



FlexBulletin #78: Do Republican Strategists Telecommute?

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Or would Frank Luntz still say “telecommuting?” *It’s hard to escape our conditioning. Among my long-term habits: history and campaigns. In my continuing quest to understand the state and trajectory of what many of us call “workplace flexibility,” I can’t help looking back at where we have been and seeing the road ahead as a continuing campaign for change – won or lost one contest at a time.*

Frank Luntz, the Republican focus group impresario, has a hard time escaping the habit of language and thinks we are its captive too. He has successfully wielded the weapon of words on behalf of his causes for more than a decade. My purpose is not to endorse his words or his campaigns. It is to suggest that those of us who would build a mutually respectful and flexible workplace might do well to take a hard look at language we’ve been using for decades and see if it still serves and energizes our purposes.

While still working on the Bulletin I promised you – working title: “Shooting Ourselves in Both Feet” – the centrality of language in recent and future events caused me to post this blog. You can find it in its original blog form on [TLNT](#) and on my [Co Scheduler](#) blog on the [Rupert and Company](#) website home page.

I’ll leave you with this wonderful, innocent refrain from our childhoods: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.”

Re-tooling “Flexibility” – Is It Time to Focus Group “Telecommuting?”

[Jack Nilles](#) was a Southern California engineer who coined the term “telecommuting” in 1973. It caught on.

[Frank Luntz](#) is a Republican marketing strategist who also names things. He relentlessly tests campaign language in focus groups to see what moves people in his desired direction. He is credited with morphing the term *anti-abortion* into its more effective successor, *pro-life*. He suggested replacing the vaguely “anti-rich” phrase *inheritance tax* with the now ubiquitous *death tax*. Clever – and very effective.

Frank describes his work as “testing language and finding words that will help his clients sell their product or turn [public opinion](#) on an issue or a candidate.” In a recent memo he says, “Bad language is costly.”

He is not a policy wonk – he markets policy change and energizes campaigns. He tries to advance policies he supports through careful review of language that reduces rather than builds resistance; that deepens rather than inhibits support

Focusing on the language of flexibility

I doubt that Frank has focus-grouped the term “telecommuting” – or [“FWAs,” “Phased Retirement” or “Part-time.”](#) Neither, I suspect, have we. Those of us who have campaigned for “workplace flexibility” for decades are working with inherited vocabulary that has not been so rigorously tested. If we did such tests, we might discover some of what our firm has detected in the last year.

It seems that much of our flexibility language might be obstructing or stalling campaigns for change rather than advancing them. We might ask: How do different markets (*leaders, managers, users*) hear our language/message? Do our words attract support or put people off? Are we thinking through a decisive campaign rather than labeling a set of benefits programs? Is this issue ascendant, stalled or slowing?

Early tweets from the canaries in the coal mine

The question of retooling our approach first leapt out at us in a series of 2011-2012 events. These included client feedback, public discourse and then an intensive group of focus group discussions on “flexibility” with hundreds of millennials. The last month of partisan post-Yahoo debate only added fuel to the fire.

Our experiences:

- ✓ **Millennials** We conducted a [series of focus groups](#) with 9 major employers and 220 millennial employees in 2011 to capture the character and intensity of their interest in flexibility.

In 220 person-hours these millennials described a strong desire to be managed clearly and well and to build the flexibility they needed in their schedules. Significantly, not one used the terms “telecommuting”, “Starbucks” or “FWAs.” The market grows; new branding may be in order.

- ✓ **Client Feedback** Throughout 2011 and 2012 a growing number of clients and prospects expressed concern that their Senior Managements were rejecting programs labeled “FWAs”, etc.

A financial services CEO terminated all “flexibility programs” as too rigid and unproductive. A global manufacturer suspended its flexibility program for negative customer service. These and others reframed, renamed and reintroduced flexibility with different nomenclature.

- ✓ **Ferment in the Field** For some time practitioners and thought leaders have been wrestling with this transition in campaign language. As alternatives to FWAs, terms have emerged from “WorkFlex” to “Time and Place Management” to our firm’s “Collaborative Scheduling.” And “Telecommuting” has spawned “Telework”, “Work-at-Home”, “FlexPlace”, “Remote Work”, “Distributed Work and “Virtual Work” – for starters.

All of these terms share some common features: an ongoing search for more descriptive language; more program than process orientation; and a description of the desired individual outcomes rather than the managerial and behavioral change we have long sought.

All winning campaigns recalibrate when facing danger or opportunity

The Yahoo and Best Buy kerfuffle raised an alarm and opportunity for all of us who seek more flexible workplaces. We believe that the forces for change from rigid and all-hands-on-deck will prevail. But it will not happen without a continuing, vigorous and at least loosely coordinated campaign – which takes us back to Frank Luntz.

Winning campaigns demand clear messaging, strong candidates and consistency in sound bites, buttons and bumper stickers. Workplace change is not the same as political campaigns. But one can inform the other. Right now, the flex campaign landscape is awash with an abundance of terms and approaches that may stand in the way of decisive victory.

Rorschach didn’t telecommute, but may have been working virtually

The recent Yahoo eruption revealed the fissures in our current approach. Heated opinions were hurled back and forth about “telecommuting” as if each commentator was referring to the same thing. But in fact, we were witnessing a virtual national Rorschach test of millions of people looking at a vague image that they considered “telecommuting.”

They then made numerous assumptions about practices ranging from informal days at home or after hours to fully home-based work. They lumped well-managed and ill-conceived initiatives together. In short, folks dug into their body of experience – from intensely productive to organizationally destructive – and *defined the candidate for themselves.*

To turn to pure politics, a general and vital “lesson learned” from our recent presidential campaign has been widely conceded by the unsuccessful Romney campaign: *Never let your opponent define you early.*

“Telecommuting” may have lost much of its positive defining power. It is no longer a novel and neutral phrase devised to capture an emerging phenomenon. The movement for broad employee-engaging and business-

beneficial flexibility has made great advances, and is in a position to transform the way we work, building on demographics, technology and business gains.

To make that leap, we don't need Frank Luntz. But we do need to rethink and retool our approach so we drive down existing and emerging unfavorable views and build positive support for greater flexibility in the workplace.

We welcome your comments on this **Bulletin** or **Blog**. When you write, please email me at: paulrupertdc@cs.com

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