

Words Matters- Much Much More Than We Think

But I Didn't Mean It That Way...

I've got some examples of things I have heard leaders, managers and supervisors say in the name encouragement and motivation, and I would like you to imagine being in the room when they are said. I'm interested in what impact you think they would have on you. Would they motivate you, and if so, to do what?

The Power Shift

My first example is when I was in a senior leadership meeting and the CEO stood up and clearly asked, "I would like anyone who doesn't believe that we can prevent all incidents to stand up now". Of course, no one stood up.

The Ethical Dilemma

The second example was at a leadership off site, and the Project Manager running the session made it very clear that this one particular project was very important to the business and so they expected everyone to do "whatever it takes" to hit the milestones. There was lots of nodding and general agreement within the room.

The Shut Down

Thirdly, I was hanging around during a toolbox talk being run by a supervisor. They were talking about work for the day, and it was something they crew did occasionally, but not often. At the end of the talk they asked, "OK crew, this is all pretty much common sense, any questions?". There were no questions.

The Secret Password

Finally, I was walking past a small work group towards the end of the shift when I heard the leading hand encouraging their work group with a, "Right guys, let's get moving, we have to get this job done before the end of the day." There were a few glances shared amongst the group and they got on with it.

So do those questions/ statements have an influence on the people in the audience? Would the influence be now, in the future, or both? Is there a chance the influence could different from what was intended?

Unintended Consequences

Language is never neutral, and so even though a leader may say one thing, there can be unintended impacts somewhere else. This is because language has the ability to prime decision making. People take cues from what they hear, and then this influences that way they think.

Let's look at the examples and see if we can see it.

- **The Power Shift-** While this statement/ question from the CEO is probably meant to demonstrate how seriously they are committed to safety, what it also does is take power (to speak up and express doubt or dissent) away from the individuals in the group. It would be a very brave person who stands up in that group, and so that gets carried into the rest of the organizational culture. A consequence of this is that the CEO won't get told about things they should because people are not empowered to speak up.
- **The Ethical Dilemma-** Generally, I see this language used as a way of suggesting the group should always give 100%, or accept no excuses. Of course, what it also does is prime decision making at critical times. When faced with a decision between following the rules, and doing "whatever it takes", some people might choose "whatever it takes". I'm not saying all will, but the language primes this option because our brain thinks that "whatever it takes" may actually mean that. Rather than, whatever it takes, but follow the rules.
- **The Shut Down-** So the seemingly innocent concept that we all know what we are doing (it's common sense), not means that if someone doesn't know they are very unlikely to put their hand up. Especially because a lack of "common sense" is seen as a bad thing (it has a negative affect). So despite the "any questions?", these words, when strung together, discourage questioning because individuals don't want to look foolish.
- **The Secret Password-** Is this just a gentle hurry up, or is it the green light to cut corners? I'm pretty sure the leading hand didn't mean "get hurt", but the language primes decision making. It influences how people think, and the result in this case is that the group may decide to ignore some rules to get the job done.

Language Is The Currency Of Culture and Leadership

It's hard to convey how important language is in terms of influencing the way people think, and yet how much we don't realise it is. Leaders think their language is simply what they say, not what people make it mean. They underestimate the ability of key words to prime decisions (now and in the future) and move power around (often towards leaders and therefore disempowering the workforce).

The good news is that it works both ways. Because language is like the currency of culture and leadership, changing the language can change the culture.

Would these type of statements have a different impact?

- I'm pretty sure safety is important to all of us, but I'm really interested in what it means to you.
- This project (job/task) is really important, so if we are going to put some extra effort in I just want to talk about what I'm OK compromising on, and what I'm not.

- I know we have done this job before, but let's just talk through a few parts of it before we kick off to make sure we are all on the same page.

Final Word

Try listening to the language of your organisation. For me, when I go into an organisation for the first time, the language (verbal and print) is a huge indicator of culture. Have a think about what words you think are important for safety and see if they are used. Does your organisation use the language of learning, teamwork, communication and support, or is it more accountability, compliance and enforcement?

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