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Words to Use, Words to Lose

Dear Communications Doctor,

There's a receptionist on our floor that uses—in my opinion—troubling language with patients, visitors, and just about anyone else with whom she speaks. When I say "troubling language," I don't mean profanity, but rather poor word choice and expressions that ultimately put people off. A friend who attended one of your seminars told me about the "Words to Use, Words to Lose" component of your program. Could you elaborate on this—and do a little translating as well? For example, how does one revise negative expressions like:

"Bear with me," or *"No problem."*

A—*El Paso, TX*

Dear A,

When adopted, the *"words to use...words to lose"* philosophy can work miracles for improving one's interpersonal communication. The basic idea behind this philosophy is that some words and phrases build relationships up, and some words and phrases tear relationships down. Since effective communication is about building and maintaining relationships, we need to choose our words wisely. "Words to use...Words to lose" simply facilitates a stronger, more positive emotional vocabulary.

As we carefully choose words and phrases, it's a good idea to keep in mind that in addition to words having dictionary definitions (their denotations), words also have connotations, which is their emotional impact. For example, have you ever noticed that successful real estate agents sell homes rather than houses. A *house* by nature has no personality, is cold, sterile and devoid of love. Conversely, a home is a warm and loving place, where cookies are baked and where you would find huge piles of laundry waiting to be done. *Home* gathers its considerable emotional power for the simple reason that it is inhabited in a way that a *house* is not. Similarly, the phrases that you mention all bring about a certain feeling or emotional response. For fun, let's diagnose each, and provide a prescription for improvement.

"Bear with me" is a phrase that is loaded with attitude since it suggests that either speaker or listener is rushed, incompetent, or arrogant. Why? Because here's how it sounds, *"I'm a know-nothing . . . I'm obviously not good at my job, won't you please have the supreme patience to wait while I go through the laborious and all-too-lengthy process of finding a yellow sticky note upon which to leave your message..."* or *"My process is much too complex for you to understand...and you are so wasting my time, hang on...."* Diagnosis = poor. Outcome = terminal.

A good replacement for *"Bear with me"*: *"One moment please"* or *"I'll be right with you."* Even better, follow the phrase with a specific description of what you'll do to help the person. For example, *"One moment please while I locate your records, Mr. Jones."* By including these details you indicate to Mr. Jones that you've heard his request. And by personalizing the message by including his name you have circumvented the sort of *"next please"* robotics which defines lousy communications.

"No problem" is another fixable favorite. Although this phrase intends to convey the idea that a person is capable of handling a situation, all the listener hears is the word "problem." Curiously, this expression is being introduced by the very person asked to provide a solution to the request. Good alternatives? *"Glad to be of help," "Happy to be of assistance,"* or *"It's my pleasure."* These phrases convey a degree of happiness and excitement, and guide the listener to believe that a positive outcome is certain. The list of conversational possibilities or *"Words to use,"* versus those impossibilities... *"Words to lose"* goes on and on....

For further reading on the subject of "words to use, words to lose," George Walther's *What You Say is What You Get*, is a personal favorite; and ditto goes for Sam Horn's wonderfully useful *Tongue Fu!: How to Deflect, Disarm, and Defuse Any Verbal Conflict*. Sharing a copy with others that you believe might benefit from this perspective is just what the doctor ordered!

Susanne Gaddis, PhD, known as the Communications Doctor, is an acknowledged communications expert who has been speaking and teaching the art of effective and positive communication since 1989. Gaddis' workshops, seminars, and keynote presentations are packed with tips and techniques that can be immediately applied for successful results. Gaddis also provides quality training and executive coaching for organizations, corporations, and associations across the United States. For more information, call 919-933-3237 or visit www.CommunicationsDoctor.com.