

The Motivational Power of Five Small Words

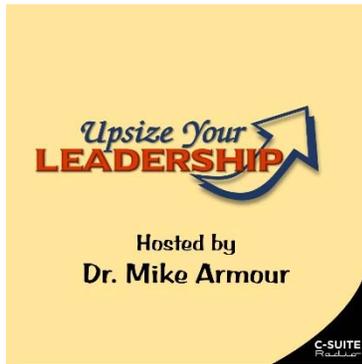
Never Underestimate their Impact

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Episode UYL1910

Podcast Date: July 9, 2019

Small things often make a big difference. For a sprinter, tenths of a second can make the difference between winning a medal or finishing back in the pack. For a driver, one small nail can immobilize a giant SUV.



With words, too, small things can make a big difference. Words inspire us. Words discourage us. Words renew our resolve. Words are the leader's primary tool for motivating his or her people.

Today we're going to look at five small words which have a telling impact on our ability to motivate. As a wise leader, you always want to choose your words thoughtfully. And the way that you use these five small words can make a profound difference in your effectiveness as a motivator. I will show you how in today's program. Over the next fifteen minutes you will learn some simple, but powerful ways to use language in order to Upsize Your Leadership.

In my role as a leadership coach, I've had the distinct privilege of meeting thousands of managers. Many of them were widely respected by their people. Others were highly admired. And a few were even loved by those they led.

Of those managers who were truly loved, one stands out above all others. He was responsible for a rather sizable team in a Fortune 100 company. Almost 200 people reported to him. Because of the nature of his team's work, security was quite high.

So when I showed up at his team's offices for the first time, I was given a security escort to be with me through the entire day. I knew very little about the manager. We had never met before. And we had arranged the visit through a single phone call and a series of email exchanges.

My escort took me to a large conference room, where we were joined minutes later by the manager and a dozen of his direct reports. What followed was an invigorating exchange for nearly two hours about a strategic initiative which they were putting together. The conversation was highly collaborative, so that everyone had a chance to make substantive comments.

As the meeting continued, the manager would pause the conversation momentarily to offer me some helpful background on the topic being discussed. On other occasions he would break in to

commend someone's contribution. And routinely he would ask people to expand on their comments and provide additional details about their idea.

As I watched the exchanges between him and his people, the non-verbal messages were powerful and arresting. From the outset of the meeting, there was no missing their towering respect for his expertise. After all, he had written some of the most important books in his field. Rather soon, however, it became apparent that the people around that table not only respected him. They felt a genuine affection for him. Not only did they like him, they clearly loved him.

Late in the morning we took a 15-minute break, which left me alone with my security escort. As we visited, I said, "I'm quite impressed with the strong affection between this group and your manager. Am I misreading what I'm seeing?"

"Not at all," she said. "Our people truly love him and we all love working with him."

"What's the secret for that," I asked. She answered immediately, without even a pause to consider my question. And what she said emphasized the telling difference which small words can make.

"You've been with him for over two hours this morning," she began. "In all of that time, how often have you heard him use a first-person singular pronoun?" Strikingly, I could not immediately think of even one instance.

She went on. "It's as though the words 'I,' 'my,' and 'mine' don't exist in his vocabulary. It's always 'we,' 'ours,' and 'us.' He never talks about 'my goals' or 'the company's goals.' It's always about 'our goals.' It's never 'my team,' but 'our team.' He gives everyone a sense of ownership."

"Not only that," she added, "he gives us ownership in success. Because our work here is so pivotal, upper management often singles him out for some honor or special recognition. If the award involves any type of ceremony, he agrees to show up only on one condition. Key contributors from his team must be allowed to stand beside him at the ceremony. He makes it the team's recognition, not just his."

Although she went on to describe a number of other ways in which the manager built an impressive team spirit, I was struck that the first thing which came to her mind was his choice of pronouns. His leadership was never "me-centered," but always "us-centered." He had worked so diligently on speaking in the first-person plural that the words "I," "my," and "mine" rarely fell from his lips.

Since that time, I've had abundant opportunities to observe how much stronger morale is when managers routinely speak of "we" and "us" rather than "I" and "me." Therefore, the first of the five powerful words I want to stress today is "we" instead of "I." And when I say that, I'm also implying that "our" and "ours" needs to replace "my," and that "us" should replace "me."

Most of us are so ego-centric in how we speak that this shift in vocabulary won't occur naturally. We will have to work on it, until it becomes habitual. But in terms of building a bond between managers and those whom they manage, it's a small change which makes a huge difference.

The second word for us to consider today is the little conjunction "but." Some linguists describe "but" as the most powerful word in the English language. That's because it has the power to

negate everything said before it. For instance, what if I were to say, “I had planned to offer a \$50 gift card to every new subscriber to my podcast, but . . .” It really does not matter what I say next. Once the word “but” comes from my lips, you know that there will be no gift cards.

Now think of what happens in the mind of a worker to whom you say, “You are doing a really great job, but . . .” The first part of your statement leaves the worker feeling affirmed. However, with the word “but,” the sense of affirmation starts giving way to a feeling of uncertainty. “Perhaps I’ve not been doing such a great job after all,” the worker thinks.

Simultaneously, the worker braces for the criticism which he or she expects to hear next. And as the mind begins to anticipate the criticism, the good feeling which came from the statement “you are doing a really good job” erodes even more. In all likelihood, the worker’s state of mind now takes on an air of defensiveness, which also takes its toll on the feeling of affirmation.

Yet many job and performance reviews are conducted linguistically in this very fashion. We begin the review with words of commendation. We then follow with the word “but,” which marks the transition from commendation to an outline of desired improvements. No matter how genuine and well-intended our commendation, its positive impact is largely diluted once we say the word “but.”

The key, therefore, is to transition from commendation to an outline of needed improvements without using the word “but.” How can we do that? By drawing on another powerful small word, one which we already utter more often than we say “but.” The word is “and.”

Grammatically, “but” and “and” are conjunctions, meaning that they define the relationship between two parts of a statement. The word “but,” however, pushes the two parts away from one another, the word “and” pulls them closer together.

When we say, “You are doing a really great job, but . . .”, we push the language of commendation (and the good feeling which comes from it) away from whatever follows the “but.” You can sense this for yourself if you notice how differently you react internally to these two statements. First, “you are doing a really great job, but here are some ways you can improve.” Now the second statement: “you are doing a really great job, and here are some ways you can improve.”

Did the second statement feel less threatening to you? Less adversarial? For most people, it does. And because it seems less adversarial, it does not trigger as much defensiveness. Yet, this was all accomplished by merely substituting “and” for “but.”

So “and” is the third powerful word which we want to use more artfully in efforts to motivate. Now let’s give some additional clout to “and” by joining it with one small phrase. This phrase consists of two small words which together are latent with power. It’s the phrase, “even better.”

To illustrate, let’s revisit our earlier statement taken from a performance review. Let’s modify the statement slightly. Let’s say, “You are doing a really great job, and here are some ways to make it even better.”

The phrase “even better” implies that your performance is already good. Earlier we were concerned that the second half of our statement – the one which transitioned with the word “but” – invited the question, “Is my performance really all that great?” With the addition of “even

better,” we preclude that question altogether. The second half of our statement now reinforces the affirmation in the first half of it.

“Even better” is also a powerful phrase even in instances where a worker has performed at a sub-par level. In this instance, we may not be in a position to begin with a strong commendation of the worker’s performance. Our entire review may be centered on needed improvements. This feedback will be better received if we say, “Let me offer you some suggestions on how your performance could be even better.”

Neurologically, this wording lowers the worker’s defensiveness. We are not telling the worker that he or she is doing a stellar job or even a good job. But no matter how bad a performance is, it can always be improved. It can always be made better. We are not being hypocritical, therefore, in using the phrase “even better” to bring out the best in people, whatever their level of performance.

Years ago, I coached a regional vice-president for a large, national company. Although he was personally a very kind and caring person, he often came across to his employees as firm and exacting. This was especially true in his performance reviews.

I urged him to adopt the “even better” technique. And he began to use it with some regularity. A few years later, after he was promoted to Chief Operating Officer, he engaged me to coach him again. In our first session, I asked, “What has been the greatest difference in your performance as a result of the work which we did together before?” His answer surprised me, because our first engagement had encompassed a broad array of topics.

“The one thing which has done more for my career than anything else,” he said, “was making a habit of using that phrase ‘even better.’ It has made a profound difference in my dealing with people.” I hope that his endorsement of the phrase will encourage you to incorporate it into your leadership language.

In our examples today we have focused exclusively on the language of performance reviews. But the artful use of “and” and “even better” will serve you well in a host of communication settings. I find myself using them several times a day, sometimes in marketing conversations. Sometimes in transactions at a retail store. Sometimes in interactions with my children and grandchildren. It’s amazing how much more open people are to your thoughts when you couch your suggestions in the language of “even better.”

These five words, then, are words with exceptional motivational power when used in just the right way: the words “we,” “but,” “and,” and the two-word phrase “even better.” Given what we have said about the word “but,” it might seem surprising that I include it in a list of terms with motivational power. In the contexts which we’ve described, it was demotivational, not motivational.

Yet, what makes “but” demotivational in one context can make it highly motivational in another one. Remember that the word “but” negates everything which went before it. And sometimes we need to use that negating power to our advantage.

A very distinguished professor once told about what turned his life around in terms of scholarly pursuits. In elementary school he developed an early reputation as being rowdy, unruly, and inattentive to his teachers. He ended up being at war with his teachers and with school itself.

That changed in the fifth grade. The moment of transformation came when he met his fifth-grade teacher for the first time. When he told her his name, she said, “Oh, yes. I’ve heard about you.” Then she paused, looked him straight in the eye, and said, “But I don’t believe a word of it.” And she said it with such genuineness that he knew that his past would not be held against him, as had been the case with previous teachers.

Thus, there are moments when even the word “but” is the motivational word of choice. A little word, but like the other little words which we have considered, a word with tremendous motivational impact.

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