

Watch Your Language!

How Your Words Reveal What You Really Mean

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Improving productivity rests on self-understanding and working well with other people. In our attempts to do this, we often believe that we should speak to each other nicely, respectfully, and politely. Unfortunately, “nicely, respectfully, and politely” is usually code for not saying what we really mean, and the cost of not saying what we really mean can be very great. People often discern what we really mean even when we try to “be nice,” “be respectful,” or “be polite.” Thus, our attempts to treat each other well and make things run smoothly often backfire and we disrupt communication, damage relationships, and negatively affect our organizations.

When I speak so as not to “hurt people’s feelings,” and avoid unpleasant conversations, negative feelings, or conflict, I change what I say and I don’t say what I really mean. I lose the power of my words, even though I make things easier for myself in the moment. I risk creating confusion and misunderstanding because my language reveals my motivations and feelings to others, even when I am not aware of them myself.

Language

I have found a simple, but very effective tool to use to become more aware of my own operating is to do what many of us were admonished to do as children: “Watch your language!” By this, I don’t mean, “be polite, don’t say bad words, and don’t hurt other people’s feelings.” Rather, I watch my language in order to become aware of the ways in which I obscure my meaning, soften what I say, or try to avoid stating something controversial. By noticing what words I use, I can learn to say what I mean more clearly, directly, and powerfully. Some of the ways I use language that don’t serve me are:

Speaking for Others – Speak for yourself! Phrases that imply popular support for my personal feeling actually distance me from my own beliefs and feelings rather than making them clear. Examples are:

- “People always ...”
- “Whenever you are in a situation you ...”
- “We feel ...”
- “It’s only human nature to ...”
- “The group feels ...”

There is safety in numbers. By saying “people” or “we,” I imply that mine is a common response, not unique to me. However, usually I have no idea how “we” or “people” or “the group” feel. All I really know is my own feeling. To take personal responsibility for my feelings I say, “I feel ...”



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Globalisms – These are statements, and often jargon, so broad that they make doing anything about them very difficult. Examples are:

- “That’s just the way we do it around here.”
- “People are just like that.”
- “I can’t communicate with people.”

Broad statements do not allow for anything specific to follow. Often, statements like these mask specific feelings. For instance:

- “They never consider our needs,” may really mean, “I’m hurt by what they did.”
- “At the end of the day, we have to focus on the bottom line,” may really mean, “I don’t want to take your suggestion.”

Non-Committal Words – Some words sound as if they convey meaning, but my opinion is kept hidden, making a useful response much less likely. Such words include:

- “Interesting”
- “Different”
- “Curious”
- “Strange”
- “Funny”

When I say, “That’s interesting ...,” my feeling on the subject—like, dislike, excitement, fear—is hidden. Without the feeling, it is difficult for someone to respond or to continue the dialogue, and the conversation tends to become one-sided.

Disempowering Words or Phrases – Some phrases help me avoid responsibility or deny that I have choices. These often express my self-limiting beliefs. These include:

- “Can’t”
- “Couldn’t”
- “Have to”
- “Need to”
- “Must”

These convey the idea that something is beyond my control. “I can’t make the meeting,” or “I’m too busy” are rarely true. It is more accurate to say, “I choose to do something else rather than attend the meeting.” By saying, “I can’t” I am not taking responsibility for the choice I make and not being honest with you. The problem is that you usually discern the real message anyway. In the end, your feelings are not spared and trust erodes despite my efforts to save your feelings.

The phrase, “I don’t know” usually means, “I don’t want to think about it anymore,” or, “I might not like what I (or you) will find out if I pursue it further.” Often, beneath “I don’t know” is an important feeling that is blocking communication. For example, “I don’t know” is often used to hide anger or shame. It is easier to appear not to know than to admit to an unpleasant feeling.



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Using Questions to Make Statements – Questions often take the place of statements that underlie them. Many questions are really statements for which I am not taking responsibility. For instance:

- “Are you sure that’s the right thing to do?” often means, “I think you’re doing the wrong thing.”
- “Do you really want to go to that restaurant?” may mean, “I don’t want to go there.”

Usually the recipient of the question hears the underlying meaning anyway and responds to that, sometimes defensively, rather than the question.

“I feel ...” vs. “I think ...” – “I feel ...” is often used in place of “I think ...” or “in my opinion ...” For example, “I feel that we are taking too long to make this decision,” is really a thought I have. My feeling on the matter is something else, such as frustration, boredom, sadness, etc. Whenever I use the phrase, “I feel that ...” I am explaining a thought as if it were a feeling. More effective is to state the emotion that I have about the thought as well, such as sad, glad, mad, afraid, etc. For example, “I’m frustrated that we haven’t reached a decision yet and I’m feeling anxious because we have a deadline.”

Downplaying – Words or phrases that diminish the impact of my position allow me to reduce my responsibility for my choices. Examples include:

- “Sometimes”
- “Perhaps”
- “Maybe”
- “Kind of”
- “Sort of”
- “You may not agree, but ...”
- “I guess”
- “I could be wrong, but ...”

Using any one of these phrases gives me an escape route and helps me to avoid taking a firm position. For example, “It kind of bothers me when you don’t put the cap on the toothpaste,” lets me hedge and imply, “but it’s not a big deal.” In this way I deny my own feelings and allow my fears to control me.

Value-based Language – These words imply that there is a right or best way to do something:

- “Should,”
- “Have to,” or
- “Must”

Using these words allows me to avoid responsibility for my own preferences, but state my own opinions or beliefs as if they were the only possible course of action. When I use these words I am either stating my own preferences or defending myself from fears



Language

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I have, or a combination of both. Examples are:

- “People should not interrupt others” may mean, “I prefer that people let other people speak without interrupting because it is a sign of respect to each person,” which is a personal preference or value; or, it may also mean, “If people interrupt me, I’m afraid I won’t be heard or I’ll be rolled over.” Here using “should” masks a fear of not being able to cope with being interrupted.
- “Everyone should speak up in meetings,” may mean, “I value everyone’s opinion and I think everyone deserves to be heard,” which is a personal preference; or, it may mean, “I am worried that people who do not say anything are against my ideas,” a fear I have about my ability to cope with opposition.

Effective Communication

All of these ways of using language help me to avoid expressing myself directly and truthfully. To be more effective I must know how to say what I mean clearly and directly. Effective, powerful communication happens when I:

1. Say what I actually experience, that is I am **open**, and
2. Take **self-responsibility**

I am direct and truthful in a positive and useful way, that is I am **open**, when I communicate my own personal experience—my thoughts, feelings, sensations, memories, beliefs, and intentions. I use phrases such as:

- “I notice ...”
- “My opinion is ...”
- “I think ...”

This makes it easier for others to hear what I am saying. However, when I talk about other people, by saying:

- “You are ...”
- “People always ...”
- “Everybody thinks ...”

I am not actually talking about my own experience. I am speculating about other people. What I say can be quite inaccurate and many times produces a defensive or negative reaction.

I am **self-responsible** when I am aware of the choices that I am making and communicate what they are to others. I choose how I spend my time, to whom I talk, what I do, and what I do not do. When I am not aware of these choices, or when I am afraid of the consequences of my choices, I may use language to hide my choices from other people and even from myself.



Language

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Some things I can do to explore these ideas and learn more about the way that I shape my experience through the language I use are:

1. **Listen to myself.** I can listen closely to the language I use and notice when I use any of the types of language described here.
2. **Listen to others.** I can notice how other people talk—the language people use on television, on the radio, in the workplace. What happens when people use the types of language described here? Does the conversation change? Is the communication clear? Is it direct and powerful? Is it vague or confusing?
3. **Reflect.** Who do I think is a powerful speaker? How do they use the language? Who is not a powerful speaker? How do they use the language?
4. **Look deeper.** When I use some of the language described here, I stop and consider:
 - Do I know what I really think in this situation?
 - Do I know what I really feel in this situation?
 - Am I uncomfortable with my own thoughts or feelings?
 - Am I afraid of something? Do I think something bad will happen if I say what I think or feel right now?

When I focus on my experience and the language that I use to express it, I have the opportunity to learn more about what I really think, what I really feel, and what choices I am making. The more I speak my own truth, the more clearly I communicate and the more I take responsibility for myself. This leads to greater clarity, quicker resolution of problems and conflict, and better relationships. ✎



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