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# Transformational Vocabulary: One Word Can Make All the Difference

Mitchell Stephenson

*"The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug."*

—Mark Twain

Tony Robbins is a motivational speaker who, according to his website, has empowered more than 50 million people from 100 countries through his audio, video and life-training programs. In the blog post "Change Your Words, Change Your Life," Robbins writes about what he calls transformational vocabulary. The idea of a transformational vocabulary is that by slightly changing your choice of key words when you communicate, you can significantly alter the outcome of the interactions with other people. "I've observed firsthand the power of changing just one key word in communicating with someone," he writes, "and noted how it instantly changes the way people feel—and how they behave."

The English language has nearly half a million words. Yet, people tend to use only about 2,000 of those words regularly, and only 200–300 habitually. Statistically, that is a very small portion of the overall language. Changing some of the words we use habitually can have a big impact on the quality of our interactions with other people. It can change our meaning from being unfriendly to encouraging, from confrontational to collaborative and from ineffective to influential. We must first be aware of the language we are using, and we must understand the impact certain words have on others. Once we do this, we can make changes in our choice of words and create better outcomes. As leadership expert Robin Sharma says, "Clarity precedes success."

An example from history highlights the impact of changing a few key words. When Abraham Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address in 1863, one of the most well-known speeches in U.S. history, he was trying to unite a divided country. In the 10-sentence speech, Lincoln never once used the words "I" or "you." Instead, he repeated "us" or "we" 14 times. Consider a familiar phrase from that speech: "Our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation." Imagine if Lincoln instead had started his oration by saying, "Four score and seven years ago, my fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation," and then went on to deliver the rest of his remarks in the first person! Lincoln may not have accomplished his goal of delivering such a unifying address, and school students today might not still recite the words he spoke over 150 years ago at Gettysburg.

Here are some examples of how changing a single word can have a big impact on your interactions with others.

- **Say “yes, and,” instead of “yes, but.”** At Prudential Financial’s 2017 Actuarial Day of Learning, psychologist Gary Bradt explained that when we respond to someone by starting out our comments with “yes, but,” we may put them on the defensive. For example, if your boss previously wanted a report from you in one week, and now she wants it in three days, you may choose to say, “yes, but if I do that, I’ll need to work late for three days in a row and miss my kid’s soccer practice.” This response may make her feel defensive and she may double down on her request. Instead, if you instead say, “yes, and if I do that, I won’t be able to complete xyz assignments for clients abc, and that may affect our relationship with them. Which is more important to you?” This response creates more of a partnership, by implying that you’ve thoughtfully considered the request, and that will help your boss to understand the true implications of what she is asking.

- **Don’t say “just,” especially when you are asking someone for something.** According to a blog post by career coach Ellen Petry Leanse, using the word “just” is akin to asking someone for permission. You may be inclined to call someone and say, “I’m just following up to see if you’ve had a chance to complete the report I asked you for. I noticed it’s due today, and I’m just curious as to whether it’s complete so I can forward it on.” Instead say, “I’m following up on the report I asked you for. It’s due today and I need to send it on to compliance. Please provide it at your earliest possible convenience.” Leanse writes that using the word “just” is equivalent to a “shy knock on a door before asking, ‘Can I get something I need from you?’” By eliminating the word “just,” especially when we’re asking someone for something that we need from him or her, we appear more authoritative, less uncertain and more confident in ourselves.

- **Avoid using the word “how,” especially when it comes to asking for feedback.** Many of us are conditioned to answer questions that begin with the word “how” in a specific way. For example, if someone asks, “How are you?” we commonly answer with “Good. How are you?” or something similar. The same is often true when we ask for feedback. If you ask someone, “How did I do?” or “How did that go?” people will often respond with “Good” or “Fine.” Instead, you can say, “What is one thing I should keep on doing, and one thing that I should do differently?” People are more likely to respond to these kinds of questions with specific information, providing you with valuable feedback that you can use to improve in the future.

Tapping into the power of transformational vocabulary is up to you. “By changing your habitual vocabulary,” Robbins writes, “you can instantaneously change how you think, how you feel, and how you live.” If we remember to change a few key words in our own vocabulary, we can profoundly alter our interactions with other people. These simple choices will increase the value of the communications we have with others. As Robin Sharma says, “Words can inspire. And words can destroy. Choose yours well.”

Mitchell Stephenson, FSA, MAAA, is the chair of the SOA Leadership & Development section. He can be reached at [mitchell.stephenson@prudential.com](mailto:mitchell.stephenson@prudential.com).

