

## The Power of Words

In some indigenous traditions, it is said that if something appears three times, it is important and merits special attention. When historical wisdom manifests I try to take special note. The following recently appeared in my work three times within a month.

The phenomenon has to do with the power of words. The concept is one of those things that most realize, but rarely discuss.

The events cited above centered on the power that statements made by top managers have on people who work for them. Top managers are aware that their words tend to carry more weight than others', but may not always use that awareness to guide their choice of what they say and to whom they say it.

The impact of statements by top managers is a result of:

- a) the executive not always being sensitive to the extraordinary power of his or her spoken words and
- b) the listener—in this case a subordinate—taking something literally or giving the statement an intention or meaning different from what the manager intended.

In (a) the question is the extent to which the manager is aware of his or her potential power and uses that awareness to guide what is said.

What about (b)—the listener?

Managers may be less likely to consider the listener's role in impact of their statements.

It may seem obvious to say that "all listeners are not the same," but consider the power of acting as though they were the all the same!

Specifically, I'm thinking about one of the ways how individuals process information. Neurolinguistic psychologists tell us that what we refer to as *motivational and attitudinal patterns* perform three functions:

1. they filter the data we are sensing;
2. they translate or code the data not filtered in a form that makes sense to us; and
3. they connect the resulting information to our database or experience to provide meaning.

Two of these patterns give an indication of how we process information related to decision making. One pattern is an indication of how much we want to make our own decisions. The other pattern indicates how much we want input and/or direction from others.

When I first encountered these notions in the work of Shelle Rose Charvet (*Words That Change Minds*), she summarized one difference between *Internals* (want to make their own decisions) and *Externals* (want input from others). My notes from Shelle's training said:

"Internals may take orders as suggestions. Externals may take suggestions as orders."

This sheds additional light on the potential impact of executives' statements on subordinates. Based on Shelle's proposition and how these MAPs work, a statement to an internal decision maker might have a very different impact than the same statement made to an externally oriented individual.

## **A Real-Life Example**

This principle came to light in our business some years ago. Ideas I had would suddenly appear as a completed project on my desk. Since I traveled every week and did not have a lot of contact with the staff, after this happened a second or third time, I asked about it in a staff meeting.

It turns out that the projects were completed by our graduate intern. Further, our intern, who had completed an assessment called the *Inventory for Work Attitude and Motivation* (iWAM) which measures your MAPs, had a weak Internal pattern and a very strong External pattern.

In the meeting when I asked why she had done these projects, her response was something like, "Because you asked me to." I was throwing out ideas bouncing around in my head; she took the ideas as a "to do" list. We managed the situation by reviewing the to-do lists before I left town.

## **So What?**

Here are two ideas to consider:

1. Executives might want to consider the potential impact of their words before making casual or informal work-related comments to people who work for them. What you say is not like the idle chatter at the coffee machine.
2. It would help to be aware that your words may have very different impacts on someone who is very internal versus someone who is strongly external. The power of your words could vary with the audience.

Nothing involving human beings is simple or easy to predict. We can, however, move closer to getting the outcomes we desire if we can pay attention to some of the factors that have a powerful impact on our communication.

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