

The Language of Sustainability: Why Words Matter

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Whether we're working in internal management teams, or more broadly communicating to the public, to create a world that works for all, we need to change the language we use to frame our mindset. Language has real power. It communicates the concepts that shape thought, and, as such, we need to be vigilant about the terms we use. George Lakoff of the University of California at Berkeley has contributed some brilliant work on the framing of language.



(See Lakoff's "Don't Think of An Elephant," Chelsea Green Publishers, 2004.) In Lakoff's definition, "frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world . . . the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions . . . Reframing is changing the way the public sees the world. It is changing what counts as common sense. " . . . Framing is about getting language that fits your worldview. It is not just language. The idea is primary -- and the language carries those ideas, evokes those ideas."

In applying framing to the issues that many of us are typically dealing with, examples might include:

1. Change "natural resource management" to "regeneration of nature" or "natural resilience." "Management" reinforces a false sense that we know exactly what to do and how nature is going to respond to our actions. We clearly have a wealth of knowledge on work with natural processes, and it is clear that our actions very often have unintended consequences, to due to the complexities of natural systems. "Resource" conveys that nature is something to be used, rather than our life-support system. As alternative terms, even restoration, a decent improvement, doesn't conceptually support the dynamic ongoing process that is ecology, but, rather, restoring to some static state. Terms like regeneration and resilience better illustrate the end goal of re-establishing the capacity to adapt, flexibility, and ongoing processes that can evolve over time.

2. Change "proper stewardship" to "proper interaction" or "healthy relationship," for the same reason as the above. Our relationship with nature is rightly a dynamic, two-way relationship, and so we shouldn't communicate that we are managing or stewarding nature.

3. Provide context for "sustainability," in that it means the ability to continue into the indefinite future by respecting the Earth's ecosystems, its limits, and providing space for the other beings on the planet to exist. Otherwise, we create perverse concepts like sustainable growth, as if we can continue unlimited growth in the face of limits.

4. Change any language that implies economic growth is always good. In an economy predicated on unsustainable uses of nature, is economic contraction and recession necessarily bad? Or is recession a necessary correction guided by the laws of feedback? During this relatively serious recession of 2008 and 2009, these questions never entered mainstream media or politics in a significant way, yet are the real questions that we as a society need to work through.

In general, we too often get bogged down in language and terms that have become polarized, have lost their meaning, and hinder honest conversation between intelligent people. Socialism, communism, big government, free-market, conservative, liberal -- all these terms are merely labels. Rather than tag a given action under one or another of these terms, let's really look at the real social, environmental, and financial effects and impacts of a given action or policy. Use of these terms has very real implications for our communication and how it is perceived. **Indicators** Similar to language in its ability to convey concepts are indicators. By an indicator, I mean simply a measure or guide that indicates the state of something -- we have economic, environmental, and social indicators to gauge progress, health, and other qualities, and we use indicators in nearly all fields of practice. In general, we need to be very careful about the indicators we use to gauge progress and guide action and toward goals. Choice of indicator means that we believe the indicator is an accurate gauge for progress or health. And inappropriate indicators drive inappropriate action. Let's say your goal is to restore a river. One indicator you could use is the number of fish in the river. An action you could take to try to improve the indicator is merely stock the river with fish. That doesn't mean you have restored the river and brought about aquatic health. Choosing an indicator such as the pollution levels found in fish could drive drastically different action -- restoring riparian zones, installing water pollution controls, etc. -- and drastically different results. Efforts to promote a national mindset that recognizes the rights of species in our through indicators include:

Rethink economic indicators. Whether changes in GDP, unemployment, new housing starts, and other economic indicators are good or bad depends completely on their context, how the indicators are measured, and the sustainability of the overall economy that is being measured. People can still be unemployed, and yet happily engaged in activities that improve their personal and community quality of life. People can have multiple part-time jobs and not be measured as employed due to the ways employment numbers are reported. And GDP can increase due to very destructive business and economic activity.

As a first action on economic indicators, replace GDP with a new economic indicator that is more respectful of the rights of all species. GDP merely measures economic activity, and counts my action the same whether I am generating a million dollars from a whole-systems habitat regeneration company or a million dollars from a blasted-earth ecosystem destruction company. Attempts to better account for human activity, and create an indicator where higher really is better, have been around for many years now. These include the GPI (Genuine Progress Indicator) and the Ecological Footprint.

Environmental indicators. Returning to the example of restoring a river, take care that indicators you choose to track your progress toward a goal truly reflect the health of ecosystems, and are not merely indicators chosen because they're easy to gauge.

Gil Friend, a frequent contributor to GreenBiz.com, identified three key performance indicators for business:

1. **Return on resources (ROR)** vs. Return on Investment, Return on Assets or other financial return indicators that do not adequately account for resource use, because resources are undervalued.

2. **Product to Non-Product Ratio (P2NP)**, capturing the ultimate efficiency of a business.

3. **Carbon Footprint**, capturing the ultimate contribution of a business to the climate change that has emerged as the premiere socio-eco-economic issue of our time.

Adoption of these indicators as the business drivers -- and the indicators to which a company is ultimately accountable to share/stakeholders, vs. quarterly returns and other financial indicators that are too limited in their scope -- would have dramatic benefits. Indicators like these encourage a proper mindset and guide us toward the goals we need to have as a society. [Disclosure: I am a former employee of Natural Logic, Gil Friend's company.]

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