

## CHAPTER 3

# Language: Dare To Look *Stupid*, It May Just Work

~~~~~  
“The tipping point is that magic moment when an idea, trend, or social behavior crosses a threshold, tips, and spreads like wildfire” - Malcolm Gladwell  
~~~~~

On a drive to watch my former team compete in Chicago, I stumbled upon a behavioral scientist. As I listened to the scope of his work, I realized that he would make a killing as a coaching consultant. He also happens to live just down the road from where I was raised in England. His name, Rory Sutherland. Rory is a marketing mastermind, who is vice -chairman of Ogilvy, a world renowned marketing firm. His most recent book *Alchemy*, should be on your - I don't have anything to do on this flight list. On every page, he broaches a marketing topic that we encounter every day, but fail to recognise how meticulous and engineered it is. As I listened more, I could not get away from the thought that being an *effective* coach in your environment is comprised of a fair amount of intentional marketing. So having an understanding of how one of the worlds most revered marketers operates, and approaches he has offered when consulting

to some of the largest companies in the world couldn't be a bad idea, could it? Throughout his book, Rory shares a number of relevant tactics, but one that got me good! He unpacks an idea about regular candy, packaged in a bag that was labelled, dog food. I won't spoil the ending, but I'll soon arrive at a similar point. Words - their arrangement and resultant acceptance by the audience - are among the most powerful tools we have.

Now, I can appreciate that not everyone reading this coaches in front of thousands of people, but can we agree that when you do, it might pose some difficult to overcome challenges? One of those being, noise, anxiety, distraction, confusion, stress - just to name a few. Awesome, now we've agreed on this, let me set the scene.

It's the 85th minute. You're 1-0 up against a team right below you in the table - it is what some people refer to as a 6-pointer. The head coach has just taken off the team's best header of the ball and put on a pacy 5,2 winger. There are 22,000 people in the stands, and the stadium is palpably rocking. You have to make changes to both sides of the ball. You erase and adjust as the winger trots down to you on the sideline. How're you going to captivate their attention, give them a role, and make the necessary adjustments as easy as possible for them to communicate? Sure, you've got your iPad or folder with graphics, these are of course important tools, but what if there isn't a corner for 4 minutes, will they remember? Can I make a suggestion here? Having world-class language and phrases specific to your team is - I am currently arguing - one of, if not the most important thing you can do when revamping your set-pieces. World-class here doesn't mean convoluted - I struggled with this initially. It means vivid. Words that elicit an emotion and paint a clear picture of what job has to be done. No ambiguity. Hopefully they've been used consistently in the training environment. Then reaffirmed in film. No doubt, they're affirmative and positive. They both captivate and explain simultaneously.

I'll let you into a secret. From season 1 to season 2 at Angel City, we changed lots with regards to our approach to set pieces, but I'll argue to the death that it was a few of 'smaller' items we subtly

changed that made all the difference. We didn't recruit 3-4 world-class ball winners. We didn't change the gym program to prioritize jumping – although this was on my list of things to nudge. Within reason, we ran basically the same designed attacking set-pieces. So, why did we jump from last to first? You're not going to like the answer, I am going to assume you want some beautifully drawn graphic with how to create space for a high xG opportunity. Sorry. That wasn't it. The most notable change we made was language. We made our language sticky. It meant that in meeting 1, I had to stand up and share we were changing it – which received some raised eyebrows. Might I even say, I dared to look stupid. And I didn't just look it for the first couple of weeks, I felt it too. I'd rehearse on my drive into the facility. But those raised eyebrows didn't exist halfway through the season when we were leading the league on both sides of the ball.

Below are just some (because this isn't a copy and paste book) of the language changes and implementations we made from 2022 to 2023:

- Target      - became >      Finisher
- Taker      - became >      Deliverer

We made quite a few more but hopefully this gets your creative juices flowing for terms you use now, and how they could be tweaked. These may seem like small adjustments, and I'd agree they are. But as a mentor of mine and I reflected on our language, we realized it could be more emotive. It needed to suggest and cover all aspects of the role. Are you a corner taker? Job done! Or is your job to deliver the ball to a specific area, with a specific pace, and a specified time?

Since I joined the league in 2021, I had grappled with the term, Target! To me, It suggested the role was a location for another person to hit, but how could we make it more of a privilege and responsibility. I wanted to make it an action. When I would look into the eyes of the player entering the field and tell them they were going to be a finisher, I was subconsciously saying, "Go score a goal." Small,

but powerful. Very, very, powerful. In a moment when the athlete wants clarity, provide it.

One of my favorites. The introduction of ‘The Wizard’. When you saw this, what did you think? Probably that I was crazy! But who on your team did you think of? Well, your job is to elicit the same emotion from the people on your team. We all have a couple of players who see the game brilliantly, and long to have the freedom to accomplish a task but through their lens and maximizing their skill set. MD-1 you give out assignments and tell X they’re going to be the wizard. You’ve won. You have their attention, and I guarantee that they go home and think about how they can wreak havoc. Done well, this will manifest in a text message or a call later that evening with some ideas they want to get out of their head and into your mind. An aside; I have seen this person’s role be something more explicit. Something akin to the runner, front space occupier, or front post dragger. While this is undoubtedly a way to describe the role, it doesn’t elicit the same emotion, does it? In my experience, it’s this you’re searching for. Ways to create a connection to the role, can you make it sticky, memorable, and in some ways, passing the baton of ownership over to it. You’re about to read one of the highlights from the 2023 season below, but 2 months into the season, I inadvertently used the term taker in a MD-2 scout, and more than 2 people in the room corrected me to, deliverer! The language had become a part of the fabric, and while there is no doubt that this was in jest, it provided me feedback that my willingness to look stupid had landed. Seeds had been planted. Time had watered them. They were blooming in front of my eyes. Our club specific, restart language was taking a vice like grip on our women. It was informing their thought process. Shaping their approach. And driving our season forward.

You can have this idea for free. It is the end-of-year team party. You’ve been intentional in keeping notes on who has served as the wizard over the course of the season. You buy 5 wizard hats, or 5 wands, or something ‘magical in nature’ to give as out as a token of your appreciation. Sure you’ll get some laughs, but it’ll live long in the memory. You’ve just inadvertently recruited your whole team to think

how the wizard could better be used in the off-season. Did your job just get easier and did your team take ownership of the process? You tell me.....!

One of the highlights of my career came when a player on our team scored a goal from a corner against our SoCal rival. She ran over to me after the goal – my heart of course happy. But later that evening when I got home, I saw a clip from the press conference on Instagram. She has used our set-piece language in a press conference. A room full of eyes staring, cameras recording, and emotions flowing, and she had used our language. Verbatim, she said, “We spent a lot of time working on set pieces. We have a saying on set pieces, it is scrappy = happy”. When your athletes & staff start to unconsciously use the language you’ve been intentionally installing – WIN! WIN! WIN! Language, check! Now let’s turn our attention to a devastating fire that took place in Montana in 1949, and how the firefighters managed to wrestle it to a manageable size, all while they had no radios, phones, weather app! They did however have a Commanders Intent!