

EXCELLENCE: Language Matters

A couple of years ago my wife and I, almost accidentally, were in Rome at Easter, and I guess I should remember Rome at Easter for all the right reasons, but I happen to remember something else.

There was a big billboard that had apparently just been put up, and it was advertising the latest issue from our dear brothers and sisters at BMW. And there was a picture of the new car that was coming out, and underneath it were the enormous words, “Radically Thrilling.” And I *love* those two words.

And what that reminded me of was the years I worked as a consultant in the 1980s for Apple. And Steve Jobs to this day—and we wish certainly for his health—Steve Jobs’ benchmark hurdle for any new product was a term that he used over and over again, and it was: Insanely Great.

Now, the reason I bring up these two examples is, I think when we’re aiming high, we ought to use energetic language. I think language matters. Obviously, I talk and write for a living, so I’m more sensitive than most. But if you want hot stuff going on at the institution, we need hot language.

There’s a guy who ran a big independent grocery store—got into some serious problems—by the name of Stew Leonard, and he was the guy who introduced me, at the age of 40, to the three-letter word “Wow.” It’s measurable. Okay, this is deadly serious. Stuff is wow or it’s not wow. Guess what? You know exactly what I’m talking about, and you can measure against it, because this is not just like that corny, “Isn’t that cool?” thing. In the case of my own little tiny company, I think we spent a year and a half designing our logo. And after a year and a half, what did we come up with? A bright red exclamation mark. But we really figured, I figured, all my colleagues figured, what do we do for a living? In a dull world of business, we do bright red exclamation mark.

So I really think you can manage and monitor and pay attention to the language you use. And if you want an energetic place, use energetic language. And I also think, as I said before, that you can measure against it. Is this wow or isn’t it wow? And that’s as true for a new system in the purchasing department as it is for some purportedly sexy new product.

