

Watch Your Language : Ye Educators!

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Year after year, an academic Calendar comes to an end with a yawn over what has gone past and a sharp attempted gaze towards what lies in store ahead. It seems appropriate to reflect on those traits that have had a positive influence on our students and us. Sharing our insights helps us to become more confident and, as a consequence, we become more effective in a highly competitive business world. We constantly endeavor to develop the basic skills to communicate clearly not only during class room instructional work, but also at the work place. Our contributions are instrumental to our students', organization's and our own success.

However, regardless of how experienced we are as teachers, it never hurts to be reminded of the way seemingly small or trivial things can greatly impact our class room presence and professionalism. In fact, Business School faculty veterans who are tenured and comfortable in front of students sometimes need occasional reminders in order to maintain that energetic professional image that enhances a group's dynamics and manageability.

Effective Communication, I believe, is the most important skill that educators need to monitor constantly and hone to best serve our students. Whether or not we embrace the concept of "students as customers" (a red flag phrase to some - read on), we may, no doubt, agree that everyone taking classes deserves quality instruction, or a fair Return on their Investment.

My endeavor in this 'script', if you will, is to ponder over with all faculty colleagues, wherever they are, on how our words influence our environment; in this case, the class room. Trigger words, in particular, often have an effect on our students that we might not be aware of, but that we need to understand.

According to Michael Bugeja, author and Associate Director of Scripps School of Journalism at Ohio University, Trigger words are so called "because they trigger a reaction inside us and, consequently, cause us to lose perspective when we most need it".

For example, if teachers mention the names of high profile public figures in a topical example (eg. Jesus, Osama Bin Laden, Barak Obama, Michael Jackson, Jennifer Anniston, or even a class member's name), listeners will shift momentarily to their perception of that person and either accept or reject the message based on their attendant preconceptions. The same goes for places (such as their home, college, Iraq, Afghanistan, Ground Zero, Disney World, or even Life Style Mall), as also for times (Summer break, 26/11, Finals week) etc.

Bugeja says of positive triggers, "when someone pushes a button, we respond favorably to a stranger or source, thinking we know them or share values, simply because they have used a certain word". For example, the expression, 'you me and the lamppost' during a conversation establishes an immediate proximity and closeness between the individuals conversing, irrespective of the fact whether they have met for the first time or know each other from 'ages'.

Triggers can also be negative, serving to turn listeners off: "It sucks me" can start making you feel so without even pondering over the message or information being passed by the sender. Some communication scholars call these negative triggers red flag words.

Several years ago, I was reminded of this by a female officer (a colleague Army officer), who told me I should not use the phrase, " you guys" even casually in a gathering or a class because there were women also present. Now, I could have just dismissed this criticism as being too 'Picky' or trivial and labeled her overly sensitive. Instead, I thanked her for pointing this out to me, and I begin my seventh year in full time Business School teaching, post retirement from the Army, passing her words

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along to my Business Communication/speech students in classes and organizations (for Management Development Programmes: MDPs ranging from 'Organizational' to 'Inter Personnel' to 'Business Communication' and Public Speaking).

I agree with one of the Brumfield's Rules of 'Manual Visibility' which states, "when a word or phrase offends or gives pause, pluck it out". In fact, I go a step further. If I even anticipate that any part of my language might offend just one of my listeners, I find a different term to convey the message. Oh! What a change in me from the days when I donned uniform and was so casual in my speech, especially with juniors and subordinates. On hindsight, I reflect how much hurt I must have caused to them, although without meaning any offence to them. It was there goodness and service etiquettes that made them lump it; but they say, "It is never too late" and, therefore, my constant endeavor to improve my speech.. How about you?

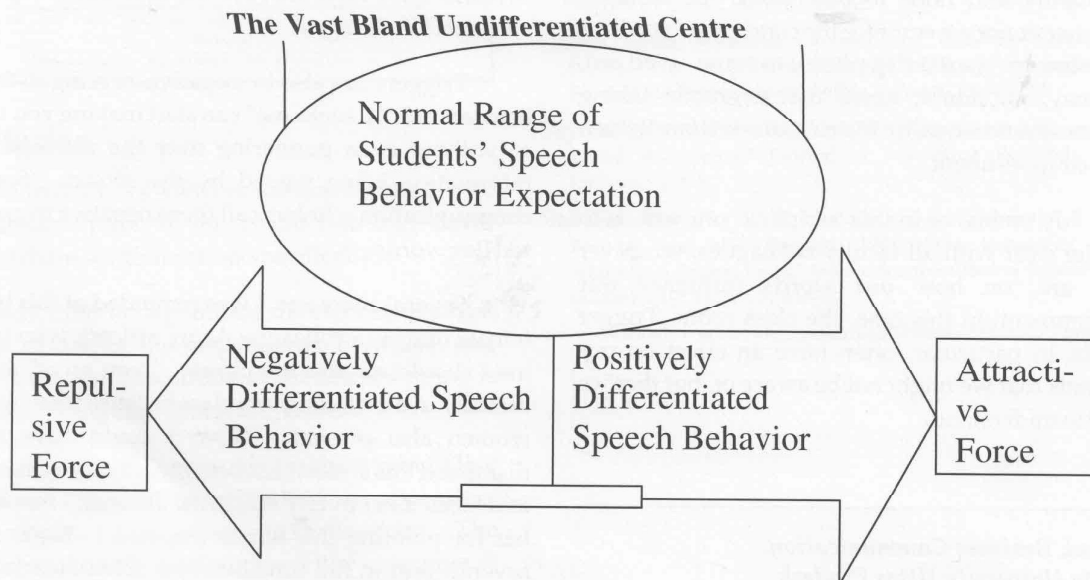
According to an article from Technical Writer magazine (Integrated publishing and Communication Services, Tokyo), one's culture helps to determine which words or phrases are red flags, or "those that invite negative reaction from the reader or listener". Sexist, racist and religiously biased phrases are definite No-Nos, but even poor grammar or inappropriate colloquialisms can cause

astute students to wonder why postgraduate level educators either don't know or choose not to use correct language. Anytime listeners are moved to wonder this, by the way, the speakers credibility is under scrutiny, no matter what the message may be.

Needless to mention here that our choice of words during instructional work determines our behavior also with the students and colleagues, to a large extent, within and without the class room. Walking your talk is a crucial Behavioral Differentiation aspect that many educators like us are not conscious of or are unmindful of. The fundamental principles of Behavioral Differentiation come into play here; namely, Behavior that differentiates is, by definition, beyond what people normally experience. All our interactions including face to face conversations or meetings, tele calls, emails, faxes, advertisements, presentations, invoices, recruitment calls, proposals, demonstrations, examination supervision and evaluation etc are referred to as "Touch Points" that establish or erode our credibility as faculty members.

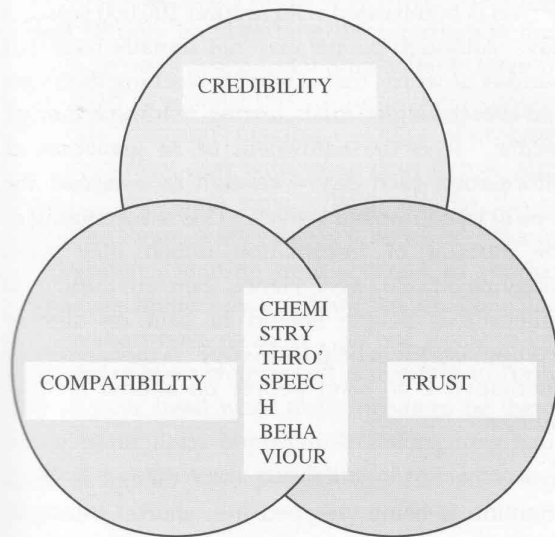
Secondly, as known, our speech behavior can differentiate both positively and negatively and thirdly, speech differentiation applies to educators, students and administrators alike as indicated by the diagram below:-

SPEECH BEHAVIOUR DIFFERENTIATION BELL CURVE



The speech behavior expectation of all the students from the other two stake holders (faculty and administrators) in any academic institution, thus, falls into the middle hump of the curve and does not really differentiate. Speech behaviors, however, at each extreme are one or more standard deviations from the norm and will have differentiated impact on students, either positively or negatively.

Credibility of a faculty, no doubt, is clearly fundamental here, but the difference in desire, commitment, trust and liking of the students for the educator are largely formed based on our speech behavior in and outside the class room. Their selection of you as the winner educator, leave a lasting impression of the quality teaching and a long lasting right chemistry developed through appropriate and sustained speech behavior, as shown in the diagram below :-



The bottom line? Like, it's a no brainer, dude. To get the most bang for your buck (where does the buck stop?); me and your need to watch our freaky language, when we are doing what we do the best --- sharing valuable insights and helpful information with our postgraduate students. Perhaps, we need to accept that we continue to be educational examples - yes, even role models.

References

Michael Bugeja's book, 'Living Ethics: Developing values in Mass Communication'

'Behavioral Advantage' by Terry R, Bacon & David G Pugh.

The article from Technical writer can be found at http://www.ftf_tokyo.com