

Strategic Vision and Values in Top Leaders' Communications: Motivating Language at a Higher Level

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Abstract

This study extends motivating language theory (MLT) to clarify how top leaders can construct and transmit strategic vision communications and related values messages to improve organizational performance. The propositions and models configure MLT's utility for transmitting vision and values through CEO language, and also expand the existing MLT framework to include multilevel and external communication. In addition, one of the proposed models presents a cybernetic feedback process that embraces external and internal organizational stakeholders. Furthermore, top leader examples of motivating language in practice are examined. Finally, this theoretical article contributes proposed frameworks for organizational-level motivating language implementation, diffusion, and future empirical analysis of MLT in leader strategic vision and related values communications.

Keywords

motivating language theory, leadership, communication, strategy

This article reconceptualizes a well-developed and tested leader communication theory—motivating language theory (MLT)—to create a model of how top organizational leaders can transmit organizational visions and related values to internal and external stakeholders in order to attain improved organizational performance and stakeholder welfare. This expansion of MLT advances it from an individual, dyadic, and team

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model to one that is instrumental in addressing organizational level outcomes. Additionally, this development provides a theoretically grounded framework for examining the content of top leaders' strategic vision and values communications.

These objectives align with abundant research that supports the pivotal role of a leader's strategic vision in attaining greater organizational performance and success (Avery, 2005; Baum, Locke, & Kirkpatrick, 1998; Collins & Porras, 2004; Ireland & Hitt, 1999; Kantabutra, 2008). According to Ireland and Hitt (1999), effective strategic vision is based on an organizational purpose, which is well-articulated and thoroughly disseminated by top leaders. The resultant organizational outcomes will be a more committed workforce that gives a high collective performance. Such a well-communicated strategic vision also transmits key organizational values to enhance external stakeholder understanding and acceptance (Porter, 1996). Similarly, inspirational visions crafted from strong values improve internal stakeholders' work lives (Berson, Shamir, Avolio, & Popper, 2001; Dolan & Garcia, 2002). Moreover, superior organizational reputation—which attracts more talented employees, builds their pride, and draws external stakeholder support—has been hypothesized to be fostered by well-stated strategic purpose vision (Dowling & Moran, 2012).

As eloquently envisioned by Daft and Weick (1984), organizations are open systems in increasingly complex environments, and it is the top leader's calling to interpret the external context, derive an organizational direction in such environments, and to communicate this vision to stakeholders. In response, management researchers have made notable progress investigating strategic leader language—specifically in language used to convey a strategic vision (Baum et al., 1998; Conger, 1991; Dolan & Garcia, 2002; Fairhurst, 2009; Larwood, Falbe, Miesing, & Kriger, 1995; Sillince, 2006; Westley & Mintzberg, 1989).

Yet little has been done to develop a model for *how* leaders communicate effective strategic vision (Kantabutra, 2008). Furthermore, previous literature on strategic leader vision communication has largely overlooked top leader empathy or humane expressed concern toward both internal (employees) and external (customers, suppliers, society, etc.) stakeholders. Prominent scholars claim that these behaviors are inherent to superior performance and top leader efficacy (Cameron, 2012; Luthans & Youssef, 2004; Miller, 2013). This latter omission seems out of sync with the 21st-century organizational landscape. Today's employees are often *boundaryless*—fluidly shifting workplaces and careers (Wayne et al., 2009). Largely due to broken psychological contracts between employers and employees (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994) caused by downsizing, off-shoring, contingent employees, and economic uncertainty, the 21st-century workforce shows very low levels of work engagement (Robbins & Judge, 2012; Saks, 2006). This low commitment leads to costly turnover and lost organizational knowledge. Yet at the same time, consumers and society now have higher expectations of organizational responsiveness to their needs (Carroll & Buchholtz, 2014) which demand greater worker involvement and engagement.

To help resolve such conflicts, fill the research gaps previously discussed, and identify how strategic vision can be systematically transmitted by top leaders and embraced by most stakeholders, we propose expanding an existing, comprehensive communication

framework: MLT (Holmes, 2012; J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2012; Sharbrough, Simmons, & Cantrill, 2006; Sullivan, 1988; Zorn & Ruccio, 1998). Sullivan (1988) originally hypothesized that leader oral communication, based on speech act theory (Austin, 1975; Searle, 1969), would motivate and elicit commitment from employees to achieve desirable outcomes at all organizational levels. This article thus extends MLT—already robustly supported at the individual, dyadic, and team levels of analysis (J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2012; Wang, Hsieh, Fan, & Menefee, 2009)—to the organizational level. Consonant with this extension, the proposed models augment motivating language's (ML's) focus from purely internal stakeholders to include external stakeholders as well. Our propositions will be presented through relevant literature reviews of MLT and leader strategic vision communication in relation to improved organizational performance, a strategic MLT conceptualization (including ML vision samples from top leaders), a discussion of ML diffusion at the organizational level, a proposed organizational level ML implementation in strategic vision with expected outcomes, and a conclusion with future directions.

Motivating Language Theory

In Sullivan's (1988) original ML conceptualization—termed as *motivational language*—he asserted that a more versatile strategic leader language repertoire would serve to better engage, motivate, build commitment, and create a shared organizational vision with workers, thus improving firm-level performance and quality of work life. His conceptualization was an implementation of speech acts theory (Austin, 1975; Searle, 1969), which posits linguistic categories that cover almost the entire range of spoken words in acts of leadership. Speech act theory asserts that all utterances are actions in speech which fall into three key dimensions (Austin, 1975). Extracting from Austin's work, Sullivan interpreted these three facets as "*locutionary acts*, focused on the meaning of words; *illocutionary acts*, focused on what the speaker is doing while talking; and *perlocutionary acts*, what the speaker hopes to accomplish" (Sullivan, 1988, p. 108). Furthermore, these three categories were explained by Sullivan as spoken words that "facilitate cognitive schemas and scripts, which will be used to guide the employee in his or her work" [locutionary acts] . . . "those that implicitly reaffirm the employee's sense of self-worth as a human being" [illocutionary acts] . . . and "those that reduce employee uncertainty and increase his or her knowledge" [perlocutionary acts] (Sullivan, 1988, p. 104). Additionally, Sullivan wrote in the same article that current motivational theory strongly emphasized perlocutionary speech, thus restricting the potential impact of other leader-to-employee motivational communication.

Each form of oral language can be more fully defined and linked to management practice and theory. Meaning-making or locutionary speech conveys organizational mental models and underscores each employee's contribution/purpose in respect to organizational goals. This type of leader talk is closely linked to the "the critical psychological state of experienced meaningfulness of the work" (or the interpretation of salient work data input as fulfilling) in the job characteristics model of management

motivation theory (Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Miner, 2005; Sullivan, 1988). Meaning-making language can also be informal and symbolic. These messages can occur from leaders in either casual conversations or formal talk, and they assist employees in their interpretation of the unique culture and values of an organization through telling stories and metaphors. For instance, a leader's story of a worker going to extraordinary lengths to successfully complete a project is meaning-making language. Moreover, when a leader publicly praises and participates in a charity such as the recent amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) "Ice Bucket Challenge," meaning-making messages happen. Furthermore, meaning-making oral language use is especially important during cultural sensemaking of employees (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005) and times of organizational change, for example, where new strategic initiatives arise.

Cultural-sensemaking—inferring what is valued and reality in an ambiguous organizational context—often occurs during organizational entry and assimilation and transition. The meaning-making genre of leader oral communication is similarly related to transformational (motivating followers to exceed expectations in performance with a tantalizing future state) and visionary (presenting a compelling organizational future) leadership theories, as well as Jablin's model of organizational entry and assimilation—which highlights the supervisor's vital role in cultural and work process sensemaking by new employees (Jablin, 2001; Yukl, 2013).

The next dimension of MLT, direction-giving or perlocutionary speech, is most prevalent in leader-follower messages and contemporary management motivational theory (Sullivan, 1988). In essence, this form of leader talk dispels employee ambiguity and clarifies purpose through transparent goals, explication of rewards, and delegation of responsibilities. When a top leader articulates a strategic imperative clearly so that employees understand the specifics of what needs to be done—including processes, time frames, and what will be gained as a result of excellent performance—direction-giving language is being applied. This leader oral language use is closely aligned with instrumental leadership (employee task clarification) from path goal theory (House, 1971; Yukl, 2013), expectancy theory (explication of desired performance and rewards; Miner, 2005; Robbins & Judge, 2012; Sullivan, 1988), and goal-setting theory (setting transparent, challenging goals which are accompanied by constructive feedback; Miner, 2005; Sullivan, 1988) in management literature.

The third and final speech act in the MLT model is empathetic or illocutionary language. These oral messages occur when a leader expresses humanity to an employee (Sullivan, 1988), and surpasses the boundaries of an economic exchange rapport. For example, empathetic talk happens when a leader speaks to an employee with appreciation of or pride for his or her efforts. Consonant with the emotionality of praise, empathetic language can also be compassionate, showing genuine concern for hardships encountered by employees (Miller, 2013). Again, as with the other MLT dimensions, empathetic language is closely linked to management theory including path goal's supportive leadership (actions that nurture employee relationships; House, 1971; Yukl, 2013), and people directed (strong concern for individual and interpersonal satisfaction at work) models in organizational behavior (Miner, 2005; Yukl, 2013).

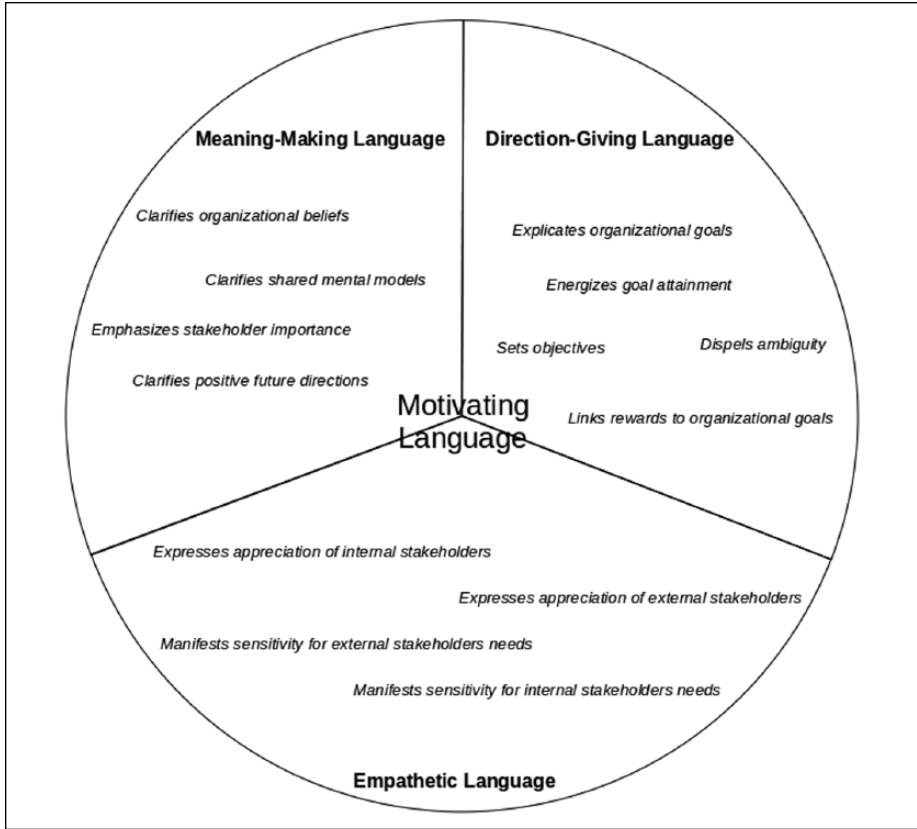


Figure 1. A graphical depiction of the motivating language model.
Note. This model shows the three components of motivating language—direction-giving, empathetic, and meaning-making language. The component names are listed in bold. Shown in italics are salient manifestations and benefits of each motivating language facet when used by top leaders to convey organizational strategic vision.

Figure 1 displays the ML model with all three dimensions, incorporating an emphasis on ML in top leader strategic vision. (This phenomenon will be discussed in more detail by the section of this article which presents ML as a strategic conceptualization.) Of fundamental note, there are four key assumptions of MLT: (a) the leader must walk-the-talk; (b) the three facets comprise the majority of leader speech; (c) although ML only refers to leader-employee speech, the employee must accurately perceive the leader’s intended message; and (d) all three components of ML must be used appropriately to achieve the optimal predicted outcomes of augmented employee and organizational welfare (J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2012; Sullivan, 1988).

This communication model has been operationalized with a highly reliable and valid ML scale (J. Mayfield, Mayfield, & Kopf, 1995) and also through using

qualitative methodologies (Holmes, 2012; Zorn & Ruccio, 1998). Results from numerous studies show significant and positive relationships between high leader ML and such critical organizational outcomes as employee innovation, job performance, self-efficacy, job satisfaction, effective decision making, perceived leader effectiveness, and leader communication satisfaction (Holmes, 2012; J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2012; J. Mayfield, Mayfield, & Kopf, 1998; M. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2004, 2009, in press; Sharbrough et al., 2006; Sun, Yang, Liao, & Wang, 2008; Wang et al., 2009; Zorn & Ruccio, 1998). Moreover, research has identified significant links between high ML use and lower costly employee withdrawal behaviors, including absenteeism and intent-to-turnover (J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2007, 2009). Also quite relevant, high written ML has been supported to have a positive correspondence with team creativity in a virtual workplace experimental design (Wang et al., 2009).

Despite these promising results, there are limitations to MLT. For instance, a study suggesting ML's positive relationship with full-time employee performance did not hold true for part-time workers (J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2006). Even though ML had a positive rapport with job satisfaction for both worker groups, these findings have important implications for the contingent workforce in today's economy. Furthermore, and as previously stated, so far studies of ML have been mostly limited to tests at the individual and dyadic levels of analysis (though there are two notable exceptions: one at the team level, [Wang et al., 2009] and one at the organizational level [Holmes, 2012]). As such, MLT lacks a theoretical foundation for application to strategic communications. Addressing this omission promises to not only expand the management communication theory but also provide a better, more theoretically grounded understanding of how top organizational leaders can transmit organizational vision and values in a way that fosters better organizational outcomes and improved stakeholder welfare (through quality of work life and external stakeholder confidence and support). The strategic expansion of MLT to attain these objectives, through enhanced organizational performance in particular, will be the purpose of this article. But first, a discussion of previous research in top leader strategic vision and related values communication, and a working definition of strategic vision itself is needed to lay the foundation for an MLT model extension.

Top Leader Strategic Vision Communication and Improved Organizational Performance

This section explores previous conceptualizations of top leader communicated strategic vision and related values statements and explicates their relationship with improved organizational performance. Such performance outcomes include a highly engaged workforce, more productivity, optimal growth levels, customer and shareholder loyalty, community support, enhanced employee quality of work life, and lower employee withdrawal behaviors. We then conclude with a derived working definition of strategic vision for the models presented in this article.

A major impetus for investigations into the criticality of leader strategic vision came from Daft and Weick's (1984) seminal article on organizations as interpretation systems. In this work, top leaders are characterized as the translators of an organizational purpose that is extracted from a complex external environment which is an open system. Thus, top leaders are focal interpreters who scan the environment to craft a strategic vision that is shared by, reduces uncertainty for, and generates meaning for stakeholders (Daft & Weick, 1984). These model attributes capture MLT's direction-giving and meaning-making facets with their references to uncertainty reduction and meaning generation.

Drawing from this and other management theories, we have developed a subsequent model (presented in Figure 2) that depicts the process by which top leaders interpret and enact strategic vision with ML. Note that Figure 2 contains feedback loops for diverse stakeholders' influences on top leader environmental interpretation and subsequent strategic vision formulation. This new development thus embodies a process by which leaders can craft ML communications for specific situations and audiences. This process will be further explained in the propositions that we set forth in the remainder of the article.

Relatedly, top leader strategic vision was perceived as a priority for improved organizational performance by Westley and Mintzberg (1989). These authors defined top leader vision into a three part taxonomy: a tantalizing, sought after future state; a mental imagery that is well-articulated with widespread communication; and a model which contains processes that enable followers to achieve it. The authors also noted that "*How* the vision is communicated becomes as important as *what* is communicated" (Westley & Mintzberg, 1989, p. 19). A similar view, leadership visioning that is effectively communicated elicits improved organizational performance, was later asserted by Conger (1991). The author recommended that framing (short, compelling messages about an organization's prime meaning that appeal to the needs of a target audience), references to organizational values, metaphors, analogies, and storytelling be included in or accompany top leader strategic vision communications. Conceivably, these framed messages may vary depending on a specific stakeholder group. For example, stockholder vision and values frames could differ from those directed to employees, although the underlying meanings remain connected. These viewpoints by Westley and Mintzberg (1989) and Conger (1991) also align with MLT's dimensions of direction-giving and meaning-making through identifying a future state, mental imagery, framing, and articulating organizational values and their supporting stories.

Delving further into the content of top leader strategic vision communications, and reinforcing that these communications are integral with competitive advantage through improved organizational performance, Larwood et al. (1995) probed for distinctive language patterns. These authors found that most visions were future-oriented and concerned with strategic planning. In addition, the majority of the analyzed messages were stable, showed communication for widespread diffusion, were tactically related to the visions of stakeholders, and integrated long-term with near-term processes. Extending germane work into the global arena, strategic visions were again described as being stable and requisite to successful organizational performance (Den Hartog &

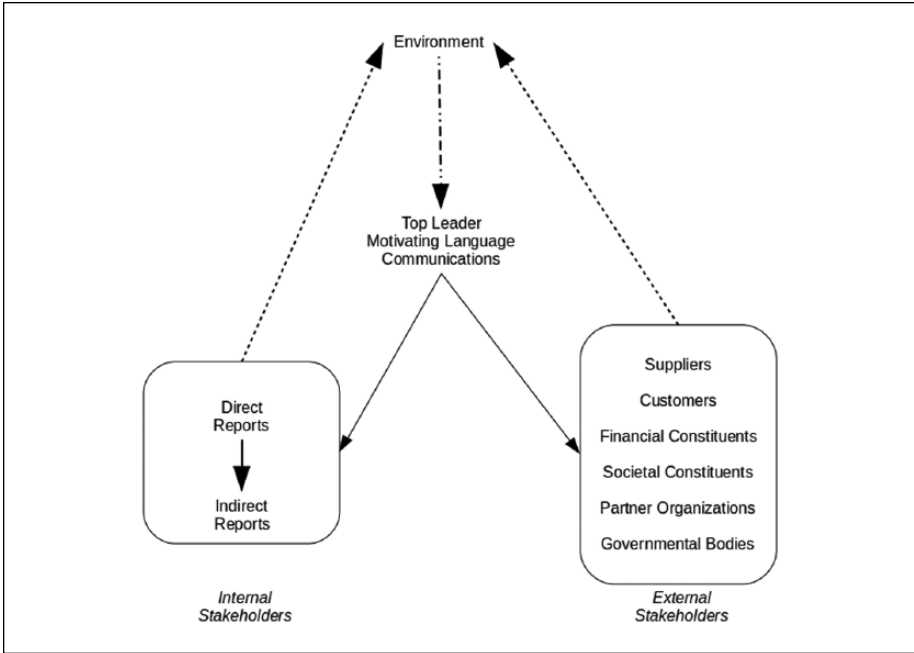


Figure 2. A model of top leaders' strategic vision and values interpretation process using motivating language.

Note. This model represents how top organizational leaders translate environmental influences into guiding organizational level motivating language strategic vision and values communication. All stakeholders give cues that are expected to have some influence on the organizational environment—which is in turn scanned and interpreted by the top leader to create strategic vision and related values language. This influence is depicted by the dashed lines leading back to the *environment*. The line from *environment* to the *leader* represents a chief executive's scanning, filtering, and prioritizing of environmental cues. Top leaders then use this information to craft a strategic vision and values that can be communicated to organizational stakeholders in order to achieve desirable organizational outcomes. In this communication process, the ML strategic vision and values messages will be shared with specific stakeholder groups (potentially using different communication frames for each group), and these communications are depicted through the lines from the top leader to the internal and external stakeholders. Also shown in the figure is the assumption that such *leader* messages are at times directly transmitted to *direct reports* who in turn transmit these communications to the *indirect reports* (workers without direct reporting relationships to top organizational management). The ML messages received by the *indirect reports* will therefore be partially mediated by the motivating language ability of the *direct reports*.

Verburg, 1997). The authors also viewed the CEO and top leaders as responsible for creation, communication, and broad diffusion of a strategic vision. Furthermore, the previous observations that vision is inextricably linked with organizational values (Conger, 1991), and crafts shared mental models of strategic focus for stakeholders were put forth. As a comparison, the MLT components of direction-giving and meaning-making language are embedded in these research contributions.

Fortifying and expanding this line of research, Baum et al. (1998) studied vision in entrepreneurial firms. The authors used longitudinal, empirical tests to conclude that strategic vision formulation and structure directly affect entrepreneurial organizational growth. In their study, vision structure (or content) was intended for oral and written communication, and exhibited the attributes of “brevity, clarity, abstractness, challenge, future orientation, stability, and desirability or ability to inspire” (Baum et al., 1998, p. 44). The authors also characterized an ideal (abstract) state drawn from collective values to be a central tenet of their strategic vision definition. Such descriptions can be linked with MLT’s direction-giving and meaning-making language through *clarity* and *collective values*, respectively.

Improved organizational performance in the 21st century was the core of Ireland and Hitt’s (1999) subsequent work on the roles of contemporary top leaders. Dissemination of strategic vision among organizational citizens was first in these authors’ priorities for effective global leadership that achieves successful organizational outcomes. Later conceptualizations by Dolan and Garcia (2002) placed values as the foundation for strategic vision. These authors posited that in the new millennium high organizational performance arises from top leader communication via “articulating values, metaphors, symbols, and concepts that guide the daily activity of creating value” (Dolan & Garcia, 2002, p. 103), thus humanizing a firm’s strategic vision. As with previous models, these scholars depicted strategic vision as an ideal, future state. Significantly, the authors did refer to top leaders’ consideration of and respect for the widely held values of corporate citizens. Consequently, some suggestion of MLT’s empathetic language exists in their model along with direction-giving (guidance) and meaning-making (articulating culture) speech.

Similar top leader communication skills have been emphasized in other work on strategic vision oral communication. Sillince (2006) proposed that: “[r]hetoric improves competitive advantage if the firm uses an attractive identity to make an associated resource seem valuable” (Sillince, 2006, p. 194). In this context, the author defined organizational identity as diverse stakeholders’ perceptions of *who we are*, hence their values and purpose. This proposition has an intersection with MLT’s empathetic language since the strategic vision corresponds to stakeholder mental models. In addition, MLT’s meaning-making language surfaced when Fairhurst (2009) used qualitative analysis of discourse to establish that leaders construct meaning strategically.

Table 1 shows the rapport between MLT and select research in the extensive and well-articulated literature about improved organizational performance through leader vision and values communication. Yet despite advances in this area, there are three major theoretical challenges in our understanding of how leaders communicate strategic vision and related values to improve organizational performance. First, we believe that the factor of leader empathy in the communication of strategic vision and related values to stakeholders is missing from much of the pertinent academic literature. Congruent with this perceived absence of empathetic language in top leader strategic vision and values, Cameron (2012) observed that employees perform better in a work climate of emotionally supportive communication. He cited case studies where top

Table 1. Literature Analysis of Strategic Visions Through the Lens of Motivating Language.

Source	Definition	Direction giving	Empathetic	Meaning making
Daft and Weick (1984)	An environmentally derived statement that is shared by, reduces uncertainty for, and generates meaning for stakeholders	Reduces uncertainty		Generation of meaning
Westley and Mintzberg (1989)	A communicated future state, mental imagery, and a model containing processes to achieve the future state	Future state and processes		Future state and mental imagery
Conger (1991)	Recommended that framing, organizational values, and stories be included in vision statements	Focus on strategic path		Framing, organizational values and stories
Larwood et al. (1995)	Most vision statements are future oriented, and integrate long-and near-term processes	Integrated processes		
Baum et al. (1998)	Vision statements need to be brief, clear, challenging, stable, inspirational, and embody core organizational values	Challenging organizational goals		Embodiment of core organizational values
Dolan and Garcia (2002)	Leaders need to articulate organizational values through metaphors and symbols in a way that guides value creation and humanizes the organization	Guiding value creation	Humanizing the organization	Articulation of organizational values through metaphors and symbols
Sillince (2006)	Vision statements should communicate an attractive identity to increase the perceived value of organizational resources	Increasing perceived value of organizational resources	Attractive identity which captures stakeholder values	Increasing perceived value of organizational resources
Fairhurst (2009)	Leaders use vision statements to construct meaning strategically	Strategic use of vision statements		Constructed meaning

leader interventions of emotionally supportive language have helped improve profits through the efforts of motivated employees.

Second, a working definition of *effective* strategic vision must be gleaned from the extant literature, especially for the objectives of this article. Fortunately, Kantabutra's (2008) definition—itsself an extension of Strange and Mumford's (2005) work—provides a good starting point. From Kantabutra's conceptualization, “[Strategic] vision is ultimately defined as a cognitive construction or specifically a mental model, a conceptual representation used to both understand system operations as well as guide actions within the system” (Kantabutra, 2008, p. 132). This definition synthesizes many of the key themes in the preceding literature review. In addition, we assert that

effective strategic vision expresses shared organizational goals and values and conveys empathy to stakeholders. All of these articulated factors synergistically foster positive outcomes for internal and external stakeholders. Cases in point, internal stakeholders (employees) will be more motivated, committed, and perform better—all behaviors which lead to better intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. As for external stakeholders, effective strategic vision inspires confidence in the organization, perceived appreciation by the firm, and potential economic rewards to stockholders through higher stock value and dividends which are associated with collective, higher internal stakeholder performance. Furthermore, we agree with the preceding researchers' consensus that such a vision must be well-communicated by top leadership.

The third theoretical gap is more process driven. No model for how to operationalize the communication of strategic vision by top leaders has yet emerged. The preceding academic literature offers broad recommendations with constructive guidelines, but does not provide frameworks for the systematic development, implementation, and diffusion of leader communicated strategic vision. In the next section, we propose that MLT can help fill this void.

Motivating Language as a Strategic Conceptualization

While MLT was originally conceived as applying to all organizational levels (Sullivan, 1988), to date only one study has tested MLT at an organizational level (Holmes, 2012). However, results from this study indicate significant and positive relationships between MLT and key organizational outcomes, especially between the oral messages of school principals (to teachers) and school academic performance. Other MLT studies have focused on individual, dyadic, and team levels of analysis. This empirical void may exist due to the lack of a concrete theoretical explication of how ML should operate to communicate strategic vision at an organizational level. Sullivan (1988) noted that "CEO's and workers are impelled by the real environment and by their own constructed vision of that environment" (p. 107).

To begin this conceptualization, our previous definition of strategic vision and associated values can be summarized as the following: Strategic vision is a shared mental model (between stakeholders) which interprets and gives positive direction, meaning, and values to the organization's stakeholders (both internal and external) in a complex, open systems environment. A strategic vision and associated values messages also show compassion and respect for all stakeholders, and seeks to further the well-being of these parties.

ML logically intersects with this definition of strategic vision. This section of the article will demonstrate this assertion, and also will give CEO examples of their ML-oriented vision/values statements. Some of these messages are taken from interview transcripts while others were collected from organizational Web sites. The latter written sources can be justified since ML's positive relationship with team creative idea generation was supported in written leader communication (Wang et al., 2009). In addition, some scholars of contemporary communication have claimed that talk occurs in discursive texts (Phillips, Lawrence, & Hardy, 2004) and that speech acts (the foundation of MLT) are present in textual Web messages (van Dijk, 2013).

As previously stated, meaning-making speech expresses shared organizational values, cultural norms, mental models, and visions for positive change. It also underscores employee organizational contributions (J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2012; Sullivan, 1988). This premise can be extended to the expressed importance of external stakeholders. As a result, meaning-making language should elicit employee buy-in and external stakeholder support for strategic vision through emphasizing cognitive schemas, shared appreciation of workforce effort, organizational values, and future directions for positive change that are purposeful for these parties. Also, stakeholder value to the strategic vision will be expressed by meaning-making language.

A fine example of meaning-making (locutionary) language can be found with Southwest Airlines' CEO Gary Kelly's communications on his strategic vision to stakeholders in 2013. "Our vision is to become the world's most loved, most flown, and most profitable airline" (Gallo, 2014). In addition, Southwest embraces the art of cultural storytelling through videos of exemplary employee customer service. Although causality has not been empirically examined, Southwest's financial performance has been profitable for the past 40 years, a claim that no other U.S. airlines can make (Gallo, 2014).

Storytelling encouragement by the CEO was also used to train future top leaders in Canada's RBC Financial Group, one of the world's largest financial services firms which also promotes environmental sustainability to the public. The top leader training was instigated by the CEO during a period of organizational turmoil and expansion in the late 1990s. During this period, employee focus groups showed that participants were unsure of the organization's future direction. In response, the CEO invited the top management team to share their stories of core organizational values to an identified group of future senior managers, who in turn recounted these and their own stories to lower level employees (Ready, 2002). In sum, meaning-making language is a persuasive, inclusive *frame* for strategic vision (Conger, 1998; Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). This premise, then, leads to the following proposition concerning how meaning-making language should communicate strategic vision:

Proposition 1: Meaning-making language enhances top leaders' communication of strategic vision and related values through clarification of shared mental models, organizational beliefs, positive future direction, and inclusive emphasis on the significance of employees and external stakeholders to this vision.

Next, the dimension of direction-giving (perlocutionary) language contributes to both internal and external stakeholders' knowledge of what needs to be done. These forms of oral language and Web messages reduce ambiguity and explicitly lay out strategic goals and objectives in the organization's vision and related values. Furthermore, the direction-giving dimension of leaders' strategic vision communication is closely tied to goal-setting and expectancy theory (Sullivan, 1988; Yukl, 2013). External and internal stakeholders thus know what to expect, and employees are aware of which behaviors will be rewarded, and what those rewards will be. All relevant stakeholders have a clear understanding of organizational purpose. Direction-giving

language also includes performance feedback, a key leader communication which improves goal attainment (Robbins & Hunsaker, 2012). As top leaders utilize clear and concise direction-giving language, employees are better able to understand their tasks, and accomplish them more efficiently and effectively.

Moreover, through effective direction-giving language (reducing ambiguity) from top leaders, employees can more readily make decisions in confusing situations. A good example of direction-giving language is found with Cytokinetics, an entrepreneurial pharmaceutical development firm. This organization partners with major pharmaceutical companies, university-based researchers, and the medical community to develop drugs which reduce the terrible effects of cytoskeleton-based diseases, for example, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) and congestive heart failure. The company has achieved impressive financial portfolio results and progress in its clinical trials. Moreover, it is structured as a networked organization that collaborates with others globally to achieve desirable organizational outcomes. Here a direction-giving strategic vision message for Cytokinetics from its CEO, Robert Blum, is shared.

Cytokinetics employees are steadfastly committed to the discovery of experimental truths that underlie biological unknowns of human disease. . . . Cytokinetics has established unrivaled leadership in the pharmacology of muscle biology and our extraordinary employees have made it their foremost professional objective to discover and develop mechanism medicines to make a meaningful difference in the lives of patients suffering from dreadful diseases. (Blum, n.d.)

The preceding statement was directed to both external and internal stakeholders. For external stakeholders, the company's dedication to combating the effects of catastrophic illness is manifest. And for employees, the message urges exemplary commitment to this same purpose. In comparison, the frame for related employee values messages from top management differs. It is much more focused on employee work processes, yet is inclusive of the previous example's reference to employees being "steadfastly committed" to the organization's strategic vision. Although they are direction-giving (emphasizing the means and goals of task accomplishment which dispel ambiguity), the following CEO Web communication excerpts also address culture (meaning-making language) through articulation of a mental model for desirable work attitudes, and empathy (empathetic language) for employees through recognition of work life balance, forgiveness for mistakes, and their need to enjoy work. Hence the assumption that all three facets of ML should be used appropriately is fulfilled.

We fully acknowledge that we ask a lot of our employees, we expect to be challenged and stimulated everyday. Cytokinetics is not the place to work if one seeks an easy, predictable and comfortable job. Our employees are especially self-motivated and want to put in the extra effort required to get the job done right. We are grateful for that. At the same time, we do offer flexible solutions for how the job can be performed and strive to afford reasonable work life balance for all employees. . . . We foster an environment where employees can learn from their missteps and mistakes. We are proud to make a joint covenant with all employees for personal and professional development, growth and

advancement. . . . We provide many opportunities to mix work and social connections and believe that a work hard/play hard attitude is critical to our building and sustaining a positive and invigorating culture. (Blum, n.d.)

As for direction-giving language's power to clarify employee rewards in a vision related values statement, we examine the speech of Tony Hsieh, CEO of Zappos, one of the world's most successful online retailers. Hsieh said in a video interview that he hires and fires based on employee-cultural fit and offers such extrinsic rewards as stock options. However, he emphasizes intrinsic employee benefits such as a culture of happiness and a higher shared organizational purpose (Hsieh, 2010). This discussion leads to the following proposition:

Proposition 2: Direction-giving language enhances communication of top leader strategic vision and related values by dispelling ambiguity and explicating organizational goals, rewards, and objectives. Performance feedback from direction-giving language should also energize employee organizational goal attainment.

The final ML dimension—empathetic language—is also crucial to effective leader strategic vision and values communications. Yet it is often absent in the academic literature on leader strategic vision communication. Empathetic language refers to a leader's shared humanity and unconditional respect for the needs of others (Sullivan, 1988), including internal and external stakeholders. With employees, it can be expressed by recognition, appreciation, even commiseration about the difficulty of working to attain a challenging goal or compassion regarding a personal setback (Miller, 2013). Also, this form of top leader oral language can be used to help craft constructive, performance feedback that shows positive regard for recipients. While direction-giving language provides specificity to performance feedback, empathetic language provides emotional support in such communications. For external stakeholders, empathetic language conveys a message that the organization supports their best interests.

Empathetic (illocutionary) language can also boost stakeholder confidence in the strategic vision by expressing that the top leader cares about and encourages them when challenges arise for even admirable organizations, as they invariably do. For example, Cytokinetics recently presented its findings on the BENEFIT ALS project in a shareholders' meeting Web cast about clinical trials on an experimental drug designed to help alleviate ALS symptoms, Tirasemtiv. Although the clinical trial results were overall very auspicious, some aspects of the medication's effects did not reach predicted expectations. As a result, CEO Robert Blum expressed both his optimism and compassion to patients and caregivers who participated in the trials. Referring to the drug testing problem he said:

This was not specifically significant and therefore we look at this as . . . [having] no effects on this primary efficacy endpoint, but nonetheless [we are] disappointed for the patients and their caregivers that were so committed to in design and conduct of this trial. ("Cytokinetics' Annual Shareholder Meeting," 2014, p. 6)

He continues to reassure these constituents and other stakeholders that “We are digging more deeply into these findings and discussing them with experts in the field” (“Cytokinetics’ Annual Shareholder Meeting,” 2014, p. 7).

Empathetic language similarly affirms organizational appreciation of stakeholders. Former Southwest Airlines’ CEO and founder, Herb Kelleher exemplified empathetic language toward both employees and customers in a video where he said “[t]he business of business is people.” Kelleher continued to explain that Southwest placed its priority on the internal customer, the employee. According to him, satisfied employees will in turn make external customers happy (Kelleher, 2008). Moreover, President Emeritus of Southwest, Colleen Barrett described Southwest’s vision related values in this interview excerpt. “Our internal mission is to always practice the golden rule. Treat others the way you want to be treated. Going with that is a respect for people. You don’t judge” (Bjorn, 2011). Such talk is also backed by actions (a key MLT assumption) at Southwest, as the plethora of excellent employee customer and community service videos (public recognition for internal and external stakeholders) convey these words throughout the company’s Web site. As demonstrated, empathetic language shows that the organization *cares* about its constituents and leads to the following proposition:

Proposition 3: Top leader empathetic language will enhance communication of strategic vision and related values by manifesting organizational appreciation of and sensitivity to both internal and external stakeholders.

Relatedly, all the previously stated assumptions of MLT on the individual, dyadic, and team levels hold true for its conceptualization as strategic vision and values messages.

1. A top leader’s behaviors must be congruent with his or her oral language, especially since top leaders serve as role models.
2. All three dimensions of ML must be appropriately integrated into a combination of strategic vision and related values messages. For example, if a top leader states organizational goals, but offers vague details on attainment (direction-giving language), or fails to convey a compelling shared culture (meaning-making language), and shows little appreciation for stakeholders (empathetic language), then ML is not being well utilized.
3. ML encompasses the leader-to-stakeholder communication direction only. However, both internal and external stakeholders send feedback cues to the leader for strategic vision and values formation (see Figure 2). These parties must also accurately perceive the leader’s intended message.
4. ML includes most forms of top leader oral language.

Proposition 4: All of the existing MLT assumptions hold true for top leaders when ML is used to communicate strategic vision and related values at the organizational level of analysis.

Motivating Language Diffusion at the Organizational Level

Effective ML communication of strategic vision is incomplete without a robust diffusion process throughout the organization. Otherwise, the employee internal stakeholders may not be motivated to fully engage in vision attainment. Relatedly, lower ranked leaders may also not send messages to internal and external stakeholders that are consistent with top leadership's expression of strategic vision. In brief, all levels of organizational leadership need to adopt high ML levels. We view the necessary diffusion process as threefold. Since top leaders are role models, their use of oral language can inspire favorable stakeholder attitudes and behaviors, and lower level leaders to adopt ML. This leadership responsibility was also proposed by Phillips et al. (2004) as a mechanism to introduce enduring organizational discourse modes.

In addition, application of social exchange theory (Blau, 1986; Miles, 2012) asserts that top leaders can incentivize lower level leaders to use high levels of ML through extrinsic and intrinsic organizational rewards. This approach can motivate non-top leaders to employ high levels of ML in their communication of strategic vision and related values, and hence foster diffusion of ML in strategic vision throughout an organization. Social exchange theory refers to people deciding to trade valuable entities for desirable outcomes (rewards). These rewards can be intrinsic—such fulfillment from serving a purpose greater than the individuals involved—or extrinsic—such as praise, recognition, job flexibility, and compensation (Miles, 2012).

In essence, a strategic vision and companion values are more likely to be consensually shared by internal stakeholders when social exchange occurs. Consequently, internal stakeholder buy-in to cultural beliefs (such as oral language practices) support a strong organizational culture which research shows to be linked to higher organizational performance through employee retention, performance, loyalty, and organizational commitment (Robbins & Judge, 2012). The last necessary component for ML diffusion of strategic vision and values messages is top leader institutionalization of formal training for managers at all organizational levels. An ML diffusion model is shown in Figure 3. This diffusion process leads to Proposition 5:

Proposition 5: Top leader high ML use for communicating strategic vision and related values must be diffused throughout the organization and adopted by lower level leaders through top leaders' role modeling, social exchange, and institutionalization of training.

Motivating Language Implementation in Strategic Vision and Expected Outcomes

Initial incorporation of ML in strategic vision and related values begins with the environmental scanning process that is portrayed in Figure 2. Top leaders must explore the external and internal organizational contexts to discern the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats from which to derive a unique competitive advantage (Daft

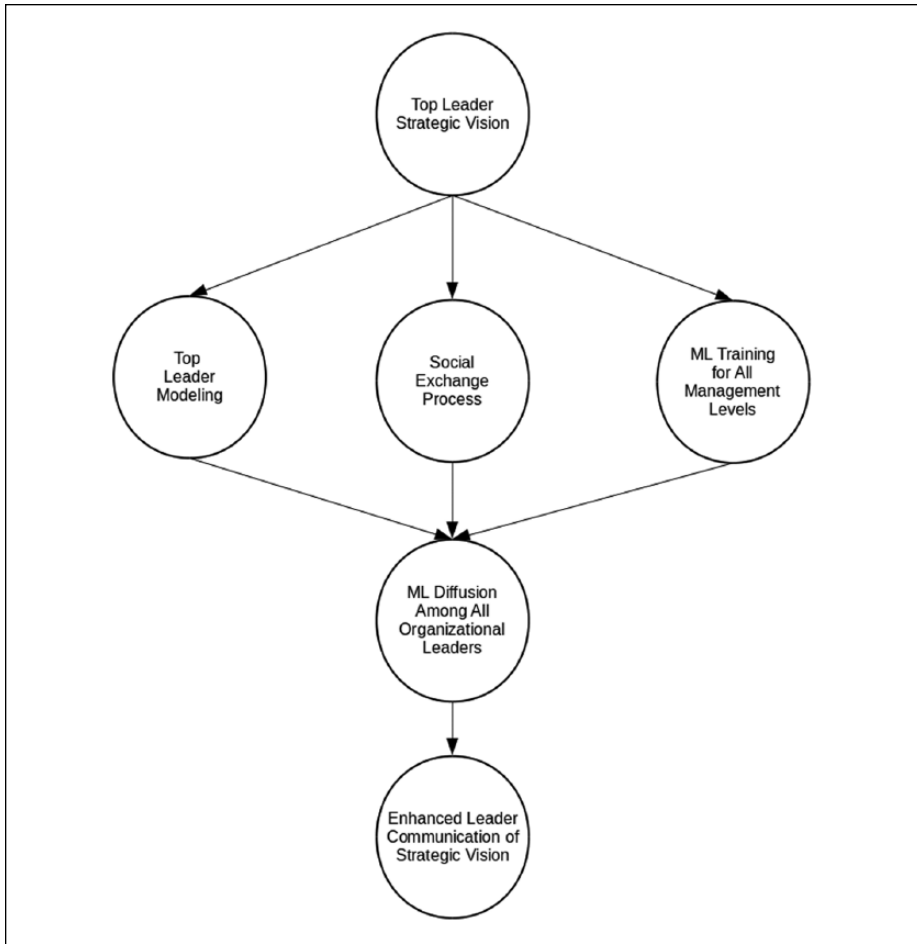


Figure 3. A model of how the diffusion of motivating language use can be enhanced throughout an organization.

Note. This model shows how leader strategic vision influences and shapes the major methods for augmenting ML diffusion throughout the organization, how these methods focus this strategic vision, and that greater diffusion is expected to improve the communication of organizational strategic vision and values to all stakeholders—internal and external.

& Weick, 1984; Porter, 1996; Robbins & Judge, 2012). This first step involves feedback seeking garnered from identifying existing and potential stakeholders, and nurturing a deep understanding of their values, aspirations, and needs. Survey research, face-to-face discussions, data analysis, and focus groups are a few of many tools that can be used to listen to the voices of stakeholders. Only after investigating and respecting these data, can a top leader be ready to formulate a strategic vision, related values, and subsequent messages to stakeholders. And according to the literature, effective

strategic vision and related values will satisfy the definitional elements put forth in this article, incorporating the dimensions of ML (see Table 1 for more specifics on these linkages).

Once this phase has been accomplished, top management must widely disseminate these messages and encourage ML use by sharing them with all levels of organizational leadership. Case in point, top leaders must model ML in their vision and values messages. We also recommend that comprehensive MLT training be conducted for the following reasons: (a) It is difficult to segregate strategic vision and related values from other forms of leader to employee oral communication and (b) The benefits of ML at the organizational level do have support from prior research, and are expected to improve multiple organizational outcomes (Holmes, 2012; M. Mayfield & Mayfield, in press; Sharbrough et al., 2006). This training approach may additionally resolve the partial mediation effect, captured in Figure 2, and potential misinterpretation of strategic vision and values which may occur as these oral communications are sometimes filtered from direct reports to lower leadership levels.

At the start, ML can be implemented as an assessment tool. All levels of leadership, including the chief executive, can be evaluated using the ML scale, which should be modified by developing a partner scale for external stakeholder perceptions. (Ultimately, external feedback can be given to trainees.) Consequently, leader oral communication areas which need strengthening can be identified, and training programs can be designed. These programs must be strongly endorsed by—and ML must be incorporated into—top leadership and participants' supervisor messages to achieve optimal effect. Research shows that such enactment and training support are key factors in learning success (Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009; Bandura, 1997). Furthermore, effective training design should be tailored to advance organizational strategic goals, be delivered in an attractive manner to learners, and be readily transferable to workplace behaviors. And as previously noted, the new ML communication skills should be rewarded both intrinsically and extrinsically (Blau, 1986; Cascio, 2010; Robbins & Judge, 2012). To assess training effectiveness, control groups of no training can be included. Then learning can be assured with assessment metrics. Thus, training can be modified by reexamining post training scores and investigating their relationships with desirable outcomes that advance organizational performance and stakeholder welfare.

We predict that results at the organizational level will be related to those which have already been supported at lower levels of analysis, for example, improved organizational performance through a more engaged workforce, accompanied by enhanced quality of work life for internal stakeholders (Holmes, 2012; J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2012; J. Mayfield et al., 1998; M. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2004, 2009, in press; Sharbrough et al., 2006; Sun et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2009; Zorn & Ruccio, 1998). Moreover, we anticipate that increased ML use will boost organizational financial performance by significantly reducing costly employee withdrawal behaviors, including intent to turnover and absenteeism at the organizational level of analysis (J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2007, 2009).

Just as promising—and important for improved external stakeholder welfare—we assert that using ML to embed and construct strategic vision and related values statements will augment external stakeholder relations and organizational reputation with clarity (direction-giving speech), strong purpose (meaning-making speech), and sensitivity (empathetic speech). In other words, external stakeholders will feel greater confidence in a transparent vision that has a tangible external value and respects their well-being. Resultantly, organizational reputation should increase with these constituents. These expectations lead to the final two propositions.

Proposition 6: Top leader ML adoption will be significantly related to those positive outcomes previously identified in the extant literature. This phenomenon will support higher organizational performance and other improved key outcomes, including enhanced internal stakeholder motivation, work relations, and quality of work life.

Proposition 7: ML adoption into top leader strategic vision and related values statements will support improved organizational performance through better relations with external stakeholders and enhanced organizational reputation.

Conclusions and Future Directions

This article has developed a conceptual framework for analyzing and improving a vital top leader role: the clear and effective communication of an organizational vision and related values statements to internal and external stakeholders. The theoretical structure is based on a well-developed and tested model of leader oral language—MLT. In this conceptual study of MLT at higher and broader levels of analyses, the model suggests the requisite flexibility and utility for fulfilling top leader strategic vision related communication tasks, and the potential to enhance organizational performance, augment organizational reputation, and to increase external and internal stakeholder satisfaction.

This article has contributed to existing research in multiple ways. For example, a major finding from the application of MLT as an analytical lens is that the academic research on strategic vision messages has largely overlooked the empathetic component of such communications. Yet our examination of these statements in practice (even if limited by necessity) has demonstrated that some successful organizations in fact do include empathetic phrases in their strategic vision and values messages. This discovery offers potential benefits to future research which reexamines leader communication of strategic vision.

This article has also presented a model (Figure 2) of the process through which top leaders interpret strategic visions from the environment, and transmit these messages to various stakeholders. Another model (Figure 3) was constructed and proposed which described how strategic ML can be diffused within an organization. These two models can be especially useful for both research and leadership practice. The strategic vision interpretation model (as presented in Figure 2) holds value through the identification of the various target audiences for strategic vision input and

transmission. Both academics and managers can apply this conceptualization in their work. The same model serves as a reminder to choose appropriate strategic vision and related values frames for divergent stakeholder audiences, again contributing to research and practice. Similarly, the diffusion process is fertile ground for future investigations and can guide decisions about how to improve overall adoption of strategic visions and related values by internal stakeholders. Both of the preceding models proposed in this article can be used to develop checklists for practicing leaders to ensure that strategic vision messages are being composed in the most effective manner.

In addition, there are other significant research potentialities that can be drawn from this article. A major implication is that this article makes progress in developing MLT into a true multilevel model (Ashmos & Huber, 1987)—one that can act as a unifying process for understanding all levels of organizational leader communication. It has also provided a stronger theoretical foundation—in conjunction with existing empirical research (Wang et al., 2009)—for understanding how written ML can be successfully used to advance organizational performance through effective strategic vision and values messages.

Furthermore, the original ML framework has been extended by including nonreporting external stakeholders such as customers, suppliers, government, and societal constituents. In fact, Porter (2008) included these factors in his five forces model which was designed as a road map to competitive advantage. Another MLT model refinement is the inclusion of a stakeholder feedback loop in the ML conceptualization. The model presented in Figure 2 shows how a cybernetic process (Wiener, 1965) may operate when a top leader incorporates environmental cues from stakeholders.

Limitations of a theory development manuscript must, of course, correspond to the conceptual level rather than threats to reliability and validity in an empirical study (Dubin, 1978; Lynham, 2002). However, such limitations should be acknowledged so that future work may expand the horizons imposed by them. One restriction is that the presented MLT model is mainly grounded in U.S. research or studies conducted in Western cultures. While ML has been tested (and supported) in other cultures, most of the literature on strategic vision messaging has been largely confined to English-speaking nations. As such, it is unclear what role national culture may play in model linkages, and MLT generalizability is bounded. Similarly, this work focused mainly on for profit directed institutions. Expectations are that the conceptualizations are applicable to other organizational types, but future explorations may want to examine how the models should be adapted for nonprofit and governmental organizations. Also, the propositions put forth in this article will need greater refinement to be developed into directly testable hypotheses for future model testing. For instance, while MLT implies that a threshold level of internal stakeholders must accurately perceive a top leader's strategic vision and values messages to elicit positive organizational outcomes (Holmes, 2012; Sullivan, 1988), this tipping point remains undefined. Subsequent empirical analysis can be conducted to determine its boundaries. Moreover, causality between ML and desirable organizational outcomes has been suggested by an experimental design test (Wang et al., 2009), but never established. Future experimental

design-based investigations of MLT could better specify potential causal relationships, including at the organizational level of analysis.

These recommended tests should incorporate diverse methodologies so as to allow for cross-validation. Some suggestions would be to employ content and discourse analysis of top leader statements on strategic vision. This analysis could be used to compare the ML use of multilevel leaders and their different performance outcomes to evaluate parallels between dyadic, team, and organizational-level results. Relatedly, the comparisons could be applied to examine if leaders vary their ML communications to different stakeholder groups, and how such variance (or lack thereof) influences stakeholder behavior. This research would be a good compliment to the prevalence of questionnaire-based research in the ML literature. Furthermore, MLT investigations in diverse national cultural settings, and of its transferability to written language will advance this body of research. Additionally, model refinement should be undertaken to better comprehend model implications. These improvements could utilize agent-based modeling methods to more clearly understand potential emergent properties of MLT, and generate more testable hypotheses from the conceptualization.

Equally important, we humbly acknowledge the theoretical and practical boundaries of MLT's potential efficacy to foster effective strategic vision and related values verbal communications by top leaders and to improve organizational performance. Many internal and external environmental events that are far greater than top leader language influence an organization's performance (Miles, 2012; Porter, 2008). Granted, all of the organizational messages that served as examples in this article came from successful firms. Still, each of these companies have endured serious performance challenges from environmental turbulence that arose from sources that were not directly related to the top leader's oral communication, such as the economy, terrorist attacks, and new product development problems. Nonetheless, ML may well help top leadership to steer a steady course during situational disruptions if this communication process is aligned with the many other necessary strategic actions that need to be taken.

In sum, we believe that ML has powerful unleashed potential at the organizational level of analysis, especially with top leader communication of strategic vision and related values. This article's model configurations, stated propositions, and future recommended steps could significantly heighten an organization's performance and stakeholder well-being.

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