

## **The Wonder of Words**

I am a wordsmith—I work with words. I think words are the most important element in our lives. To prove my point, let's try a quick experiment. How many of you have ever climbed a mountain? How many of you have ever jumped out of an airplane? How many of you have ever been President of the US? How many of you have ever said a word? See what I mean?

Do you have any idea how many words you will use in your lifetime? The experts say that the average person will use over 50 million words in their lifetime, although only about 6000 different ones. That's 2000 words a day! Of course people like me will use a lot more than that, but I'm not average when it comes to word use.

Language is our common denominator and has a powerful impact on every aspect of our lives. It is with words that we do our business, express our innermost thoughts, and acknowledge the feelings of others. Words, in the form of business communications, are the backbone of our economy and free enterprise system, because that is the way we buy, sell, and render services. Misunderstandings can cost you money.

So you can imagine my chagrin when people ask me, "But why do I need to learn to communicate better? Why do I need to be concerned with using just the right word, or even pronouncing my words correctly? Isn't what I mean more important than what I say?" There is a very definite answer to that question: Yes and no.

Yes and no because communication today means more than just getting your ideas across. I may be the greatest wordsmith in the world, but if you don't understand what I'm saying, I might as well be talking to myself. Have you ever had a disagreement with a manager or secretary or coworker because what you wrote down was not interpreted correctly? Ever had an argument with your spouse or children because what they heard you say was not what you meant? Can you truthfully say that you have never had an altercation because of a communications misunderstanding? If you have never experienced this, congratulations. You're way ahead of me.

My life's motto seems to be: I know you believe you understand what you think I said, but I'm not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant.

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But language has changed over the years. Communication today is both a discipline and a liberation. It's more flexible--a stretch language in which one size fits all. But it's also a discipline because many of the rules and guidelines are steadfast and not open to personal preference.

We can enjoy the liberation, but we also need to be especially careful to choose the right words, use proper grammar, and avoid the pitfalls. We all know from our daily experiences that poor structure and word usage in someone else's memo, report, letter, or even conversation can rub us the wrong way, so we need to remember that the opposite may also be true.

Edwin Newman said that the key to effective communication is vocabulary and that vocabulary is more than a means of communication. He says it is a matter of self-defense, a tool of survival. I agree that vocabulary is important, but I believe the know how to use it concisely and clearly is equally essential. There is magic in words, but it takes the discipline of grammar to make the magic work. A rabbit will sit in a concealed box all day, but it takes a skilled hand to bring the rabbit from that box through a top hat and onto a stage. It's still a rabbit, but now, with the magician's skill, it's a magic rabbit.

So is with communication skills. Words are only words; it takes a skilled hand to make them effective.