

The Language of Leadership: Five Moves to More Powerful Presence

By Colin T. McLetchie, PCC BCPP

"Words are like eggs dropped from great heights; you can no more call them back than ignore the mess they leave when they fall." - Jodi Picoult

Language and words have power. We know this. We've known this ever since language was invented. As children, we learn how much power they have, especially to hurt. We teach children the old adage, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me" because we want to give them the ability to be resilient in the face of hurtful words. Leaders who become keenly aware of their use of language can enhance their presence and followership in powerful ways.

Realize for a moment that humans are the only creatures on our planet that use words to communicate. While other creatures have "language," they do not have the ability to use words to collaborate, to create their realities, to partner together to achieve goals and outcomes. It is unique to the human experience to use words and language – spoken and written – to conduct business, to communicate affection or derision, to experience the fullness of life. And ultimately, to build up or to tear down!

As leaders, this means we have a real responsibility to be conscious of our language and its impact. Susan Scott in "Fierce Conversations" talks about how our presence impacts the people we lead and with whom we interact. As she puts it, "An emotional wake is what you remember after I'm gone. What you feel - "the aftermath, aftertaste, or afterglow!" A big part of our leadership presence rests in the words we choose to convey meaning, to engage others, to communicate a vision and light passion in people's hearts and minds.

Of course, it's more than just our words that convey meaning and have impact. The tone, the volume, the emphasis, the context all play a role in how others interpret our meaning and experience us as people and leaders. Yet, words are the building blocks, the key ingredient. Paying attention to the words we choose can and will shift our leadership presence in meaningful ways. Here are a few things to try on.

"Without knowing the force of words, it is impossible to know more." – Confucius

1) But out; and in. "Yes, but" means "No." As soon as the word "but" appears, the speaker or writer has negated everything that came before it. During a recent leadership workshop I was facilitating, a participant told this story: "My boyfriend and I were struggling in our relationship and working to rebuild our connection. I came home one evening after a hard day at work, and he had set the table, lit the candles, had music playing, and had cooked an amazing meal for me. It was the sweetest thing, and as I sat down and took my first bite, I was simply astounded by the delicious food he had prepared for me. He'd never done this before, and out of my mouth comes, 'I'm sorry, honey, but this is the most amazing meal I've had in forever.' He never heard the second part. He heard the 'but' and I could see by his reaction that he thought he had failed. What I meant to be a wonderful compliment drove a huge wedge between us." Sometimes "but" can work for the good of course. When someone shares with us, "This was the hardest thing I've ever done, but I'm glad I did it," we can hear the positive outcome. And, many of us hear the "but" and never quite get past it. It leaves a residue behind. So why risk it? And isn't this more powerful and affirming: That was the hardest thing I've ever done, AND I'm glad I did it.

Try this: Replace "but" with "and" and see what happens. "And" allows both things to be true at the same time and minimizes the potential for a negative reaction to a word that is overused and fraught with harsh implications.

2) Questions are your best answers. Managers tell. Leaders inquire. In any given situation, you only have one chance to get the other person's perspective before it is tainted by yours. Once you share your thoughts, you have already influenced – for good or ill – what you might have heard had you taken the time to ask a good question. Steven Covey shares in his "7 Habits of Highly Effective People," the concept of

seek first to understand then be understood. Highly effective leaders put this to good use continually. Asking sincere, open questions invites the other person to share, to explore, to learn, and demonstrates your authentic desire to help them do these things.

Try this: Replace some of your periods and exclamation points with a question mark and see what happens. Create the space for the other person's unique voice and perspective and listen to what shows up.

3) Why ask "Why?" "Why not?" you're likely asking yourself now. In the next 30 seconds, see if you can remember the last time someone asked you why you did something or why you feel a certain way and you didn't feel on the defensive. I'd be willing to bet that you can quickly recall a time when you felt you had to justify yourself. No matter how carefully we ask "Why?" many people will hear this as parental and feel within themselves their inner child rearing up to defend and argue. Only the most carefully phrased "why" question posed to a really open listener with whom you have a trusting relationship will avoid this reaction – so why risk it? (How did you feel just then?)

Try this: Replace "why" with "what" or "how" and see what happens.

Questions that start with "what" or "how" invite the other person to engage in dialogue and exploration with you and can open up a world of possibilities that may well not show up if you ask, "Why." Particularly if you are more senior than the other person, that power dynamic will often be heard in your "why."

4) Of course you can, and will you? Strong leaders and managers know that coming to clear agreements is the key to success in business – and in life. When we ask someone if they can do something, we aren't getting their commitment to do it. We're simply inquiring about their ability to do it. This is a powerful distinction for leaders to put into good use.

Try this: Replace "can" with "will" and see what happens. Using "can" in place of "will" hedges the bet, so to speak. It's far less assertive and confirming. As leaders, we want to inspire and confirm commitment (and as parents, we often want the same thing: Will you, PLEASE, clean your room?). When someone says, "Yes, I will," you have achieved a level of commitment within them that "can" simply can't.

5) Silence is your best weapon. When implementing all of these, learn when not using words is the best response. Ask a good question and hush. Listen. Be present with the other person. Someone will fill the silence. If it's you, you've lost the opportunity to hear the other person's clearer perspective.

Try this: Let silence do the work. Ask a question and let it sit. And when the person responds, be fully present with what they say. There is power in words, and there is equal power in silence.

Changing our language isn't easy. We've created deep neural pathways with our words that are reinforced every time we speak those words. And our desire to fill silence is equally strong in many of us. Trying all of these on at once may be too much too soon. Pick one that you are most resistant to and one that might be easiest for you. Notice what you notice. Keep a "noticing" book handy and write down what you experience and observe in your use of language. Or send yourself emails. However you do it, you can look back over time to see how your use of language unfolds and to pay attention to the shifts that start occurring as you make these changes. Lead by example in using language to bring out the best in yourself and others.

As I always say, the future is simply history waiting to be written. Write well!
Initially published in HR.com's, "[Leadership Excellence Essentials](#)."