

Leaders: Be on the lookout for sugar-coated phrases

By Rick Maier

In an effort to be nice, we often say things that aren't exactly what we mean. Over the years I've kept a list of certain words and phrases that people say when there are issues lingering beneath the surface that need attention.

These are some of the workplace phrases that deserve closer study:

"I don't mean to be disrespectful (or insert any other unpleasant reaction such as "to be disagreeable" or "to complain"), but..." Whatever comes out next is exactly what the person said they didn't mean to be.

"No problem," as said by someone serving a customer. Almost always well intended, but it indicates that whatever the customer was asking for (like more tea in a restaurant) was going to be a problem, but the worker did the customer a big favor and took care of it.

"They..." The use of "they" sometimes indicates distance or tension. As a leader, you are one of "them". See if you can't convert "they" to "we".

"You..." Using the second person singular can be bossy or confrontational, as in "What you need to do is..." Say things from an "I" position as "What I would do is..." And avoid telling people what they "need" to do.

"Thank goodness it's Friday." Usually just conversation, but it says that you don't enjoy your work. I feel sorry for people who watch the clock (or the days of the week). Try this: "I'm really looking forward to taking the kids camping this Saturday".

"I don't have time." You have time, you just choose to spend it on something other than what I'm asking about. If what I am requesting isn't a priority for you, just say so.

"We've always done it this way." Alarms and sirens should go off when these words are spoken. Call the person "Hem" and hand them a copy of the must-read book *Who Moved My Cheese*.

"I did the best I could." Unless you're under 10 years old or brand new to your position, it's more important to address results and consequences.

"Why bother?" "That's not my job." "What's the use?" The end is near for people who mutter phrases like these.

"But..." Whenever someone says "but", you can figure that they don't agree with you. When they say, "I hear you, but..." they have made up their mind and stopped listening.

“I’m new.” You might as well tell the customer that you’re about to mess up.

“Fine” in response to “How are you doing?” We say this whether it’s true or not because we know better than to burden other people with our problems. If you want to be more honest, no matter what kind of day you’re having, respond by saying, “Better than I deserve!” or “Unbelievable!”

“Oh, by the way…” Look out! Duck! You are about to hear the real reason the person came to see you, and it’s not going to be pleasant. That’s why he or she waited until the end.

Now for the nicest word…

Do you know the sweetest, most endearing word you can say to someone in any language?

It’s their name. Nicknames like Possum, Toolbox, Boo or TwoBelly are great, but avoid neighbor, bubba, captain, mister, partner or other names you say when you can’t recall someone’s name.

It’s tough to memorize names. The older we get, the less room there is in our mind for storing names and the more people we know who’s name we should recall. Just try to remember how good it felt when you first reported to work and the big boss knew your name.

Reading between the lines and remembering names can help leaders create a more spirited, productive environment. We could all express ourselves a little more clearly, and help others do the same.

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