



**A**LL LEADERS HAVE SIMILAR SETS OF WORDS AT their disposal – no matter what the language – but how they wield those words and for what effect varies greatly. A CEO’s words can move markets, encourage or discourage customers, and motivate or demoralize workforces. In interviews with four CEOs in a variety of industries, we uncovered similarities as well as novelties about the kinds of words these leaders use – and why.

**Simpler is better, but don’t skimp on emotion.**

Shabbir Dahod, CEO of TraceLink, a cloud-based tracking and tracing service for life sciences supply chains, started his career as an engineer. When he founded TraceLink in 2009, he knew he had to change his communications style. “In the past, I felt

time for negatives. I avoid using the words ‘can’t’ and ‘impossible’ because with the right people alongside you, all things are possible. It’s my job to convey that.” For Jeremy Levin, CEO of Ovid Therapeutics, a company that addresses rare neurological disorders, he communicates that “the purpose is the patient” to keep employees focused on what matters. But Levin was once taught a lesson about how positive expressions can cut both ways when he told a team “we can do better,” and it backfired. “I meant it as a call to action,” he says, “but instead it came across as a criticism or that I was disappointed. It was a sharp reminder that how you say things matters a lot.”

Crown Castle’s Mr. Brown says his favorite word in any language is “excited.” “It’s a hopeful word and it’s not very limiting. It conveys an energy, a sense of what’s to come and a sense of hopefulness about what will be – without being so precise as to define exactly what it is. As CEO, I have to communicate a sense of energy and passion around the subject matter, and show that what we do is something that matters in the world.”

**There is no I in team.** In addition to choosing positive words, the CEOs we spoke with make a point of avoiding the words “I,” “me” and “my.” Brown “will always use ‘we’ and ‘us,’ particularly when my comments are forward-looking. If it’s backward-looking or in recognition of something we’ve done well, I use ‘you.’ The exception is when I’ve made a mistake that I need to own and personalize – then and only then will I use ‘I’ and ‘me.’”

Tracelink’s Mr. Dahod agrees. “I like to use words like ‘team,’ ‘we’ and ‘us.’ It’s important to convey shared accountability and teamwork. I tend to avoid words that I think of as “hero” words that convey success depends on a superhero individual rather than a team.”

**The lasting power of words.** Straightline’s Mr. Watras learned this lesson the hard way when he said “that’s good” to his hair stylist. “I hadn’t heard what he’d said and just responded automatically,” Mr. Watras says. “It turned out he was telling me his father had recently died. I was understandably embarrassed and it was a reminder to always listen, and never assume you know what’s being said.”

## Take It From the Top: The Words CEOs Use

it was very important to explain things precisely and with rigor – the way an engineer is accustomed to communicating,” he says. “But as CEO, I’ve learned the importance of communicating with emotion. It’s what motivates and convinces people. Now I may still be factual, but I focus on emotion and passion.”

Jay Brown, CEO of Crown Castle, the US’s largest provider of cellular infrastructure, agrees. “I came out of finance and was CFO before becoming CEO. My language was too muddled with technical jargon, particularly financial jargon. Now I try to speak more directly and draw analogies to things that are commonly shared experiences,” he says. “For example, if I’m talking about a financial matter, I relate it to people managing their own checkbooks. Also, I try to get my team to forgo bigger words when simpler ones will do. It’s great that people might be impressed that we have a big thesaurus, but it’s wasted if they don’t know what the words mean,” he adds.

**The power of positivity.** Michael Watras, CEO of Straightline, a global strategic branding firm, says “I believe in optimism and don’t have a lot of

Vanguard Group for Leadership’s **KEN BANTA** and Brunswick’s **JONATHAN DOORLEY** hear from four CEOs on terms they use and phrases they avoid

**We asked these CEOs what words they'd hope people would remember them for:**

**Jay Brown, Crown Castle:** Steward, faithful, caring

**Jeremy Levin, Ovid Therapeutics:** Patients, purpose, products

**Shabbir Dahod, TraceLink:** Integrity, innovation, trust

**Michael Watras, Straightline:** Genuine, responsible, pops (the word he uses for going out for drinks)

Mr. Dahod also talks about the value in not changing language just to appeal to younger employees. "It can be divisive to use different words with different groups in the organization. I prefer to communicate with everyone in the same way."

Ovid Therapeutics' Mr. Levin adds "the biggest challenge when communicating to younger employees – and other colleagues for that matter – is not the choice of words but rather the loss of quality, clarity and human interaction that comes from the emphasis on texting and shorter forms of communication."

"I really enjoy the idea that words matter," says

Mr. Brown. "The time invested on words has a far greater impact than people realize. Preparing and being thoughtful about the words we use as leaders can – and often does – have great impact."

Finally, all four CEOs were passionate on one additional point: Words set leadership direction, tone, and framework, but what's decisive is how the leader acts on them.

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# Worthless "Value"

Professional shorthand is great – except when your audience doesn't know what it means, says Brunswick's **DAVID SELDIN**

**W**HEN TRAINING TO BECOME A PHYSICIAN, students learn a lot of technical language. They learn to distinguish the *coronoid fossa* from the *radial fossa*, and the difference between *medial epicondylitis* and *lateral epicondylitis*. But most doctors learn pretty quickly when they start to interact with patients that they're dealing with a sore elbow.

Medical jargon often gets in the way of the real professional task: helping the patient understand what's going on, what can be done about it and how to prevent it from happening again.

There's a lesson there for people who approach healthcare from a business, technology or policy orientation (especially all three). We have information that people need. We understand the situation so deeply that we have shorthand ways of referring to it. But we forget at our peril that in making ourselves understood by people who lack expertise, the jargon gets in the way.

Case in point: the word "value." If there is one concept that unites people across the healthcare industry, it is that pricing should be tied to value – the value that a cure brings to individuals, that better disease management brings to the healthcare system, the value that patients ascribe to a better understanding of their medical risks and health. The concept is brilliant; the word is not. Outsiders



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to the conversation don't know what it means. It's a buzzword and it needs to be replaced.

Working with clients from across the healthcare sector, I've had the opportunity to see this language tested in focus groups and polls, and put to use with journalists, investors, and public officials.

For the most part, they don't get it. Some people think "value" is code for "cheap," and worry that it will mean poorer quality. Other people think it's a euphemism for "more expensive," a way to take advantage of them. Still others are so uncertain and befuddled, they don't know what to make of it.

Something else that happens in those conversations: When you ask about ways to improve healthcare, people will often articulate exactly what we mean when we talk about value. They will say, "I'd like to see a system where we pay based on what works," or, "If something is going to prevent more expensive treatments down the line, we should be willing to pay a good price for that." Or they'll say, "Those extra six months with my mother were worth so much more than just treating her symptoms."

In other words, the public thinks the same things that the experts do, but because the experts talk about it in ways that defy understanding, the industry's reputation continues to suffer.

Is there a better buzzword? There might be, but a better approach is to take the few extra seconds to actually say what we mean. Instead of saying that they want to "move to a value-based approach to pricing," a pharma company's executives could simply say that its prices include considerations such as the impact a product has on a patient's overall health costs. Health plan leaders could replace "value" with simply spelling out that they will reimburse based on the success of treatment. It's not that hard to do.