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Language, Influence and Performance

Have you taken a good hard look at your schedule lately? What are you spending your time and energy on, *really*? In Daniel Pink's current bestseller *To Sell Is Human*, the research he and his team conducted shows that one out of every nine of us in the professional world is in "sales." Oh yeah, and the other 8 out of 9 are also in sales. He calls it "non-sales selling" and I think he's right on the money. Every single one of us are in the business of moving others. At work, we aim to move our team members to action, move our customers to extend trust and confidence in us, move our suppliers to deliver consistently. The list goes on and on and it doesn't stop when we get home. We're selling our children on the benefits of being honest, we want them to take responsibility and make healthy choices.

Essentially, we are cajoling, convincing, persuading, influencing, twisting arms, and sometimes dragging them kicking and screaming. Even when we would like five whole minutes of peace and quiet to drink our coffee and read the latest issue of HBR, we still want everyone else in the family to cooperate.

Here are a few stats:

- 40% of our work activities are devoted to “moving others”
- We consider it critical to our professional success
- 70% of the respondents in the survey report that at least some of their time is spent convincing, influencing or persuading others

When I took a good hard look at my weekly schedule, I was surprised to see that those numbers are conservatively low. Even at dinner, I notice that I’m “selling” my ideas of healthy food choices when I tell our daughters, “Yes, we’re eating Annie’s Organic Shells and Cheese because Kraft Mac-n-Cheese has artificial colors in it.” I want them to buy into this change *and like it*.

Even in our thoughts and decision making, we spend energy talking ourselves into action. “You know you would feel better and have more energy if you went to yoga in the morning.”

So, if you also find that spending your time moving others is critical to your business and life success, keep reading. I’ve got a few tools that you can use to better influence and generate greater performance for your entire team, including yourself.

Language informs our body language *and* shapes our thoughts, decisions, actions, and feelings.

Transforming your language is a powerful approach to shaping your thoughts, making powerful decisions, managing your time/energy, and increasing your ability to move others.

Wingspan’s Illegal Words™ is a list of words that we encourage our clients to remove from their vocabulary. One illegal word is *but*. Take a look in the mirror (or grab a willing team mate for this exercise) and notice your facial expression as you say the following the sentence out loud: “Suzi, you did a great job developing the product demo, but now let’s work on improving your delivery.”

Note that when you say the word *but*, your brow furrows, your face tightens or your eyes squint slightly, and you sometimes tilt your head to one side. The word and the body language send messages of negativity, contraction, limitation, devaluing, discounting. Even though these might be unintended messages, they are often seen that way and have a significant impact.

Now, say this modified version of the sentence out loud:

“Suzi, you did a great job developing the product demo. Now let’s focus on improving your delivery!”

While we have only removed the *but* from the sentence, the words and the non-verbal language in your face have changed a good deal. Your face is open, expansive, even excited.

This one small change in language can dramatically improve your interactions with others; efficiently getting your ideas or direction across to the receiver while enhancing your relationship with them.

Removing the Illegal Word *but* from your communication will also support you in elevating your personal leadership performance by fostering better decision making and energy management. For example, when we think to ourselves things like, “Yeah, the meeting went well, but I screwed up the story,” we are giving ourselves a half-way acknowledgement and it can even turn into beating ourselves up. Instead of seeing the progress and using it to build our energy, this pattern of language we use in our thoughts and self talk is a constant energy drain throughout the day. Consciously changing your language when you speak with others will help you change your language when you talk to yourself. Your self talk will become more uplifting and healthy because you will shift into thinking, “Yeah, the meeting went well, and next time I’ll get the story right too!”

Social psychologist, Amy Cuddy, shows in her research that our body language literally shapes our mind. When we demonstrate certain body language, it drives our physiology; our hormone levels. So, our verbal language influences our body language, which influences our hormone levels, which influence our confidence, thoughts, behaviors and thus...our performance and outcomes.

[Search “Amy Cuddy your body language” on Google and you’ll find a fantastic TEDx video that talks about this research and the findings.]

Language is a practical, tactical way to achieve stronger performance, from your self and others.

Often times we think that we must change our mind first, and then our actions, communication, and behavior will change. It actually works in both directions. When we make a commitment to remove certain words from our vocabulary, we have a practical, tactical way of knowing whether we’re progressing or not. It’s on the “outside” and other people are better able to support us with awareness and accountability. I have several clients that commit, as a team, to eliminate the Illegal Words™ from their vocabulary. They hold one another accountable and even implement structures like a quarter jar (you owe a quarter to the jar every time you use an Illegal Word.) It’s amazing to see how much progress they are able to make, how efficient and powerful their communication and interactions become with one another. They are often astonished that simply changing a few words in their language can be a game changer for their performance.

Language can cultivate and grow our relationships, and it can divide and dissolve our relationships

You will more quickly deepen the respect, trust and integrity in all of your relationships as you practice the Language of Self Leadership. Let’s go back to the Illegal Word *but*. Think about how many times you’ve gotten frustrated because of the way someone speaks with you. For many of us, the word *but* has become a trigger. I’ve noticed that with some individuals I don’t even listen to whatever comes before the *but* when he or she is talking with me. I simply listen for what comes after the *but* because that’s what they really want to say to me anyway. Do you find similar patterns with colleagues, friends or family? At the same time, we have unintentionally triggered others when we use the word *but*.

“I’m sorry, but...”

“Yes, that’s a good point, but...”

The word *but* can send the message that what the other person is saying has no value. Or that your apology is not sincere and you're going to tell me why your behavior is justified. The Illegal Words™ are “blockers” in our exchanges and in our relationships. They carry a great cost, including time, money, trust and respect.

All of us are in the business of moving others. Conscious communication can dramatically strengthen your business performance, your leadership performance and every relationship in your life. Now that's something to talk about!



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