

The Leadership Guide To Choosing The Right Words

In a Forbes blog post on Leadership, Jeff Boss, an executive coach, author and former Navy SEAL cites a WSJ article detailing a match.com poll of 5,000 singles where they asked them what they considered the number one unattractive quality in a potential partner's profile. Next to hygiene, the most frequent response was poor grammar.

Boss asks: Why is this important? His answer: it's a reflection of character. The words you choose and how you employ them determine how you're received—positively, negatively, influentially. While this has powerful implications for leaders, Boss suggests that it really applies to all of us.

To ensure your message resonates, he offers this leadership guide to choosing the right words.

Avoid using contractions. Words such as “can’t,” “won’t,” “shouldn’t” are all based off a negative. For instance, replace the statement, “we can’t hit these numbers without...” with, “We can hit these numbers *when*...” Also, notice the avoidance of “if” in the latter sentence. “We can hit these numbers *if*...” would connote the possibility of failure or choice, but *when* indicates the expectation to execute and fulfill.

Replace “try” with “do.” In the words of Yoda, “do or do not. There is no try.” Let me ask this: do you say to your spouse or child, “I love you” or “I’m going to *try* to love you?” Hopefully it’s the former. Words like “try,” “want” (i.e. “I *want* to...[insert ‘but’ here]”) connote a lack of commitment, of uncertainty.

Use words that influence. Using words such as “just,” “kind of,” “sort of,” “a little,” “maybe,” “I think,” and “some” all have less impact than their assertive counterparts, so replace “I think” with “I believe.” Again, do or do not, there is no try.

Communicate choice rather than compulsion. The phrase “I *have* to...” conveys a lack of personal choice, as if an external influence is forcing you to do something. The same goes for “I *need* to.” Remember, people choose their leaders because something that leader did inspired them, such as a belief, value or behavior. Choice indicates confidence and purpose. Replace “I have to” with “I want to” or “I will” if you want to sound more assertive.

Avoid “probably” at all costs. There’s nothing worse than a leader who is unsure of him or herself but afraid to admit it. *Probably* infers just that—a 50% chance of success and a 50% chance of failure. Does that make any sense? It shouldn’t. If you’re unsure of something is the best thing to do just say so. Honesty and transparency go a long way. Remember, the best way to build trust is to begin trusting.

Choose common words. Choose words that an eighth grader would understand for two reasons. First, it humanizes you. Excessively long or uncommon words communicate one thing: “I’m smarter than you and I’m going to use smart words to prove it.” Second, insecurity is easily discernible through vocabulary, and smart people see right through “big words.” There’s no need to use a \$50 word when a dollar will suffice. An extensive vocabulary is important, but be mindful of when, where, why and with whom you employ the big ones.