



The Power of Language

By Sandra Ford Walston

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.”

This old adage is false. Because words are so powerful, they *can* hurt you, but they can also get you positive results at work, such as increased productivity, improved morale, enhanced project effectiveness, and reduced stress, to name a few.

During my 14 years of interviewing employees for my work on courageous leadership, conducting interpersonal skills training, and coaching people on how to use courage, I became aware of the importance of language and how we use it to describe our domain. Our words create our reality.

According to *Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership* by Joseph Jaworski, “It is through language that we create the world, because it’s nothing until we describe it. And when we describe it, we create distinctions that govern our actions. To put it another way, we do not describe the world we see, but we see the world we describe.”

When you speak, you are “acting.” Linguists technically call the process “performative acts.” A word or words, sentences, or utterances are performances—meaning they make

something happen. Promises, requests, offers, or words to persuade are performances that provoke action. In the book *How We Do Things with Words*, J.L. Austin reveals how we use words as a means to get people to do things for us, endear ourselves to people, make people like us, buy our services, or countless other motivations—with both positive and negative results.

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Take, for example, the power of “hate” speech. Myra Bookman, director of the Master of Humanities and the Master of Social Science programs at the University of Colorado in Denver, shared with me her understanding of the issues of hate speech. “The idea that you can’t just say whatever you want to someone implies that words can be as wounding as concrete, like throwing a stone. The law, examining the nuances of hate speech, agrees that words can indeed hurt you.”

The opposite is also true. A brochure for a workshop called “The Language in Action” explained the significance of communication: “When we communicate effectively, we are able to intervene in and reshape the world in which we live.” So if you can communicate more effectively with coworkers, you can reshape your work environment and produce the sustainable results you’re seeking.

Putting Language to Work

Our words, body language, and emotions form a triangle through which we interpret the world around us. If we change the interpretation of the dynamics of this triangle, we can shift the resulting behavior and the effect it has on our spirit and coworkers. Simple statements, such as saying “thank you” more often and offering words of encouragement, have a positive effect on coworkers. If you want to increase a staff member’s productivity, consider the effect of using the word “imagine.” What would happen if you asked your team (or client) a question like this: “How do you imagine this project progressing?” This

question not only engages the person but also decreases stress because creativity is being generated, and people are motivated to speak up. Try it!

Another step to open up the lines of communication in the workplace is to use requests and offers. For example, you can say, “Is there anything else I can *offer* you?” and “Do you have any other *requests*?” Requests and offers allow people to open up and reveal the “chatter” in their head (or what they really want), thus providing transparency in everyone’s communication and removing any awkwardness if someone ordinarily feels hesitant about speaking up.

To improve communication, a company can promote openness. Letting employees communicate in an open fashion—and truly encouraging them to do so—also creates a positive work environment. A senior team leader who works for such a company says the environment allows employees to move out of inertia and display their talents. Transparency—speaking directly—gets results for this team leader. “Be transparent and to the point with your team,” he says. To accomplish this, you can do the following:

Be Direct

When someone speaks directly, his/her communication hits the bulls-eye, and “no translation” is needed. To get to this stage takes practice, courage, and the self-awareness to speak the truth *in spite of* the inevitable criticisms. You can take these steps:

- ◆ Play an active role in the communication process by taking responsibility to really hear the other person.
- ◆ Show an interest: Ask a lot of “you” questions to display an interest and other-centeredness, such as “What was your assessment about the big project we just finished for that client?” Be cautious with your tone. This means you take responsibility for how your language affects others. Your words are a part of your daily legacy—people remember them more than the action.

Be Aware of Indirect Communication

Be aware of the effects of indirect communication, such as when someone:

- ◆ Walks away, shaking his head because he felt he couldn’t respond (it wasn’t safe).
- ◆ Dictates by providing an answer without even asking a question.
- ◆ Finishes the other person’s sentence for her.
- ◆ Makes more statements with “I” than asking questions with “you.”

Unless we take time to review the power of language, we become stuck in one place by giving ourselves labels. We say to ourselves, “I will fail, or I’m incapable,” and this language can paralyze us. Many times we have to be jolted by a shocking experience before we initiate internal reflection. For example, a tax and estate director of a private CPA firm knew he was going to be eliminated when the firm merged with another firm. Even though he had been with the firm for more than 20 years, his intuition told him what was going to happen, and it did!

Before taking the leap to go out on his own, he began to reflect on his thinking process and the language he was using to describe the time of uncertainty—the time when his job ended until starting something new. He confessed that his head was buzzing with “I will fail,” “I am too old,” and “I should have done this years ago—I saw it coming.” For this professional, reflection helped him see that he had been stuck in complacency for quite a few years. His introspection included addressing whether he was committed to movement or would become immobile. His self-doubt about being able to make it on his own hindered him, but by setting higher standards for himself, he was able to start a business—and he was very successful on his own. His only regret was that he didn’t make the change sooner, which so often is the case.

When Communication Breaks Down

Actions can be effective when they are automatic. Automatic means you’re able to perform without having to reflect on the performance, such as when you drive your car. While you’re driving, you’re performing an action, but not necessarily reflecting on that action. But a “breakdown” occurs if you are suddenly jolted out of your “automatic” action—when you have a flat tire or have to slam on your brakes to avoid hitting something. A breakdown requires you to assess your circumstances in that moment. In communication, a breakdown often happens when employees don’t think about the words they use or the lingering effect those words will have.

Any habitual response is automatic and falls into consistent, unconscious patterns, such as resorting to a conversation around old stories that keep you stuck in the past—what I refer to as a bad version of *Groundhog Day*. For example, a company may have always paid vendors with a check, but an employee requests that they start to pay electronically. With the request, the employee pro-



vides three solutions that confirm cost savings but is met with the knee-jerk response of “We’ve always done it this way!” These types of comments keep things the way they are instead of initiating receptivity to new possibilities to improve the work environment.

Another example is when someone says, “I don’t care how you do it, just get it done!” Anytime a “stone is thrown” with the phrase “I don’t care,” the receiver is most likely going to have an internal breakdown at work and then one at home. We all want to feel appreciated and valued for our contribution, so another way of responding might be “How do you envision accomplishing the task/results?”

Breakdowns happen not only between coworkers because people are acting on automatic pilot, but also at a high level, such as when organizations are trying to hit a target called the mission statement. Organizations are generally cruising on automatic when creating their mission statement. In any enterprise, creating a mission statement requires individuals to aim at the same target. Metaphorically speaking, many people (and organizations) fire rifle shots as they try to create this vision. But often the shots are scattered rather than communicated and orchestrated in the same direction, so the result is mixed messages and confusion. Why is there a tendency for this to happen? The creators of the mission statement are operating in automatic mode. One strategy consultant said, “I am often struck by the stark difference in outcomes between the firing of single, unfocused rifle shots and the execution of integrated, but still targeted, strategic initiatives. So often it’s a scattered, mixed-messages approach that organizations send to their people. Good strategy badly implemented is bad strategy and results in off-target results.”

Communication breakdowns can also lead to ambiguity, which permeates the workplace. Ambiguity is the inability to confront brutal facts and act with conviction to resolve them, and a good deal of ambiguity comes from lack of clarity and direction. Here are a few suggestions on how to avoid ambiguity:

- ◆ Make your choices strong and clear.
- ◆ Be willing to confront uncomfortable truths.
- ◆ Act with conviction and resolve.
- ◆ Take responsibility for the role you play and how you communicate with others.

◆ Set aside differences, and focus the dialogue on the results.

◆ Express your point of view without ambiguity.

Be careful of “mixed messages.” Mixed messages mean people tell you to speak your mind, take a stand, and take risks, yet they reward those who play by the book and play it safe!

What about language-induced breakdowns? These often result from messages being delivered in a command-and-control style—authoritative language that puts others down and makes assumptions. Avoid this style because it comes across as though you are giving orders and won’t be willing to listen to questions. Also, communicate your expectations clearly. Because we’re human, we naturally expect the receiver to know exactly what we expect in the outcome and what we mean. Instead, we need to say directly, “I have expectations that you will do this and that.” The outcome of unclear expectations? Wasted time that can’t be reclaimed and unnecessary tension in the workplace.

In addition, you can reduce breakdowns by designing conversations that coordinate action, such as *requesting* someone to stop using words that put you down and cause shame, blame, and diminishing self-esteem as when someone is trying to overpower you. A coordinated action lives in *promises*, such as “I promise to complete the assigned task by 5 p.m. on Friday.”

Speaking Up

Speaking up and clarifying your position is taking appropriate action. After all, language is the coordinator that brings us together and enables us to live together. Think of problem solving as a dialogue—with yourself or with another person. For the successful financial professional who wants to refine his/her communication, one suggestion would be to try being vulnerable. You can show vulnerability by using the word “confess.” For example, when you don’t have the answer, try saying, “I must confess that I don’t know (have) the answer, but I promise I will get back to you by 11:00 tomorrow morning with the answer. Will that work for you?”

Our relationships are defined by the conversations we have or don’t have with the people in our lives, and you can determine the quality of your relationships by analyzing the conversation. “How do I create my conversation with someone?” “Do I blame my boss for criticizing me and fail to generate a new context for our relationship (casting blame on circumstances is strong today), or do I take responsibility to speak up to air the truth?” The key

behavior is to seek a place for wondering about what the behavior may be and listening for concerns. “Wonderment” lives in the ability to connect with the essence or core of the other person because of the effect you have on them. Have you ever wondered what draws you to some people and not others? I would venture a guess that a lot of the pull has to do with the communication connection.

Speaking up isn’t easy, especially when it involves admitting mistakes or not having the answers, but it can be turned into a positive. One president and CEO offered the following observation: “When someone comes to me and admits an error as soon as s/he realizes it’s been made, that takes courage. It’s hard to admit mistakes, but there are very few errors that can’t be fixed if brought to light as soon as they are discovered. And often, creative thinking can turn the error into an opportunity.” It’s scary to speak up and confess you don’t have the answer, and it’s often embarrassing to have to ask questions. (In school we received good grades for good answers, not good questions.) Katherine Graham, the former CEO of *The Washington Post*, put it well, though: “A mistake is simply another way of doing things.”

Transforming the Workplace One Word at a Time

Words are a powerful tool for transformation. W. Edwards Deming said, “Nothing happens without personal transformation.” As you alter the language that shapes your choices, transformation can occur. Transformation happens when you do something a different way, perhaps admit you’ve been wrong in your previous approach, question your old language patterns, or assess why this particular issue or breakdown keeps happening.

Transformation boils down to effective communication. Think about what type of language you experience in your work environment and what you display. The words we choose can submerge us into negativity or elevate us to a different level of consciousness—and take our coworkers with us. That is the power of language! **SF**

Sandra Ford Walston is known as The Courage Expert and is the innovator of StuckThinking™. She is a learning and organizational effectiveness consultant, speaker, corporate trainer, and internationally published author of Courage (2002), Stuck (2010), and Face It! (2011). You can reach her at (303) 696-1010 or Sandra@SandraWalston.com.

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