



## Watch Your Language!

by Grace L. Judson

The language you use every day — your word choice, sequence, and tone — plays a more critical role in how you're perceived than you may imagine. How you respond to a question, a compliment, even a comment on the weather, affects what subtle yet very powerful ways.

Let's look at three examples, including some simple changes you can make to have the most positive impact on your career and your relationships.

### 1. **Yes, thanks, that *was* a good job**

How you respond to a compliment influences people's perception of your confidence and ability (or lack thereof).

Like most people, you've probably found that compliments are harder to accept than criticism. From early childhood, you were almost certainly taught to *ask* for feedback (a.k.a. criticism) and to be *modest about* (i.e., discourage) compliments.

When you do the "aw, shucks, it weren't nuthin'" shuffle, brushing the compliment off with embarrassment or downplaying your accomplishment, people *believe* you. Believing your response, they overlook the hours of overtime put in by your team, the expertise and skill that were required, and the polish you put on the finished result.

On the other hand, if you adopt a superior stance by taking all the credit for a team effort or claiming that only you out of all the people in the organization could possibly have pulled it off, you'll be written off as arrogant and dangerously independent (*not* a team player).

Instead, practice a middle-ground approach, preferably by role-playing with a friend outside the office. Get comfortable with language that asserts your confidence and competence without false pride or arrogance. "Yes, thanks, my team and I did a really terrific job!" is a great response. "Thank you — I appreciate your recognizing the effort it took to get that done well," is another.

When someone compliments you personally, consider asking for more detailed feedback. A compliment can feel uncomfortable because it often implies judgement — positive judgement, to be sure, but judgement nonetheless. "You're a great facilitator," is a judgement that inevitably causes comparison in your mind to all the facilitators you know who are better than you are, creating instant disbelief and discomfort.

Thank the speaker and ask, "What about my facilitation really worked for you?" This draws out specific comments ("I like how you make sure everyone gets equal time") that are actually useful to you in developing your facilitation skills.

### 2. **Accentuate the Positive**

Have you noticed that people complain in habitual ways? They use the same words to describe all the things they're not happy about. One person might call anyone he disagrees with a "schmoozing backstabber." Someone else might say any disappointing event — whether in the past or anticipated — was a "disaster."

Did it occur to you that your complaining habits are just as obvious to others as theirs are to you?

Management views complainers as losers. Therefore, complainers never get the best projects and are consistently passed over for promotion. You may not be an out-and-out complainer, but you almost certainly have typical complaining habits and hot-button circumstances that trigger those habits.

Pay attention for a few days to identify your habit. What triggers your complaints and what words do you typically use? (If you can't figure it out, enlist the help of a trusted friend.)

Then pick more positive ways of expressing yourself. If positive replacements feel too artificial, try a factual way of describing the person or situation, without any emotional load.

The "schmoozing backstabber" might be "politically savvy," or could just be "Joe." That "disastrous project" might be "unfortunately delayed because of new requirements," or just "the printer upgrade project."

Save your complaining and venting for friends, spouses, and partners *outside* the office. Your career will thank you for it.

### 3. **Choose Want instead of Need**

Take a few days or a week to experiment with what happens when you use "want" instead of "need," "should," "gotta," "have to," and "must."

"I want to leave for work now."

"I want to finish this report by the end of the day."

"I want to go to the staff meeting."

If this feels awkward, especially if you feel as if you're lying to yourself, add on the reason *why* you want to do these things.

"I want to leave for work now because I have a better day when I'm at the office on time."

"I want to finish this report by the end of the day because my boss needs it first thing in the morning."

"I want to go to the staff meeting because when I don't go, my team-mates say sarcastic things about my priorities and my boss gets mad."

You may find it such a pleasant way of looking at the world that you adopt "want" as your word of choice in every possible situation. In fact, I have a good friend who creates "want to do" lists instead of "to do" lists. She finds it significantly more motivating!

How can you adjust your language to have a positive effect on how you're perceived — and on your career? Drop me a line and let me know!

*"Language exerts hidden power, like a moon on the tides."  
Rita Mae Brown, 1944 - , American author, screenwriter, and activist.*

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