenues definitely are important, what leaders sometimes overlook are the hidden messages embedded in other organizational language, such as job titles and unit names. After all, the division general manager could give a rousing all-employee speech twice a year that helps instill meaning in everyone's job. But on the other 258 business days of the year, employees are surrounded by institutionalized labels— on nameplates, business cards and phone directories, for example.

Many will take their cognitive cues from these sources, particularly in the absence of strong daily manager reinforcement to the contrary. This is how organizational labels that may seem innocuous from afar actually become quite powerful, even overshadowing executive messages.

Labels and liberation

When these labels are removed, and replaced with terminology that is more in tune with what employees hear in their executives' rallying cries, the results can be quite striking. Try it for yourself. Just consider your own feelings as you read through this list of common organizational and occupational labels and some more "progressive" alternatives.

A		B
Insurance agent	*vs.*	Financial Professional
Transaction processor	*vs.*	Client service advisor
Call center	*vs.*	Service center
Food service associate	*vs.*	Barista
Recruiter	*vs.*	Talent scout

When you read through the list, in addition to the "B" alternatives simply having a better ring to them, didn't they generate a more positive instinctive response? What adjectives and images came to your mind when you tried the "recruiter" label on for size rather than "talent scout"? Whatever thoughts ran through your head, it's likely that the "B" alternatives generated more confident, inspiring and empowering feelings than their traditional counterparts. Now consider how those feelings might translate into employee engagement and, consequently, customer service, satisfaction and loyalty.

If organizational leaders don't have this language dynamic brought to their attention, they are prone to overlook it. It rarely affects them personally. The labels applied to leaders' jobs (and their operating units) are generally more complimentary and rousing: "vice president," "managing director" and "strategic business unit" already have favorable connotations.

But to those who are saddled with labels that are unflattering, not to mention inaccurate, the impact can be an anchor that weighs on individual and organizational performance. It constrains people's thoughts, narrowing the responsibilities they believe to be in their purview. It crimps creativity and innovation.

When is a mail room not a mail room?

As an example, let's go back to the service organization I discussed earlier. One of the changes we made to that

unit's organizational labels was to rename the mail room to the "document management hub." All of our mail clerks became document management associates.

Once the management team dissected the key accountabilities of our mail room, the "hub" moniker seemed much more appropriate. After all, every piece of incoming mail came to this area for document imaging and triage. After triage, each piece was routed to the appropriate internal service unit for handling. Once that unit fully addressed the customer request, all associated documentation went back to the mail room for imaging and archival.

When this was diagramed on a process map, what became apparent was that the "lowly" mail room acted as something of a nerve center for the rest of the organization. Furthermore, if the mail clerks didn't get the upfront imaging, triage and routing correct, the rest of the service process was doomed to underperform, if not completely fail.

While the mail clerks' critical roles may have been previously articulated by company management, the concept really took hold once the labels were changed. Suddenly, these employees got it. Document management hub associates had a greater understanding and appreciation of their part in the overall service process. New ideas began to flow for process improvement. The team even clamored to take on more responsibility for simple client requests, such as mailing address updates, that seemed to be well-aligned with the hub's charter. A new spirit of engagement and accountability came across the unit. The change was palpable.

Watch your language
In the business arena, the notion that language shapes thought may not be a universal truth. Some people, regardless of the labels applied to them, will rise above the words and reach their true potential. However, given how people's minds often work and interpret the world, the concept should not be ignored.

Business leaders are often (rightfully) faulted for their carefully chosen sound bites, their delicate wordsmithing of bad news and their excessive use of buzzwords. Yet the precision they demonstrate in formulating their speeches and press releases is too rarely applied to the organizational labels that are etched into their employees' minds.

By focusing greater attention on those labels, leaders can harness the power of language to broaden employees' perspectives, provide more meaning to their jobs, and free them from a common cognitive pitfall that could be clouding their potential—and that of the organization.

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