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# Why Words Matter: An Interview with Prof. Gail Fairhurst on Leadership and Discourse

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Gail Fairhurst



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**Iga Maria Lehman (IML): From your experience and studies, can you say why language and discourse matter so deeply in management and leadership?**

**Gail Fairhurst (GF):** It's hard to know where to begin, quite honestly. This is because language is not simply a reflection of reality but constitutive of it. Leaders and managers “do” things with words e.g., promise, order, accept, command, etc. (Austin, 1962)—while direct reports (and others in their role set) hold them to account as they try to decide “Can my boss be trusted?”. Discourses, in turn, are (sociohistorical) ways of thinking but also ways speaking and acting. They supply linguistic and behavioral repertoires, or tools bags, that bring about leadership and followership performances as actions and interactions in the doings of things with words (Wetherell, 1998).

**IML: Your work has emphasized framing in leadership discourse. How do the discourse practices of framing shape power relations, inclusion, and identity in organizations?**

**GF:** Along with the materials in the environment, leaders and followers use their linguistic tools bags to frame (read, position) themselves with respect to one another i.e., to show deference, dominance, equality, etc. As these “positionings” repeat over time, patterns form and scale up in various ways to constitute identities, relationships, hierarchies, organizations, systems, and societies (Fairhurst, 2007).

**IML: I know discourse is an integral element in your research on paradox and problem-centered leadership, could you describe exactly what role it plays?**

**GF:** I study paradox and paradoxical tensions, which are bipolar relationships that compete, contradict, or form ironic or absurd relationships with one another (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2024). We can spot these tensions in talk and interaction when actors use language or describe actions that show strain, conflict, or the push-pull between opposing poles. It also helps to know that clashing discourses generate paradoxical tensions. For example, we can

see clashing discourses in the case of a nonprofit whose social mission [read, discourse] is often in tension with its business mission [discourse]. Because the nonprofit requires funding to stay afloat, it may not be able to do everything it wants to do on the social side.

The “push-pull” between these discourses says a great deal about how power is enacted. If one discourse dominates another (e.g., too much attention to either mission), a paradox approach says this is often a sign of “either-or” thinking. We might want to avoid such a response if it fails to address the complexity of a situation when both poles of a tension are meritorious (e.g., a social *and* business mission). Actors engage in either-or thinking when they react defensively, deny competing poles, select only one pole, project tensions onto other actors or events, or vacillate between poles (Smith & Lewis, 2011).

Instead, paradox scholars recommend embracing “both-and” thinking, which tries to marry the interests of both poles by balancing the two. Balance can entail trade-offs or the integration of opposites, although it can also lead to unpopular compromise. Alternatively, “more than” thinking uses dialogue, collective reflection, narratives, and/or metaphors to create space for creative thinking that promotes the interests of both opposing poles (Putnam et al., 2016). It is frequently a healthier way for collectives to address conflicting yet interdependent interests for mutually satisfactory solutions.

**IML: This *DoC* issue highlights the importance of moving beyond instrumental views of language toward inclusivity and reflexivity. How can leaders use discourse to build more inclusive, responsible, and participatory organizational cultures?**

**GF:** Well, in addition to the “more than” practices described above, I think it is important that individual leaders adopt mindfulness practices that encourage reflexivity through pausing or taking a step back to consider how they (and others) are communicating and with what consequences (Fairhurst et al., 2025). I then think it is important for leaders to foster a sense of *collective mindfulness* on a regular

basis with their teams to clarify values like participation and inclusivity, but also strategic direction, meeting performance goals, and, not least, acting with integrity. Obviously, there are specific, on-the-ground practices for inclusive, responsible, and participatory workplaces, but I'll leave those to another discussion.

**IML: With the rise of AI and digital communication tools, what kinds of linguistic or discursive challenges and opportunities do you see emerging for leadership communication and organizational voice in the near future?**

**GF:** I think that the many amazing things that AI and digital communication tools can bring to leadership communication has to be balanced by a recognition of their limitations. In the case of AI, leaders (and followers) can and should use these tools to, say, acquire information or sharpen their word choices or sentence structures. However, if leaders use AI to construct the entirety of their messaging, it risks making them appear hollow and inauthentic because AI-generated content is very easy to spot. As for digital communication tools, we saw how valuable they were during the pandemic and how these tools have been incorporated into our post-pandemic routines. That said, how much is too much digital communication? There is still so much that we do not know about the levels of engagement with various digital tools relative to in person interactions and the overall impact on leadership, followership, and organizational learning.

**IML: Looking ahead, what questions about language, discourse, and management do you think are most pressing for researchers and practitioners to explore?**

**GF:** I think I've named a few already. However, I would underscore the importance of understanding the influence of tensions, contradictions, and paradoxes created by rapid technological advance, globalization, and divisive politics on leaders and their organizations today. Once tensions and contradictions were thought of as anomalies in organizational life, now they are the "new normal" because the pace of change has intensified so dramatically. Ways must be found to cope and respond to them in sustainable ways—and, if early research is any indication, leadership communication skills will require deftness, nuance, and sophistication.

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