

“The Negative Power of Negative Language”

Among the most predictable and persistent mistakes communicators make in service to their clients is the casual use of negative words and phrases. Whatever your position, whatever the situation, whatever the outcome desired, if moving ahead is the desired action, hope or motive, it is positive language and direction that will get you there.

If confusion, consternation, contention and conflict are your goal, by all means use negative language. The two most famous negative statements, around the world, even today, from two generations ago “I am not a crook” and “I did not have sex with that woman” remain symbols of the impact of negative language.

On the other hand, Clint Eastwood in the first Dirty Harry movie, had a suspect on the ground, pointed his 57 Magnum pistol at him and said, “Make my day.” The question is would we have even remembered Dirty Harry if, in the same situation, the script had read “Don’t move.” Recently I participated in a discussion on LinkedIn where the author listed “11 Don’ts in Crisis.” She also listed a dozen “Do’s.” The problem is that the emotional power of negative language and instructions is so strong that whenever negative responses or instructions are given, even if constructive “Do’s” are also given, what gets discussed, what gets worried about, what ironically tends to happen? Yes...it’s the “Don’ts”!

Negative language has 9 powerfully destructive permanent attributes:

- 1. Negative language is non-communication.** If you don’t like something, can’t understand something, don’t want to do something, the listener, employee, or leader is at a loss to understand what you’re talking about.
- 2. Negative language is confusing.** If you say “I wouldn’t do it that way”, “I don’t disagree”, “I can’t speak for them,” “It won’t fly,” what do these statements mean and how does one take action as a result of them?

3. **Negative language is destructive.** If you say “You’re wrong about that,” “This is not the way to reach your objective,” “It’s not in the budget,” “That’s not true,” the negative power of these negative words shows through and the difficulty presented responding in some useful, positive way. Comments like these are remembered far more readily than anything positive that might have been said in the preceding or succeeding conversation.
4. **Negative language is sticky.**
5. **Negative language is heavy and damaging.** Using phrases like, “That’s not our style,” “No one believes you,” “That’s a lie,” in conversation, instructions, or explanations are 3-5 times more memorable than the equivalent positive instruction. The difference is that negative language stops everything from happening. Shorter, more positive language gets things moving. The impact here is that for every negative phrase you use that affects someone directly, it must be replaced by 4 or 5 times as many positives just to repair the damage.

6. **Negative responses always overshadow positives**
7. **Negatives can permanently victimize**
8. **Disparaging others or “them” triggers the “get even” from response from “Them”**
9. **Insults accumulate and are remember forever**

In my course for new CEOs called “The Ingredients of Leadership”, the first ingredient is to be positive, that is, to eradicate the use of negative phrases and language in everything that the leader does. Every negative phrase triggers the five bad attributes of negative language mentioned above. Positive language has the opposite or completely neutral effect. Here is the translation of all of the negatives used in the article into positives. Keep in mind, that while I show only one positive alternative here for space reasons, there are at least 4-6 other positive ways to say the same things and achieve a far different, constructive result.

<u>Negative</u>	<u>Positive</u>
“I can’t speak for them”	What I can say is
“I don’t disagree”	I agree
“I wouldn’t do it that way”	Here’s what I suggest
“It’s not in the budget”	The budget is completely allocated right now
“It won’t fly”	Think of something els
“No one believes you”	What d you want people to believe?
“That’s a lie”	Here’s what’s true
“That’s not our style”	We stand for other things such as . . .
“That’s not true”	Here’s what’s true
“This is not the way to reach your objective”	There are ways to reach your objective.
“You’re wrong about that”	My view is different

Remember, there are really only 3 ways to express any idea, concept, or question: positively, negatively, or blah-blah-blah. I always, even with attorneys, prefer positive and blah to anything negative. From a leadership perspective, the people of tomorrow use positive, declarative, and constructive language. The people from yesterday, who want to move backwards, almost always use negative approaches, images, and mandates.