



## WHAT DO YOUR WORDS SAY?

WHEN WE REALLY FOCUS ON THE INTENTION AND THE POWER OF OUR WORDS, SOMETHING SPECIAL HAPPENS

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Words have saved my life and the lives of others on more than one occasion. As a hostage negotiator, words are the most essential thing you have to face a weapon. Words – whether a question or a statement – must be used skillfully and effectively.

The first time I was held hostage, a psychotic man ran towards me with a pair of scissors, which he forcefully placed at my throat. In that moment I had to choose to use words or call for force to be used against him. I used words and kept talking. I recall focusing on each word as it was, in truth, the difference between life and death. I chose my words with awareness to build a connection and to move the hostage taker's focus from despair to hope.

Using words effectively is what a high performance leader must do every day. Words are one of your greatest tools to lead. They are the key to building, maintaining and ending relationships with others. Used with skill, each word can contain a power and energy that shifts mindsets, opens dialogue, motivates, inspires other people and even yourself. Used ineffectively, words can demotivate, discourage, disengage, and, in extreme cases, make someone ill.

Our words are powerful. They carry our thoughts, our ideas, our feelings and our intentions. In fact, in Greek *logos* means both word and container. Words contain our state of being, both positive and negative. A high performing leader is aware that the brain of those listening to them is resonating with their state of being. This creates a greater connection and deeper bond.

Words, more often than not, flow from the tongue without awareness. They can become a habit – as automatic as driving a car. Many times talking is running on autopilot, a playback of hollow statements made without full awareness. The result is that others do not listen. Also, the leader may talk too much, not answer questions, over generalize or use other barriers to full exchange. The effect is that the listener tunes out and is unable to focus on the message.

When we really focus on the intention and the power of our words, something different happens. Self-awareness and self-regulation connects us with our feelings and inner world and to that of others. A clear understanding of what we want to convey with our words means that they are more likely to hit the “bull’s eye”. The listener feels connected to us and our intention and we to them. Psychologist James Lynch describes using words as “the sharing of thoughts, physical sensations, ideas, ideals, hopes and feelings”.

Without this awareness and self-regulation our words can be driven by anger, fear and negativity. By managing our emotional state our words are more likely to have the intended impact, whether positive or negative. In other words, do you say what you mean and do you mean what you say?

Our words have a deep connection to our physiology and biology. When, for example, the leader makes the other person feel important, that person's heart rate changes. This is what Russian physiologist Y. N. Sokolov referred to as the “cardiac-orienting reflux”. It is when two or more hearts resonate together by listening to each other. Studies he conducted showed that focusing one's attention on the external world in a non-defensive way caused the heart rate to slow down and move blood circulation in a positive way. Lynch referred to this outward focus as “look up, look out”. So asking questions, being interested, showing curiosity in others and listening are all good behaviours for our health as well as our effective leadership.

We are learning more about the effect of words on ourselves and others in the field of epigenetics, the science of turning genes on and off. According to Andrew Newberg, M.D. and Mark Robert Waldman, words can literally change your brain. In their book, *Words Can Change Your Brain*, they write: “a single word has the power to influence the expression of genes that regulate physical and emotional stress”. Positive words strengthen areas in the brain that promote cognitive functioning and, according to Newberg and Walman, stimulate the motivational centers of the brain. A single negative word can have an opposite effect, increasing the activity in our amygdala, the part of the brain that reacts to perceived danger and pain. When activated, our amygdala releases stress-producing hormones which make it hard to think, affecting both our own performance and the performance of others.

Recently I spent four days in a studio recording the audio version of my first book, *Hostage at the Table*. I had to give life to the written words and to connect to the listener with the spoken word – quite a challenge. I wanted to convey the meaning and to engage and inspire. I was struck by the enormous focus and engagement it required. I learned again how powerful words are in the way they are expressed. I was reminded of the shortest story attributed to Ernest Hemingway. In six words he connects powerfully to the reader. What is your reaction when you read these six words?

"For sale: baby shoes, never worn."

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*Kohlrieser is author of the award-winning bestseller Hostage at the Table: How Leaders Can Overcome Conflict, Influence Others and Raise Performance, which was released in audio version by talking book on 24 June 2016.*

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