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## **Words and Silence in Job Mentoring**

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### **Abstract**

Today, economic sustainability is a social priority and it implies positive, rewarding, and creative relationships in the workplace. Creativity, innovation, and subjective welfare will remain extremely important for sustainable production models in an age of technological acceleration, ecological threats, and digital globalization. With the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the new ways to organize work, this is even more important. The basis for this is to be found in education, especially in secondary and higher education. Good mentoring is becoming essential in professional development; this activity is based on words and silence, using corporate and individual coaching tools to open new doors of creativity. Following Peter Drucker's (1954) work in management thinking and the approach of positive psychologists, this paper presents a new concept of sustainable working relationships for the 21st century based on words and narratives.

*Keywords:* mentoring, coaching, education, leadership, management styles

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## **Introduction: The Word and Management in Modern Companies**

We need to reclaim the role of the word in the activity of business management professionals, to reclaim the word as a tool of positive influence for those who are responsible for other people. Management is one of the most influential social disciplines and words are the main vehicle for human interaction. This is especially relevant when we refer to mentoring and coaching as activities associated with managerial functions.

In our fast-moving society, the use of the word has become a matter of great importance in professional activity. It has always been a part of management, but words as a motivating factor and as an aid to mentoring must go a step further. It should not be seen as a complement to more technical skills and knowledge; rather, it is a fundamental, necessary, and irreplaceable tool.

One issue we should first comment on when referring to a company concerns its environment. One of the most defining influences of the age we live in is the focus on ecology and sustainability. Although this article is dedicated to the importance of the word in management education, it is important to highlight the social determinants that have the greatest impact. One illustrative and highly relevant determinant is the search for sustainable development, which John Dernbach (as cited in Friedman, 2009) stated "is among the most important ideas to come out of the 20th century .... Something is environmentally or ecologically sustainable when it protects, restores, or regenerates the environment rather than degrades it" (p. 52). Both authors introduce the concept of sustainability as one of the driving forces that will affect corporate and social development in the coming years.

The ecological challenge is undoubtedly one of the greatest we face at present and thus when we refer to management issues and specifically the use of the word, we need to take it into account – along with other challenges that we should briefly mention, such as technology, the impact of globalization, the media revolution, and the rise in inequality. This last factor, in particular, has a profound connection with people's working lives.

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The contradictions and factors regarding disengagement or lack of motivation with work are the consequence of a social situation that has been taking hold in recent decades. The work of managers cannot be analyzed in isolation from this social context. If we are willing to defend the intense use of the word as a tool for transformation, it must be done realistically, without ignoring the real difficulties. The environment cannot be left aside, not only the most immediate one currently defined by the sudden COVID-19 crisis, but also the one defined by chronic dysfunctions in the globalized economic system:

over recent decades, markets have not done a good job of ensuring the basic requisites of a decent life for all. Some of these failures are now well understood: markets would prefer to insure only the healthy, and they devote enormous resources to differentiating between the healthy and others. But a society where only the healthy can get insurance will not be a productive or healthy society. (Stiglitz, 2020, pp. 208–209)

What we wish to emphasize with the above is that the intervention of people dedicated to mentoring in secondary and higher education must be carried out with an extensive range of social, psychological, and motivational variables. However, despite all this, the word of a mentor, the word of a manager, or the accompaniment of a good coach is decisive for personal wellbeing and professional success. Apart from the management of people, subjects such as those related to professional development and the discrepancies between the practice of organizations and the aspirations of young people and even older professionals in their career at work or in a business, university curricula rarely include subjects resembling the humanities. This is a modern-day discrepancy, as Armin Trost highlights in his articles (2016, 2017).

Moreover, digital technology and its impact on society brings many advantages as well as challenges. Innovation and social innovation create new frameworks, which demand changes in the managerial field, especially in human interaction, but in this specific area changes are slow.

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More informally, but with a background of great interest in understanding our reality, Alessandro Baricco addressed this issue:

With each passing day, people are losing some of their humanity, preferring a more performative and less reliable artificiality. When they can, they delegate choices, decisions, and opinions to machines, algorithms, statistics, classifications. The result is a world in which the potter's hand is perceived less and less, to use an expression pleasing to Walter Benjamin: it seems to have come more from an industrial process than from an artisanal gesture. Is this how we want the world to be? Accurate, polished, and cold. (Baricco, 2019, pp. 21–22)

Although it has been a trend in recent decades, it should be noted that one of the greatest impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic has been the rapid increase in and implementation of remote working. Although it remains to be seen how it will be extended across sectors, the word will be an important instrument in helping to reorganize work in the new personal and employment conditions imposed by the “new normal.”

### **Economic and Ethical Globalization: The Word as an Indispensable Tool**

The summary set out in the previous section is intended to situate the need for change in much of the inertia that still besets professional life in businesses. Many curricula and syllabi are still based on a socioeconomic situation typical of the mid-20th century.

In a world in which digital globalization influences almost every aspect through an almost instantaneous connection, it could be worth implementing what Adela Cortina defends in her proposals: moving from economic globalization to ethical globalization. For Cortina, we live in a “Global Village,” as described by the communication theorist McLuhan (1992), in which

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selfishness is an old-fashioned attitude, as [is] petty tribalism .... In the face of these universal challenges, there is only room for the response of a universalist ethical attitude that has as its horizon, for decision-making, the universal good, although it is necessary to build it from the local good. (Cortina, 2009, pp. 218–219)

The previous reference to structural changes, digital globalization, and technological acceleration allows us to frame a series of changes for which the influence of mentors, persuasion, and the ability to inspire are actions and categories that are not only desirable, but necessary and essential.

In this context, the use of speech and silence is fundamental in order to organize transitions of both a personal and professional nature at a time when the amount of information and messages of all kinds has reached saturation point, resulting in mistakes – as highlighted by Daniel Goleman in one of his most recent pieces:

Attention has ended up becoming the main problem .... The bombardment of data leads to negligent shortcuts, such as careless filtering of e-mails, exclusively paying attention to their headers, missing many voice messages and the too fast reading of messages and reminders .... This situation had already been noticed in 1977 by Herbert Simon, Nobel Prize winner in Economics. While writing about the advent of an information-rich world, he noted that information consumes the attention of its recipients. Thus, excess information is accompanied by a poverty of attention. (Goleman, 2013, pp. 21–22)

The use of the word, of the good word, is and will be of the greatest importance in professional life, as mentioned by Professor Álvarez de Mon (quoted by Gonzalez-Alorda, 2011):

Words, silence, gestures, and listening are powerful instruments of self-knowledge, relationships, and coexistence. However,

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unfortunately, despite the fact that talking is an activity natural to people that is free and within everyone's reach, it is a scarce and very expensive thing. (p. 12)

The dissociation between the importance of the word and the training received by those who are preparing to lead, in degree programs or professional programs, is extremely marked. In curricula or syllabi in business schools, we may find a few subjects dedicated to business communication, both external and internal, in addition to those of a more technical nature (Finance, Marketing, Operations, etc.). However, not enough attention is paid to the word as an indispensable tool in professional life.

Before examining in detail the impact of the word, it would be convenient to take into consideration two related fundamental areas: the economic and social environment and the ability to learn new skills. It is important to know the reality, "the playing field," or in other words, where we really are; the importance of promoting the word as a tool of maximum value is derived from this.

### **The Need for a New Mindset**

The macrotrends driving our society have been defined in recent years by a common factor: acceleration. Technology accelerations and digital globalizations are transforming economic relationships, leading to a new world with deep consequences for people's lives. At the same time, information technologies are advancing rapidly along with the constant increase in ecological challenges, the balance in nature, and the risks presented by climate change. All this is intended to highlight the conditions in which people live today, though of course with important differences according to the countries they live in and their level of wealth and distribution.

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## The Importance of the Word in the Age of Technology

Another circumstance that we need to consider is access to information. The word is a key integral part of the information sent through the Internet. Since we access practically everything through the Internet these days, this introduces new dimensions to consider when analyzing the social reality, especially the reality in companies and in 21st-century professional life.

Access to extensive information, mainly through the word – sometimes ordered and at other times chaotic – forces us to take into account a situation that in academic debates perhaps remains in the background. We need to bear in mind that we are immersed in an interconnected society based on a new information architecture (Jarvis, 2009). Information is transmitted through *links*, something that is impacting the importance of the social use of words. How this information is transmitted through links is something that must be considered for any analysis on the importance of the word.

In the context of change, in which technologies play a growing role, the word gains even greater importance in the world of work and professional relationships – and by extension in all types of social relationships.

In the context of this article, we refer to the word in its various manifestations, namely written and spoken by people; however, we should also consider the help –through the word – provided by solutions based on algorithms and software, for example, *Cortana* for Windows or *Siri* for IOS, in addition to others whose numbers are growing by the day, such as speech based on algorithms and artificial intelligence.

## The Growing Importance of Trainers, Mentors, Tutors, and Coaches

Tutoring, mentoring, and coaching each have a different function. A mentor is not the same as a tutor or a coach, but from the point of view of this article we will adopt a flexible approach when defining these



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categories, since the aim is to study the role of the word, of the good word – or of silence where appropriate – and not so much the particulars of each role. All of these activities, with their various methods and circumstances, are designed to help and influence people and organizations for the better.

The role of technology must be placed in an appropriate context, but under the assumption that it is not the most important thing when it comes to guiding, influencing, and orienting in the professional world.

In 2014, Brandon Busted of the Gallup Institute carried out a huge survey of North American university graduates who had been working in companies or developing their professions for more than five years. The research can be summarized in a question that was addressed to the professionals regarding what they considered to be the most important factor in their years at college or technical school that encouraged them to follow a professional career track. From the results of the survey – carried out on more than a million professionals – two aspects clearly stood out:

Successful students had one or more teachers who were mentors and took a real interest in their aspirations, and they had an internship related to what they were learning in school. The most engaged employees, said Busted, consistently attributed their success in the workplace to having had a professor or professors who cared about them as a person, or having had a mentor who encouraged their goals and dreams. (Friedman, 2016, pp. 242–243).

The results of the study highlight two characteristics that relate to the importance of the word. Mentors, tutors, and company coaches have at their disposal a fundamental tool: using words, the good word, or sometimes even silence. What the professionals most valued, what truly defined their life and professional career, was the result of crossing paths with leading people who had left a deep impression on them.

To achieve this relationship of acceptance, there must be a circumstance, a situation that does not usually feature much in professional



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fields or in management degree programs, and it relates to loving people. Indeed, to influence someone you have to love, you have to appreciate others. An example of the importance of this aspect in the transformation of people and organizations is described below.

Positive influence of mentoring and accompanying are aspects of great importance that usually do not receive enough attention.

One example which may help to illuminate the importance of this category was given some time ago by Oxford Leadership Academy consultant Brian Bacon at the end one of his lectures to a small group of attendees. At the end of the day, according to Gonzalez-Alorda's transcript, Bacon (as cited in González-Alorda, 2011) explained:

A few years ago I took part in a conference in San Francisco. I was a minor lecturer at a great event in which giant figures like Peter Drucker, Peter Senge, and Michael Hammer were speaking: The Who's Who of leadership and organizational change. The conference was taking place in the context of the 50th anniversary of the United Nations. For two days the lecturers had given a display of scientific wisdom on how to lead organizations. The subjects went from re-engineering human resources to changing structures, via the best keys to leadership ....

At the end of these conferences, the organizers normally distribute a questionnaire on which one may evaluate the speakers and the impact of their messages. To everyone's surprise, Mother Teresa of Calcutta – whom they had persuaded to take part in the event – came first in the ranking, far ahead of the person in second place. Curiously, she was not on the panel of speakers, but had simply been invited to give a brief message at the end.

In fact, she spoke for no more than thirty seconds. She mounted the platform, waited a moment in silence and then, in a very soft voice, said: "So you want to change people. But do you know your people? And do you love them? Because if you don't know your people, there will be no understanding, and

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if there is no understanding, there will be no trust, and if there is no trust, there will be no change. And do you love your people? Because if there is no love in what you do, there will be no passion, and if there is no passion, you will not be ready to take risks, and if you are not ready to take risks, nothing will change. So if you want your people to change, think, 'Do I know my people? And do I love my people?'"

Mother Teresa's message had remained suspended in the auditorium, and it was clear that it had struck home. As strongly as when someone hears the truth. (pp. 43–44)

Brian Bacon's words described Mother Teresa's intervention, which has some teachings that should be highlighted. Firstly, the account of what happened as explained by Bacon, a professor and consultant who works in the reality of today's companies, provides us a perspective connected to many references that in professional language remain to a certain extent included under the category of *emotional intelligence*. The popularization of emotional intelligence as a concept in the fields of management and management education owes so much to Daniel Goleman (1997, 1998) and others.

On many occasions in professional knowledge, words are often used that do not quite define the ideas that underlie them. Perhaps loving others is often described using the term empathy, although it is not the same thing. Speaking the way Mother Theresa did at a meeting of specialists helps to clarify certain concepts, but her words could not be used by a consultant. In order to lead, it is essential to cultivate emotional intelligence, and in order to be close to people you have to love them. However, this notion seems incompatible with a language we call professional, which is characterized by its distance and oftentimes by handling abstract concepts and meanings that are to a certain degree vague.

This situation is explained very well by González-Alorda (2011) when referring to what Brian Bacon explained about Mother Teresa's brief intervention:

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That account of Brian Bacon brought me to the following conclusion: To get people to change, the best way is to inspire them, after having accepted them as they are. And you are inspiring when others see not only your professional qualities, but also certain personal qualities worthy of being emulated – when there is consistency between what you think and what you say, and also between what you say and what you do. In short, when you transmit authenticity, a quality which is won through many little efforts and which, frequently, requires you to swim against the current. (pp. 44–45)

### **Developing a Giving Attitude**

Various studies exist that provide empirical evidence of the importance of having an attitude of giving to others – indeed, it is even one of the ways of achieving a successful professional career, as highlighted by Adam Grant, professor at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania (2014). Based on empirical studies, Adam Grant, who comes from the professional field of social psychology, explains in *Give and Take* how managers who give themselves to others achieve successful career paths in much greater numbers than those who only take advantages from others. Today, with technological acceleration, organizations need creativity and fluidity and should not depend on hierarchical barriers that hold back the ideal of an organization today, which is to be agile.

### **Social Creativity, Innovation, and Adaptation**

Fostering creativity is directly linked to empathy and the need to make the most of everyone's capacities and abilities. Mentoring, good influence, and good words will make it possible to promote innovation and creativity, and to give meaning to people's lives. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, in relation to the psychological basis of creativity, wrote that

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when we live creatively, boredom is banished and every moment holds the promise of a fresh discovery. Whether or not these discoveries enrich the world beyond our personal lives, living creatively links us with the process of evolution. Most of the suggestions derived from the study of creative lives can be implemented by anybody regardless of age, gender, or social condition. (1996, p. 344)

Proposals and alternative approaches to fostering creativity are not new; they have already undergone a long journey. Technological acceleration, however, demands a change in the way we manage and behave in organizations. Transitioning to new stages will only be possible with the continuous work of people in companies – with inspiration, mentoring, and coaching – to ensure that technological advances are not held back by a lack of social innovation and the slow adaptation of humans.

Eric “Astro” Teller, the current director of project X at Alphabet – the parent company of Google and others – highlighted this situation. He explained this to *The New York Times* journalist Thomas Friedman by means of two curves on a graph, one showing technological progress – which has accelerated in recent years – and another, more static one showing the adaptation of humans, which was slower than the technological acceleration. As Thomas Friedman explained:

So that is going on with scientific and technological progress . . . . He’d promised two lines, and he now drew the second, a straight line that began many years ago above the scientific progress line but since then had climbed far more incrementally, so incrementally you could barely detect its positive slope.

“The good news is that there is a competing curve,” Teller explained. “This is the rate at which humanity (individuals and society) adapt to changes in this environment. This,” he added, “can be technological changes (mobile connectivity), geophysical changes (such as the Earth warming and cooling), or social changes.” (Friedman, 2016, pp. 30-31)

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Social changes are the slowest to take place. If we examine life and the curve that shows the activity of companies, we will notice the slowness and the need to change. Here the role of mentors and coaches is essential in providing help in advancement. It is also essential to help avoid a situation in which the companies that define themselves as “agile” are still very similar to those places described by the sociologist Richard Sennett (2000), whose studies on work changes in the United States at the end of the 1990s highlighted factors that result in frustration, including routine, boredom, and the frustration many people feel in their jobs and in their professional relationships.

### **Management, Mentoring, and the Word in Future Management**

The culture of organizations does not allow changes to be made with the speed required by current times. Managers who act as coaches, or through external mentors, have to be considered in the context of cultural factors, as highlighted by Edgar Schein (2010, pp. 7–33): The three main points are 1) what we see and know, 2) values and beliefs, and 3) what is assumed and not explicitly stated.

These factors are deeply ingrained in organizations and, unfortunately, are not always so obvious to everyone. With technological acceleration, the distance between what a company is and what it should be has widened. Peter Drucker previously stressed that not only should these incongruities be taken into account when innovating, but so should the opportunities they bring with them:

An incongruity is a discrepancy, a dissonance, between what is and what “ought” to be, or between what is and what everybody assumes it to be. We may not understand the reason for it; indeed, we often cannot figure it out. Still, an incongruity is a symptom of an opportunity to innovate. (Drucker, 2007, p. 51)

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This discrepancy, which Peter Drucker considers an opportunity, can be considered a “window” through which managers, mentors, and coaches can work to change and adapt the organization to new needs, whether defined by globalization, by the COVID-19 pandemic, or by any other circumstance that arises. Recent research has paid attention to the need for changes in soft skills and in the use of words (Boyatzis et. al., 2019) with recommendations that could influence the changes required in today’s forward-looking companies and organizations.

By highlighting the idea of “lifelong learning,” they underline a long-term vision that is far from the short-term opportunism that until recently was seen as the only source of innovation.

Unlike mentoring, which can sometimes last decades, coaching typically involves a shorter time period and a more specific focus. In our work, we focus on an explicit dyadic coaching process, which means that there is a mutual agreement – formal or informal – between coach and coachee that they are participating in a developmental process. Sometimes coaching takes place during predetermined coaching sessions, but it can also occur while walking to or from meetings, at lunch, or in other less formal settings. Note that although the number of professionals using the actual title of “coach” is growing at dramatic rates worldwide, coaching as we use the word also might be an informal or formal advisor, a boss, or a peer (Boyatzis et al., 2019, p. 45)

The word used in formal and informal coaching sessions or in discussions with mentors or managers during their daily work is essential. It is important to highlight the everyday work carried out by mentors in the company that is outside of formal sessions but which helps through reflection and the word.

The effect of the word on management and entrepreneurship leaves no doubt about the need for mentors to advance in the correct use of discussions and conversations in order to bring



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true innovation in companies. The following sentence sums up the actual discussion's essence: "In order to consolidate the discursive dimension within experiential learning, we think that there is a need to better train mentors in oral communication techniques, along with sensitizing managers." (Lefebvre & Redien-Collo, 2013, p. 370)

At this point it is worthwhile emphasizing that silence, the absence of the word, must also be cultivated by managers, mentors, etc. It seems to be convenient to move away from the stereotype of those (managers or mentors) who always have an explanation, always evaluate, and must always give an opinion. In contrast, silence can be of great help on many occasions and in time people can learn to appreciate this humility, as highlighted in the following interview by the editor-in-chief of *Harvard Business Review* with the CEO of JP Morgan Chase, Jamie Dimon:

You need humility and heart. You don't have to be that good at all the analytical stuff. But if you don't get the best out of your people, you won't succeed. People want to be treated with respect. They have ideas. They want to contribute. Managers have to understand that we don't have all the answers. (Ignatius, 2018, p. 8)

Another important aspect regarding the use of words in business management is the listener. To promote the word as a tool for transformation in a company, sufficient time must be devoted to training in receiving "feedback." It should not be so much a defense or source of debate by those receiving it; rather, whoever receives feedback must know how to reflect, distill the fundamentals, and make the most of it in order to improve the essential arguments. In the training of leaders, negotiation and persuasion techniques are usually studied, but always (or almost always) with the aim of "winning." In contrast, an environment that enhances the word must engage those who receive feedback in learning such skills; it is a factor that can be fundamental in the transformation and innovation of organizations.

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The person who gives an opinion, provides feedback, or evaluates activities must be fair and considerate in substance and form. However, knowing how to capitalize on those conversations and the advice given is important and is something in which we must all make an effort and train ourselves – in how to receive feedback. As professors at Harvard Law School have written, “receiving feedback well is a skill” (Stone & Heen, 2014). Through the word, the great and urgent work carried out by managers, mentors, tutors, and coaches can help people in companies, organizations, and universities to redefine attitudes towards contributing and giving to others (Grant, 2014). At the same time, universities and business schools should promote teaching the word as the best tool for transformation and change.

If one of the urgent issues of our time is the transformation and adaptation of human teams, we urgently need to teach the use of the word as a tool. This is a relevant subject for young people in their early years of training, as well as to those who follow programs within “lifelong learning” schemes. Along with traditional subjects typical of the managerial profession – marketing, finance, strategy, etc. – or other, more recent ones, such as e-commerce, business analytics, or machine learning, it is important to pay attention to the use of the word by using various tools. Education is needed in the use of “power verbs,” as described by Faulkner and Faulkner-Lunsford (2013). These authors confirm the importance of the word for mentors and, by extension, for anyone whose profession is to lead:

Words have the power to affect both the physical and emotional health of people to whom we speak, for better or for worse. Words used to influence are inspiring, uplifting, and challenging. They encourage, motivate, and persuade; they can be visionary; they can change people’s lives for better. Verbal communication is a powerful human instrument and we must learn to use it properly. We need to not only learn to think about speaking in new ways, but also learn to think about language and human nature, psychology, and sociology. (Faulkner & Faulkner-Lunsford, 2013, p. 9)

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## Conclusion

In order for the above ideas to develop positively, it is evident that a good level of motivation must first be achieved by setting interesting goals and presenting them in an attractive way. The philosopher José Antonio Marina, discussing words and motivation, cited the case of the prophet Isaiah, who said, "Give me, Lord, an initiate's language to be able to say a word of encouragement to the afflicted" and reminded us that "Bergson spoke of personalities capable of showing us new possibilities, of eliciting new emotions" (Marina, 2011, p. 29).

We do not have to forget that when professionals were asked what they valued the most in their education, it was crossing paths with leading people that left a deep impression on them. This refers to educators, coaches, and mentors. Their influence was given by the words and silence they administered.

Opening new areas of interest and improvement with the word is of the greatest relevance and also of the utmost importance for the progress of companies and, by extension, of future society. In times of great change, such as the one currently defined by the COVID-19 pandemic and globalization, the use of words and silence is an effective instrument to achieve greater wellbeing for people and organizations. In the workplace, it is important not to forget that organizations are the people who comprise them.

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