



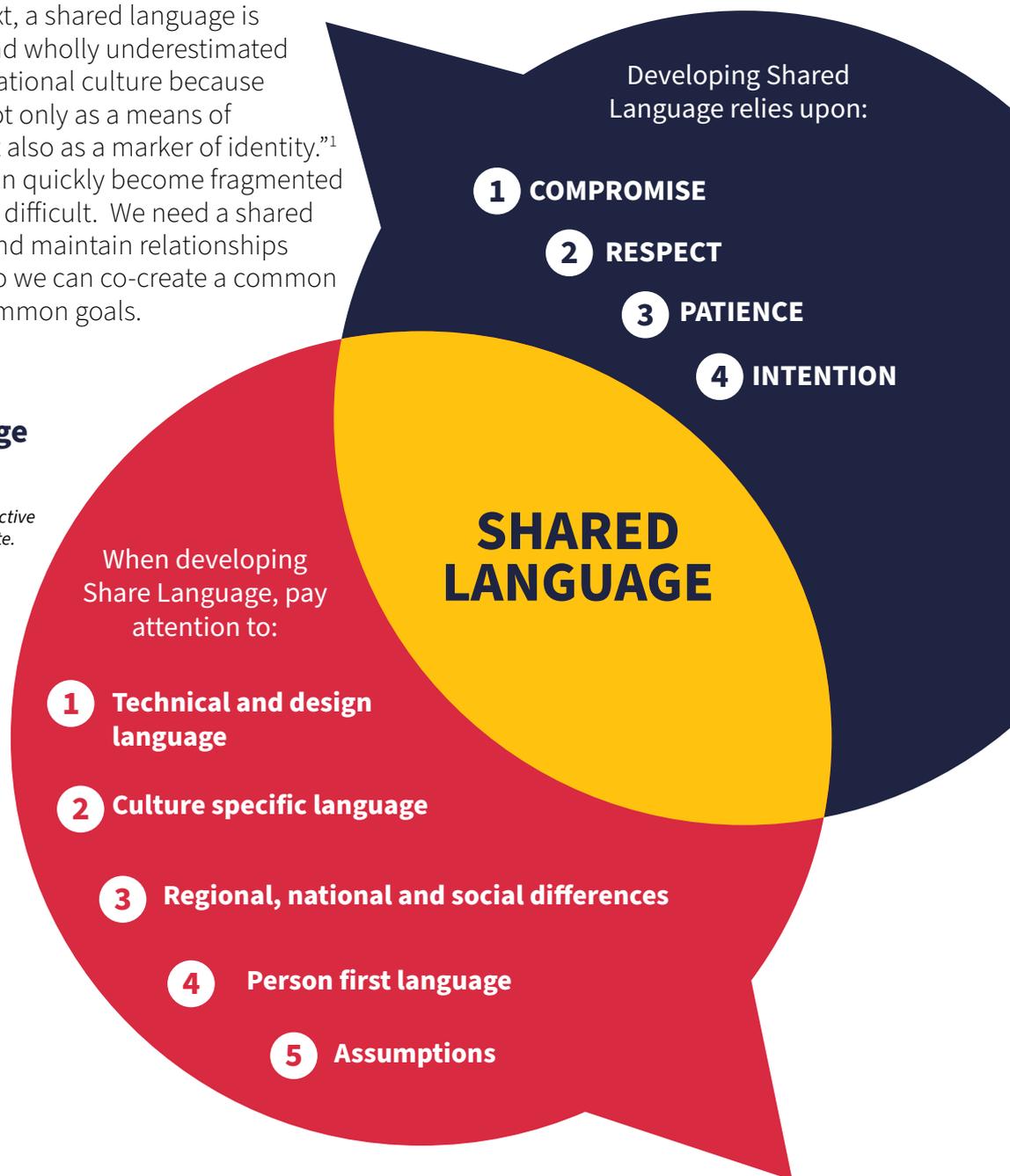
**The Power  
of Shared  
Language**

**Have you ever had a cryptic conversation with a close friend? The kind where you only need a few key words and phrases for them to understand you. The kind that anyone else you know would have trouble deciphering. That quick shorthand communication is possible because of your shared or common language.**

In a business context, a shared language is an often invisible and wholly underestimated indicator of organisational culture because “language serves not only as a means of communication but also as a marker of identity.”<sup>1</sup> Without it, teams can quickly become fragmented and change is more difficult. We need a shared language to build and maintain relationships and partnerships, so we can co-create a common purpose and set common goals.

## Elements of Shared Language

*Joyce Thomas and Deana McDonagh. (2013). Shared language: Towards more effective communication. ResearchGate.*





## The Organisational Benefits

The benefits of a shared language within organisations are many. It provides:<sup>2</sup>

- 1.** Consistency – when teams, customers, and clients all hear the same language, they perceive a sense of reliability and cohesiveness
- 2.** Speed – the shorthand of a shared language can hasten communication and collaboration
- 3.** Accuracy – there is less room for misinterpretation and error if we all understand the meaning of the words that we use
- 4.** A sense of culture – a shared language, through metaphor, categorisation and labelling, and frequency becomes a key factor in building a culture.

## Shared Language and Culture

The role of a shared language in establishing a company culture is crucial because words tend to set cultural permissions that we then adopt as behaviours.<sup>3</sup>

For instance, language can be inclusive or exclusive. We can use it to open doors and invite conversations, or we can build walls with it and shut down enquiry. Research shows<sup>4</sup> that high performance cultures are inclusive, and how we voice that inclusion is key. Inclusive language will be respectful, and it notices other people's value.

Metaphors are a particularly influential language device too. If your business's key metaphor is "time is money", that will foster an entirely different culture than "find your flow" or "invest in riders not horses."

Language also provides stability while allowing for innovation. "On the one hand, words are conventional and prescriptive, and provide a stable representation that is easily shared with great fidelity, but on the other hand, words have an open-ended "placeholder" structure that invites innovation... this dual capacity contributes to what is distinctive in human cultural evolution."<sup>5</sup>

## How to Build a Shared Language

There are some very practical ways<sup>1</sup> in which we can ensure our organisational language aligns with our people and purpose.



**Create a list** – identify and record the language that is specific to your workplace



**Encourage consistency** – streamline your communications channels to enhance consistency (e.g. Slack, Teams etc)



**Be explicit during onboarding** – don't rely on chance and osmosis, be explicit about introducing your shared language to new team members



**Identify friction points** – where has language let you down or caused a miscommunication and how can you learn from that?



**Make it a learning focus** – coach your team members and partners on your language



**Correlate with Industry** – align your language with your industry practitioners and partners

Because language conveys meanings and references “beyond itself”<sup>6</sup>, learning a shared language requires us to also understand the behaviours, customs, and beliefs that underly the words we use to communicate. That process inextricably entwines language with culture. We cannot speak without conveying culture, and to know a culture, we must know its language.

That feedback loop has important implications for transforming organisations. Daily conversations and sentiments set ingrained patterns, so new or changed language needs to be introduced with patience, time, and respect. But it's well worth the effort because we need language to understand each other – and from shared understanding, comes shared commitment.<sup>7</sup>

## Further Reading:

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