

You “Should” “Just” Do It

Anyone who has read my book, *“Appreciate The Fog: Embrace Change with Power and Purpose”*, will be aware that I believe the words we choose can be empowering or dis-empowering. “Should” is a strongly coercive word, and whether instructing someone else, or directing it at ourselves, it has the effect of removing choice. It dictates the path that must be followed with a veiled threat if not performed as required. It is a word often associated with shame. A manager speaking to a subordinate with “should” is edging on, if not already immersed in, micromanaging. “Should” stifles creativity and spontaneity, establishes expectation, and those hearing that word argue with the predetermined at their peril. “Should” requires us to park our intelligence at the door and follow the prescribed path, irrespective of how unproductive, futile or irrelevant the instruction seems to us. Replacing “should” with “could” opens the possibility for new ideas, innovation, testing and challenging of the status quo, or of the proposed request, and allows a degree of freedom that is unavailable with “should”. Such a small change in word can lead to a significant shift in meaning.

The adverb “just”, another word I frequently hear myself using, is similarly problematic. Meaning “exactly, precisely; actually; closely, close”, “just” can be used to box or contain ideas and expression. Often when we



“Just”: This and Only This

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Abstract

Words can empower, and they can dis-empower. The restrictive impact of two particular words (“should” and “just”) are explored and the brains positive response to changing phraseology.

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use “just” we don’t mean it. The effect is to suggest precision in what we are saying and that only what is being proposed or stated is the case. “Just” impedes us from engaging in a deep and meaningful manner. Stevie Wonder’s song “I Just Called to Say I Love You”, a song I love hearing, is a classic example. If he truly just called to say “I love you”, he would hang up as soon as he said it. Preposterous, but that is what the line means. Read the rest of the song. There is so much more he wishes to convey. If the song was “I Called to Say I Love You”, there is no similar exactness, and it “unjustifiably” allows more to be said. Using “just” in this way creates an emotional escape hatch, putting an artificial limit on the conversation. While we may say more, “just” signals that what is coming is all there is. “Phew! I said that. Now I may say something more.” It is highly habituated in everyday use. I hear myself using it and cringe, and then ask myself “What am I afraid of? If I were to fully express myself here and now, what would I say?” That has the effect of connecting me with what is going on within me, and freeing me up to be more fully present and authentic in expressing myself. That, I find, is highly productive to the relationship I am in at that moment.

A related favourite is “I just wanted to say...” That may be followed by “I love you”, “I cherish our friendship”, “I find you incredibly annoying” or any number of possibilities. In using “wanted to” the sentiment has not actually been delivered, only the suggestion it is there to be said. It is a safety mechanism used to test the waters without fully committing to the statement. I have been known to respond with: “Are you going to actually say that to me?” The common response is a somewhat startled or perplexed expression. Recognition of what was said and its meaning often leads to a cognitive shift, with a fresh statement being uttered that is more fully aligned with their real intent. Such a shift often relates to what is referred to as an “ah ha” moment.

And then words like “always” and “never” are absolutes that are rarely the real truth in terms of how we use them. “It always rains on my day off.” That may feel true sometimes when weather is inclement for several weekends in a row, but it isn’t actually true. Such absolutes are may be used to artificially end debate or to express a global belief that the speaker holds. Usage often highlights a black and white, on or off, blinkered view of the subject, where colour or shades of grey are not recognised or acknowledged. The effect is to contain the dialogue, dismiss uncertainty, and to ensure distance from feeling, opinion and connection.

I am not suggesting that every use of these words is wrong. Rather I am offering that what we say, including the specific words we choose, can have significant and unexpected consequences in our communications. Taking time to reflect on the message we wish to convey and ensuring our words, tones and gestures are aligned and support our intent can assist us be clear about what matters to us, and reduce the risk that we gloss over something important. “I just called because I wanted to say I love you”. “I just called to say I love you”. “I called to say I love you.” “I love you.” If your significant other was on the phone speaking to you, assuming love is part of the expression of your relationship, which of those phrases would you prefer to hear?

Our brain does hear what we say, and does pick up on the nuances, even if we don’t consciously recognise them ourselves. Coercive or constraining language does impact our performance, our experience, our attitude, and the meaning we make and take from our experiences. As we choose language that is more fully aligned with our intentions, our capacity to realise the results we seek increases. As a coach one of the areas I attune to are the words and messages of the coachee, and whether their thoughts, feelings and actions are aligned with their declared aspirations. Take some time to check on what you are communicating and if it is “just as it should be.”

For more information related to themes in this article, refer to chapter 5 (Survive Reactions) of: Harrison, S. G. (2012). [Appreciate the Fog: Embrace Change with Power and Purpose](#). Auckland, New Zealand: Xlibris Corporation.

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