

You May Not Be a Liar, but Are You Worth Listening To?

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Abstract

Within workplaces, deployment of words and phraseology is the most consequential medium through which executives establish their reputation – a point also generally true for other workplace actors. Moreover, ultimately, organizational performance, irrespective of its measure, substantially depends on internal communication. Despite such import, managerial advice addressing this matter is threadbare and, where it exists, is inclined to be unhelpfully generic. This article presents, updates and operationalizes an ancient framework for executive language use which has straightforward workplace application.

In Jeunet and Caro's 1991 dystopian film *Delicatessen*, one character tries to sell another a rat bait. Being turned down, the salesman takes out from his suitcase an improbable cubic object adorned with a kind of antenna, declaring that it is a BS detector. He urges his interlocutor to say something that would so qualify. Following a short hesitation, the latter ends up proclaiming: "Life is beautiful!" At these words, the antenna rotates while making repeatedly a rubber duck quacking sound. Note here that the BS detector is confirmatory. It is activated when one suspects one is being buried in meaningless verbiage. Further note that, within workplaces at least, it is the process of suspecting, but not necessarily being convinced of, the hollowness of managerial rhetoric that is corrosive and costly, for both the executive personally (the communicator) and the employer.

A straightforward and readily discoverable lie is summarily dismissed; its purveyor labelled as disreputable. However, that is not usually what happens. Indeed, it is more nuanced forms of deception and obfuscation that create most problems. In the real world, workplace actors (notably managers) often talk a lot but somehow dwell in the rhetorical twilight zone between that which is true and relevant, and that which stands *in lieu* of the genuinely informative and helpful. In doing so, they diminish their stature as leaders. Whilst not necessarily assessed by observers as dishonest, they come across as vacuous, unsure of themselves and without a sense of where they are going or taking others. From an organizational performance perspective, missives without meaningful content (common, often pervasive), at best, add little value and, at worst, are, in various ways, inefficient and dysfunctional. In more mischievous or malevolent cases, this phenomenon has been identified as amongst the most manifest characteristics of toxic bosses, sometimes giving rise to accusations of gaslighting.¹

Putting aside concerns about performance, who in organizational life has not sat through meetings listening to platitudes, triteness or even plain nonsense delivered in a learned tone?² How many in positions of responsibility have their image tarnished because of how they speak or write? Remember, it is suspicion that one is being served with nonsense that is organizationally toxic – a liar can be efficiently mentally dealt with. However (and as noted), there are more insidious forms of deceptions. Here, for example, are some typical workplace aphorisms: “Poorly managed organizations may survive for a while, but eventually fail,” “Motivated employees work hard,” “It is our competitive advantage that is going to make the decisive difference here,” or “Good products always sell well.” Such pronouncements, although often seeming like profound managerial wisdom, are without practical utility. They say little (indeed, nothing) about how the world is or will become. The problem is that (unlike with several of the aforementioned examples) spotting sentences that waste oxygen when said (or ink when written) often takes a bit of thought, which, of course, takes energy, which, also of course, is invariably costly. The good news is that, although the contraption used in *Delicatessen* is not yet commercially available, its linguistic-philosophical equivalent has existed for centuries, in fact since (in modern times) the 1730s. It is known as “Hume's Fork.”³

Hume's Fork has surprising, but mostly unexplored, practical organizational utility. By way of context, it has recently been deployed within the social sciences to address implementation and application concerns.⁴ Crucially, there is compelling evidence that corporate stewards who have at least implicit awareness of its usefulness preside over better financial performance than those who do not.⁵ In light of this latter finding, we (the

authors) have developed a beefed-up version of Hume's Fork, road-tested our creation and now (in this piece) present it as workplace ready.⁶ Specifically, this article gives an overview of Hume's Fork, describes its elaborated version and reveals, using examples, how executives, in particular, immediately benefit (themselves and their employer) when, in delivering their missives, they understand and apply it.

Hume's Fork and workplace communication

Drawing on conjecture from medieval philosophers, David Hume (1711-1776) proposed distinguishing between "relations of ideas" and "matters of fact," between what ended up being called analytic and synthetic propositions. In its simplest formulation, Hume's Fork stipulates that meaningful statements, when literally interpreted, are either one or the other of these kinds.

Although not necessarily immediately apparent, analytic propositions, also called "*a priori*" or "formal," are true by definition – and are therefore inevitably true. The first of four sub-kinds of analytic statements considered here is the tautology, an assertion where a pronouncement's subject and predicate are synonymous (or entail substantial conceptual redundancy) according to word and language use conventions. In such cases, the only practical import of what is being said or written (at least when literally interpreted) is that it does away with the need for a thesaurus. "Triangles have three sides" is a straightforward example. Here is another, organization-related, case in point: "Because that guy is always tardy, he is just going to be late again getting his report to us." Other workplace-related examples – often coming from the mouths (or literature) of consultants – include: "Charismatic leaders are influential," "Without a good manager, the team will lack clear direction" and "He does not speak much because he is shy." The denial of tautological analytic statements inevitably implies a contradiction. Indeed, when refuted, their absurdity is revealed. For example, reflect for an instant on the contention that "charismatic leaders are not influential" – a manifestly jarring thing to say.

Some analytic statements, especially those of the tautological kind, are easier to spot than others. It is the more disguised ones that tend to dominate managerial discourse and create malaise. Specific terminology assists here. First, there are unveiled tautological (analytic) statements, those that are obviously so (example: "my neighbor lives next door"). Second, there are veiled (slightly or more substantially) tautological (analytic) statements, those where a subject and its predicate are essentially synonymous or embody substantial conceptual overlap, but which require a measure of linguistic and domain-specific sophistication to identify. For example, when

confronted with the assertion that “narcissism is detrimental to team performance,” recognition of redundancy is not necessarily obvious but ultimately undeniable. Indeed, being obsessed with one’s own performance and believing oneself to be superior to others (and expecting to be recognized as such) is incongruent with making a corporate-style (collective) contribution wherein one willingly shares the limelight or is content to remain uncredited.

It is not just tautologies that are analytic in nature. As noted, there are three other sub-kinds of frequently uttered but practically irrelevant propositions. The second sub-category of analytic propositions relies on verbs such as may, might and can (especially in the conditional form “could”). These sub-types of pronouncements implicitly establish as being in play all possible outcome options for a given course of action. As such, they are semantically analogous to proclaiming to one’s partner that “we either will, or will not, go to Hawaii for our vacation this year” (which, in the interests of maintaining a good relationship, we warn against ever saying!). Equivalent examples from the world of work include: “strong personalities may be preferred in difficult situations” (leaving open the possibility that they may not) or “tight networks can produce negative effects” (again, leaving dangling the prospect that they do not). The third sub-kind of analytic statement comprises those which are manifestly unfalsifiable (statements that cannot be shown to be untrue). For example, “people behave as they are rewarded” is inevitably the case.

The fourth sub-kind of analytic statement that has substantial workplace relevance is really a specialized form of the third sub-kind. We call these “I’m *gonna*-propositions” and the people who utter them habitually “*gonna*-people.” Smart kids are often good at teaching us about deployment of such rhetoric. For example, ask a teenager if they have done their homework. The astute ones who at this stage have not and are anxious to avoid any impost will often reply “no, but I’m *gonna*!” This is a brilliant maneuver on their part. It allows them to avoid the charge of lying and simultaneously establish conditions that suit their agenda. Theoretically, they can repeat the phrase indefinitely in such a way as to dupe their interlocutor. Insofar as work is concerned, there is a specific (and mostly duplicitous) application of “I’m *gonna* statements.” Simply put, they are often used by those who have no intention of doing something but have assessed themselves to be backed into a corner. In a technical sense, a “I’m *gonna* statement” is one pertaining to intention (and thus parsed in the future tense) which is not associated with precise time contingencies. Like the other sub-kinds of analytic propositions discussed, they come in various guises. Sometimes, for example, they take

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the form of pronouncements like “I definitely need to do that,” “I will soon,” or, even, “I will.”

The bottom line is that analytic statements, irrespective of the sub-kind to which they belong, convey nothing about what the world is actually like or how it will change given specified exigencies. In this vein (and to round out the point), while it is certainly true that “my father’s brother is my uncle,” to indicate this does not inform an audience about a) if my father has a brother (I could be communicating in the abstract), b) if I have a good relationship with my dad or, c) if indeed I have ever met him. It is only these latter kinds of missives that enable listeners to become informed about their world such that they are empowered to be effective actors – a precursor (within organizational contexts) for better performance.

Unlike analytic statements, synthetic ones represent propositionally how the world is (if they are true) or the world is not (if they are untrue). An example of both the former and the latter is “The report was finished yesterday” (depending on whether or not this is in fact the case). It is noteworthy here that a correctly formulated statement which is not true remains meaningful and especially informative. Indeed, the man who says: “I have just bought a private jet,” when he has not, does his audience a double educative favor. First, he provides a basis for investigation of the claim such that something new will be discovered about a relevant context (i.e., the interlocutor-s will learn that the claim is false). Second, he discloses to the interlocutor(s) something consequential about his disposition (i.e., he reveals that he is a liar).

If a proposition is neither analytic nor synthetic, it is by default in a third category, henceforth labelled as “residual.” Such statements are not necessarily devoid of value. For example, “Love is forever” and “God exists” are residual statements when Hume’s Fork does the sorting, but are nonetheless, in various ethereal ways, often meaningful to those who utter or hear them. In practice, and as evidenced by the two preceding examples, the bulk of residual-category statements comprises sentences where abstract, fictive, or disembodied entities are treated as if they were tangible or had derivative concrete attributes. To return to organizational concerns, these latter kinds of pronouncements have little to do with what workplace actors normally communicate about (with some exceptions, to be discussed).

Residual category propositions have a unique standing when it comes to legitimacy. Specifically, when deployed non-literally, they can be, in various ways, evocative, entertaining, funny, etc. For example, to say during a meeting that “this idea will fly” is not to say that something intangible will take on a physical form, sprout wings and start flapping around the room. However, it is the fleeting contemplation of such a spectacle (or the idea that

flying places something above – and mostly going faster than – everything else) that emotionally aligns parties through conveying a colorful form of endorsement.

In the world of work, there is nothing wrong with residual-type statements if they are understood and kept under control. They have their optimal effect when the communicator and the message receiver share an understanding that language is being invoked figuratively, mostly to elicit an emotional connection or response. For example, “This is a natural miracle” is self-contradictory but the sort of pronouncement that enthuses others and thus has occasional utility.

Another sub-kind of residual statement is noteworthy. Labelled “deepities” by recently-deceased philosopher Dan Dennett, they are pronouncements that, although not obviously wrong, leave those who read or hear them unable to decide whether they are glib or profound.⁷ “Love is just a word” is one of Dennett’s favourite exemplars. A management-related example is: “There is no ‘I’ in team.”

A squeaking rubber duck for the workplace: Sharpening up executive communication

Within workplaces, greater explicit awareness on the part of decision-makers and communicators about what Hume’s Fork is and how to deploy it assists to alleviate confusion, instils confidence in consequential actors, brings to heel toxic bosses and co-workers, and ultimately improves organizational performance. In practice (and to reemphasize a crucial point), there is evidence that less well-functioning firms are disproportionately beset by an over-abundance of analytic statements and injudicious (or out of place) use of residual ones.⁸ To address language deployment dysfunction within organizations, Table 1 identifies several kinds of statements, gives examples of each and provides executive guidance principles dealing with where and how each kind is used optimally.

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Table 1. Examples of statements and their classifications

Statement types	Exposed or obvious	Veiled (thinly or thickly)
Analytic	<p><i>Examples:</i> “Malpractice is damaging.” “Sales may improve next year.” “Our revenue position is about to change.” “Her work has a lot of meaning for her.”</p> <p><i>Advice for executives:</i> Such statements are to be avoided in (almost) all circumstances.^a They diminish a communicator’s credibility because they are manifestly vacuous. Furthermore, they have no implication for organizational performance and are often organizationally destructive because, when uttered by leaders, they diminish stakeholder confidence in executive competency.</p>	<p><i>Examples:</i> “Firms that survive will be those that adapt to changing markets.” “It is the motivated ones who are going to do most of the work.” “I am going to look into it.”</p> <p><i>Advice for executives:</i> These kinds of pronouncements are relevant when one is ambushed, put on the spot, has not done one’s homework or is being compelled to comment on matters outside of one’s competence zone. They are an alternative to saying ‘I don’t know’. They are best deployed sparingly, as a remedial measure in circumstances where a declaration of ignorance would be personally damaging. It is noteworthy that, as with unveiled tautologies, they have no implication for improving organizational performance, but sometimes have short-term prop-up utility.</p>
Residual	<p><i>Examples:</i> “He has too many ideas in his head.” “This proposal will be shot down.” “We did not get remotely close to agreeing.”</p> <p><i>Advice for executives:</i> The optimal use of residual statements is when they have attained the status of idiomatic expressions.^b Deployment of residual propositions, when they are not idiomatic, is high risk. If a residual expression can be formulated that is especially evocative, it will establish its progenitor as a wordsmith, perhaps (in rare cases) with cultivated ability to connect emotionally with others. On the one hand, such a result is a big pay-off. On the other hand, failure is reputationally damaging. For this reason, if a non-idiomatic residual statement is to be formulated, it is best done in writing where it can be thought through in advance.</p>	<p><i>Examples (veiled residual statements are mostly deepities):</i> “Everything is subjective.” “This case transcends the code of ethics.” “The basis of all teamwork is attraction.”</p> <p><i>Advice for executives:</i> deepities have specialized application. Garden-variety managers concerned about proximal measures of organizational performance should not deploy language in this way. However, and to reiterate Dennetts’ point, deepities, by virtue of being simultaneously difficult to categorize as glib or profound, and always having a niche audience, play a role in establishing for a communicator guru status. Certain consultants routinely deploy deepities (or thickly veiled residual statements) to secure an income – a method generally associated with other aligned elements of their approach.</p>
Synthetic	<p><i>Examples:</i> “Our monthly sales target was hit early last month” (low precision). “Our monthly sales target was hit on the 20th last month” (moderate precision). “Sales revenues reached \$100,000 on the 20th of January, which was our overall target for the month” (high precision).</p> <p><i>Advice for executives:</i> Personal credibility is established when discourse is dominated by these kinds of statements. Such an image-enhancement advantage has been shown to translate into improved organizational performance. Where facts are established, higher levels of precision exacerbate performance gains. Synthetic statements should be the default in the executive language arsenal.</p>	

a. There is a particular category of exception to this principle. In circumstances where there has been a tendency towards not addressing the substance of a problem or undue obfuscation concerning it, an unveiled analytic statement is useful for getting an audience focused on the matter at hand or what needs to be done. For example, in the context of an esoteric panel discussion about tax-rebates, government subsidies, public housing availability and state-sponsored childcare for the economically disadvantages, the economist Milton Friedman, once said, “I think it is worth pointing out that the main problem poor people have is that they don’t have enough money.”

b. Some expressions are idiomatic, meaning that, although in a technical sense they are analytic or (more commonly) residual, they are so ingrained in language use that they can be treated as synthetic because they convey clear meaning. Examples: “I am playing the Devil’s advocate” or “This is an open secret.”

Conclusion

In organizational life, it is not necessarily straightforward to classify people's statements. However, it is the case that employees (or, for that matter, any workplace actor's) intuition has a way of tipping them off that something is wrong when dealing with a boss or colleague whose rhetoric is heavily laden with analytic platitudes, or unrestrained non-idiomatic residual category-type statements. Such communicators are looked at with askance. Other things being equal, their career is inclined to stall. From an organizational perspective, they create psychological (and other forms of) inefficiency. They impose on their listeners an unduly burdensome cognitive load, compelling them to find meaning where little – or none – exists.

In the final analysis, it is synthetic statements that are the stock-in-trade of the organizationally competent. It is these types of propositions that paint the pictures of how things were, how they are now and how one intends them to be. It is the synthetic statements that represent the world – and which provide the medium for making it better, or, at least, to one's liking.

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