



Assessments and Assertions

Two Companion Speech Acts

"Language is an ACTION. It produces a future and a world, which unspoken, would not have existed."

Assessments and assertions are not the same thing, though most of us think of them as such, and use them interchangeably. This confusion can cause significant personal suffering, and can cripple performance and team coordination in an organization. We hold the power to create speech actions that move our communities and teams forward. Understanding how assessments and assertions differ offers us the key to unlocking that power.

What *is* the difference?

Assertion: A statement that is either true or false.

Assessment: An opinion or judgment we make in theory for the sake of being able to take some future action, or to justify a feeling.

"Gravity keeps things planted on the earth."

That statement is true. We can provide evidence to support the claim and prove its validity. If we can disprove its validity, the statement is still an assertion. It's just a false one.

"That is an effective marketing tool."

At first glance this might actually look like an assertion, but it is not! We might be able to provide evidence to support our claim; however, to declare something "effective" is actually an assessment made by an observer with a certain history and set of standards about effectiveness that do not match all other people's standards. There is no doubt you could find someone who refutes the claim and provides other supporting evidence for the assessment.

We are assessment-making machines. It is part of our hard wiring.

"I can trust her with my life."

"He's not very competent when it comes to deadlines."

"Tomorrow will be a better day."

Make the distinction. We are mammals capable of making assessments that will ensure our very survival – “*The bear can’t get into the house.*” That said, we are constantly churning out assessments about ourselves and others as if they were true assertions and then make decisions and take actions based on them. When we do not take time to distinguish the types of assessments we are trafficking, we hinder our prosperity. Understanding the origins to our definitive actions gives us power.

Assessments and Powerful Leading

Leaders are paid to make powerful, grounded assessments – about the future, about their organizations, about other leaders. The more powerful and grounded a leader's assessments, the more value she offers.

The mark of a leader lies in one's ability to discern which assessments are useful and which are not. Assessments are always made by an observer, and knowing who you are as an observer makes you more powerful. Knowing that assessments are born of thought and feeling is critical.

Assessments in Action, a Leaders’ Inventory

1. As a first step, take some time to be an observer, and watch and listen to the statements made by others. Can you tell the difference between an assertion and an assessment? Take notes and code what you hear around you.
2. Then, reflect on your relationships: Can you think of the assessments you have made about your boss, your colleagues, your team, any one else that are currently informing your actions? Do you hold them like assertions? Do you have grounding, or "evidence," to support your assessments?
3. Use the following questions as fodder for this inventory.
 - Are you an effective leader?
 - Where are you making powerful, grounded assessments?
 - Where are you listening to assessments you ought to decline?
 - Where are you not paying attention to someone's assessments that you ought to hear?
 - What assessments are you withholding that would serve? And of whom?
 - What assessments are you harboring, about whom, that do not serve?

The Speech Acts: *the Declaration, the Request, the Promise, the Assertion and the Assessment* are at the crux of our communication with one another. They are the primary currency of all organizations, all teams, all families, all countries. Aware or not, we use The Speech Acts – the name Fernando Flores used to distinguish the language moves we humans make every day to form conversations, and our world. And these conversations lead to actions that would not have been possible prior to speaking about them. It is well worth the time and attention to learn how to Master the Art of the Conversation.