

You are special because your words can make a difference¹

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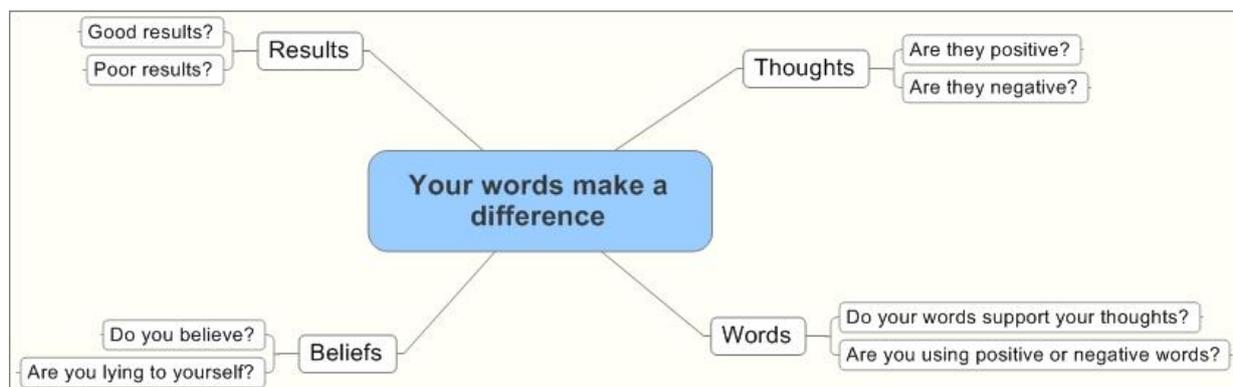
Abstract

When was the last time you seriously thought about the words you use each and every day as a project manager? How carefully do you select them? Many times your words have much more power than what you can imagine. They can build a bright future, destroy opportunity or help maintain the status quo. Your words reinforce your beliefs, and your beliefs create your reality and contribute to project success. This paper explains how your words, as a project manager may generate different perceptions and reactions from different people; how to select the right words to be used correctly in the right environment, with the right people. If you take care selecting the right words to say you will be programming your mind to be successful as a project manager.

1. Introduction

Your words have much more power than what you can imagine. Think of a process of a row of dominos that looks like this:

Thoughts – Words – Beliefs – Actions – Results



For instance, a project manager has a thought, such as “I am not very good when it comes to project sales”; now let’s remember that he doesn’t have this thought only once. He runs it through his mind on a regular basis, maybe hundreds or thousands of times in his life. Then, that project manager starts to use **words** that support this thought. He says to his friends and project management colleagues, “I am never going to do very well in sales” or “I just hate making sales

¹ How to cite this article: Bucero, A. (2020). You are special because your words can make a difference, *PM World Journal*, Vol. IX, Issue VI, June.

calls or approaching prospects”. Here again, that project manager repeats these phrases over and over and over...in his self-talk and in his discussions with others. This, in turn, strengthens his **beliefs** and it is at this stage where the rubber really meets the road. You see, everything that you will achieve in your life flows from your beliefs.

So, in the sales example, that project manager develops the belief that he is not going to be successful in project sales. This becomes embedded in his/her subconscious mind. What can possibly flow from that belief? Because that project manager does not believe in his/her project sales ability, he/she takes very little action, or he takes actions that are unproductive or ineffective. He does not do the things that would be necessary to succeed in project sales. And then that project manager gets very poor **results**. To make matters worse, that project manager starts to think more negative thoughts, repeat more negative words, reinforce negative beliefs and get even more negative results. It is a vicious cycle. This whole process could have had a very happy ending if that project manager had selected positive **thoughts** and reinforced them with **positive words**. In turn, he would reinforce the **belief** that he is successful in sales. As a result, that project manager would take the **actions** consistent with that belief and wind up with outstanding **results**.

2. Select the right words

In my experience professionals who feed themselves a steady diet of negative words are destined to have a negative attitude. It is a simple matter of cause and effect. I have heard some project managers saying and repeating negative words about the project they manage, and you cannot keep repeating negative words and expect to be a high achiever. The reason I found is that negative words will always lead to the reinforcement of negative beliefs and eventually to negative outcomes. I have observed many colleagues, myself included that usually repeated to themselves sentences like, “I am not good delivering presentations”, “I am not good talking to upper managers”, “and I am not very good managing project cost”. And, after many years of using negative words, you develop a strong belief that you can’t do these things. We are unconsciously programming negatively our minds.

So, unconsciously you create this situation by not being careful about the words you use. The truth is, you could eventually reverse this trend if you started using positive words about your ability to make repairs. This behavior depends on the motivational values from every professional. For instance, in the Spanish culture I found many negative professionals by nature. Are you in that group or not? If you belong to that group of professionals, now is the time to wake up and be conscious about the words you are using in your projects, with your people, with your customers, and with your managers. If you are a positive person, congratulations and welcome to the team “Today is a Good Day! If you are not yet a member, reflect about it, you have the choice to change your attitude.

I’d like to share with you the set of positive sentences I usually use with my project sponsor and other project stakeholders:

- I can
- I believe
- I dream
- I will
- I'll respect
- I want to
- I need you
- I'll love you
- I'm ready to
- I apologize
- I'm listening to....

3. The State of Mind

In words are seen the state of mind, character and disposition of the speaker. Years ago, my friend Randall L. Englund introduced me to Dr. Robert J. Graham, an experienced and worldwide recognized project professional, lovely, amazing, and friendly person. He is also a cultural anthropologist, and he was a university professor in the US, consultant worldwide, and author of four books on project management.

Graham has a physical challenge to contend with. Robert Graham is in a wheelchair. He has multiple sclerosis. However, over many years he has consistently delivered project management seminars, attended and being a lecturer and keynote speaker in many Project Management Congresses, and consulted and assessed big multinational companies on the project management field. Graham loves people. He always speaks with enthusiasm; he transmits passion and security at all of his speeches. He cannot use his arms very much, and he needs to rely on a power scooter or a wheelchair. He communicates through positive words, looking at you through his powerful smile. He has told me many stories, because he has travelled a lot worldwide. To this day he continues travelling coast to coast to visit his family and help with community affairs. It is incredible that someone in his physical state is not focused on himself. He is always trying to enjoy his life, never complaining.

By using positive and enthusiastic words, Robert Graham is empowering himself to achieve great things. He does not give any power to his limitations and, as a result, he is able to transcend them and accomplish more than many other people.

What obstacles are you facing in your life right now? Imagine the power you could unleash if you saw them as “just barely an inconvenience” instead of as an insurmountable barrier. I have some suggestions to improve your positive words. To begin with, use positive self-talk as often as possible. After all, you are talking to yourself, so you don't have to worry about others hearing your comments or judging what you say. The key is that you hear this positive input again and

again, and it becomes deeply rooted in your subconscious mind. I have learned that *repetition* is the key.

Whether to share your goals with other people is a much trickier issue. One thing I have learned is this: Never discuss your goals with negative people. All they will do is argue and point out all the reasons why you will not be successful. Who needs that? Often, these “negative nellys” are the ones who do little or nothing in their own lives. They have no goals or dreams and they don’t want anyone else to succeed, either. Yet, there are some instances when you can benefit by telling others about your goals. First of all, make sure that you are speaking with someone who is extremely positive and totally supportive of your efforts. This should be the kind of person who would be absolutely delighted if you achieved this goal and would do anything in his or her power to assist you. You may have a friend or colleague that fits this role or certain family members.

It is also important to share your goals with others who are working with you to achieve that outcome. For example, if a sales manager wants to increase sales in the coming year by 20 percent, he or she would make this goal known to everyone on the staff. Then, everyone can work together to achieve it.

Even though I am encouraging you to use positive words to move you toward your objectives, I am not suggesting that you ignore the obstacles that you may face or that you discourage feedback from other people. Before embarking on any goal, you want to prepare for what may be coming down the road. Personally, I prefer to discuss those issues with someone who is positive, someone whose feedback includes creative solutions to the difficulties that may arise. Furthermore, I’ll only discuss my plans with people who are qualified to render an intelligent opinion on the subject.

Let me give you an example: when I left HP to create my own company, I asked some colleagues their opinions about my decision. Most of them did not understand. Common opinions were “too risky, you are fool, outside is raining too much”. I only found one professional who encouraged me to do it, Luis M. He supported my ideas, and gave me some contacts in the market to start up my business. He was a reviewer of my first project management book, and he is my friend. I learned to listen to intelligent people, who are focused on the huge possibilities every human being has as a professional. A positive state of mind helped me a lot in my professional career.

4. Words and Accountability

There is another reason why, in some cases, you might decide to share your goals with someone else. In other words, if I tell others I am going to do something, then I have to go ahead and do it. Think of this approach as “burning your bridges”.

Let me assure you I am not a believer in “burning bridges” when it comes to personal or business relationships. But sometimes the only way to move forward in life and to achieve an ambitious goal is to cut off all avenues of retreat. This can be a very useful strategy. We may tell a friend that we are going to work out at the gym three times this week knowing that at the end of the week, this friend will ask whether we did, in fact, go to the gym three times.

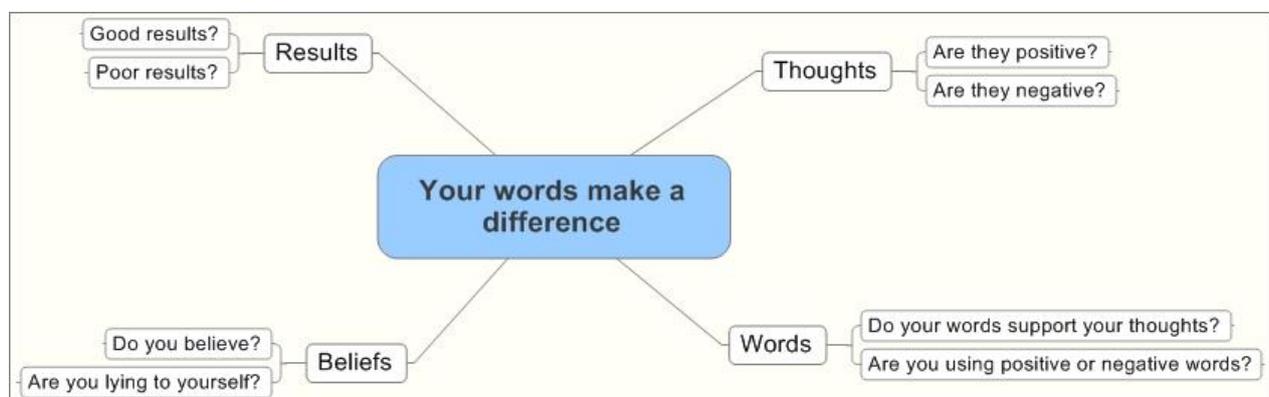
Even more dramatic example is that of well-known motivational speaker Zig Ziglar. Ziglar decided to go on a diet and reduce his weight from 202 pounds to 165 pounds. At the same time, he was writing his book *See You at the Top*. In the book, Ziglar included a statement that he got his weight down to 165 pounds. This was 10 months before the book went to press. And then he placed an order with the printer for 25,000 copies. Now, remember, at the time he wrote these words, Ziglar actually weighed 202. He put his credibility on the line with 25,000 people. By including a statement that he weighed 165 pounds, Ziglar knew that he had to lose 37 pounds before the book was printed. And he did. Use this strategy selectively. Limit it to those goals that are very important to you and where you are committed to go the distance. Is it risky? You bet it is. But it is a tremendous motivator.

5. Emotions

Our vocabulary affects our emotions, our beliefs, and our effectiveness in life. For example, let's say that someone has lied to you. You could react by saying that you are angry or upset. If, however, you used the words "furious", "livid" or "enraged", your physiology and your subsequent behavior would be dramatically altered. Your blood pressure would rise. Your face would turn beet red. You would feel tense all over.

On the other hand, what if you characterized the situation as "annoying" or said that you were "peeved"? This lowers your emotional intensity considerably. In fact, saying that you are "peeved" will probably make you laugh and break the negative emotional cycle completely. You would be much more relaxed. Of course, you can also intentionally select words to heighten positive emotions. Instead of saying "I am determined", why not say "I am unstoppable". Or, in place of declaring that you "feel okay", try "I feel phenomenal" or "I feel just tremendous". Juicy, exciting words like that lift your spirits to a higher level and profoundly influence those around you. When you consciously decide to use such terms, you actually choose to change the path on which you are travelling. Others will respond to you differently, and you will alter your perception of yourself, as well.

Let's take a look at your life for a moment. Are there any areas where you have been using phrases like "I can't", "I am not good at", "It is impossible"? We all know project professionals who make statements like these:



When you make these comments day in and day out for 10, 20 years, you are programming your mind for failure. It all comes back to your attitude. Every one of these examples reflects a negative attitude. And if you see the world through a smudged window, you are going to use negative language and get disappointing results.

Fortunately, you can control your words, which means that you have the ability to build a positive belief system, and to produce the results you want. The first step is awareness. Let's examine the phrases you have been using in four key areas of your project life – relationships, finances, career and health.

1. Relationships

Do you say things like “All good men (or women) are taken” or “People are always taking advantage of me”? If you do, you are literally programming yourself for unhappy relationships. Your mind hears every word you speak and it sets out to prove you right. With regard to the above examples, your mind will see to it that you attract only those persons who will disappoint you or take advantage of you. Is this what you want? If not, stop repeating such negative statements.

2. Finances

What words do you use on a regular basis to describe your current financial situation and your prospects for the future? Phrases such as “I am always in debt”, “The economy is lousy” or “No one is buying” work against you. Far better, choose language which reaffirms prosperity and better economic times. Of course, you will not necessarily have abundant wealth within a few days after changing the way you speak. But the physical conditions can change only after your beliefs have altered. Clearing up your language is an important first step. After all, the people with wealth in this world did not get that way by thinking about being in poverty. And the people who always talk about a lack of money generally don't accumulate much of it.

3. Career

If I were to ask you about your career prospects over the next five to 10 years, how would you respond? Be honest. Would you say that things will probably remain the same as they are now? Or would you describe a higher position with more challenges, more responsibilities and increased financial rewards? If you respond “I don't know where I am going in my career”, chances are not much will change. Your language reflects your lack of vision and direction. If, on the other hand, you have a clear goal which you can articulate fairly often, even if only to yourself, you stand an excellent chance of reaching that goal. The same, of course, holds true if you have your own business. Do you use language that is consistent with the growth of your business? Or do you constantly talk about how you will never get to the next level?

4. Health

Without question, our words have a profound impact on our health. For example, imagine that a group of us sat down to what seemed to be a perfectly wholesome and delicious meal. Then, two hours later I called and told you that every person who ate with us had been rushed to the hospital

and treated for food poisoning. Suppose that you felt perfectly fine before I called. How would you react after hearing my information?

Most likely, you would clutch your stomach, get pale and feel very ill. Why? because my words instilled a belief in you which, in turn, your body started to act upon. This same bodily reaction would have occurred even if I was playing a cruel joke and was lying about the whole situation. Your body responds to words it hears you and other people say. That's why it makes absolutely no sense to keep repeating that you have "chronic back pain that will never go away" or that you get "three or four bad colds every year". By uttering these statements, you actually instruct your body to manifest pain and disease.

Please don't misunderstand. I am not suggesting that you deny pain or disease or that you can overcome any illness, but there is certainly nothing to be gained from using language that reinforces suffering and incurability.

6. Up to you

Have you thought about the words you use in your personal and professional life? When we repeat certain phrases over and over, it is as if a "groove" is formed in our brain. We keep replaying the same old refrain in our heads like a broken record. The trouble is, whenever you say these words you just deepen the groove, replaying the same old myths in your mind, strengthening the same old beliefs, and getting the same old results.

Recognize, however, that just because you have said things in the past there is no reason to blindly continue doing so. While it takes some discipline and vigilance on your part to make changes in your language, it is well worth the effort. So, from now on, consciously choose words that will point you in the direction of your goals. Ask a friend to remind you when you slip. Remember, it is up to you to speak in a way that will move you toward what you want in life and in the projects you are managing.

7. Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal messages often contradict the verbal; often they express feelings more accurately than the spoken or written language. Numerous articles and books have been written on the importance of nonverbal messages. Some studies suggest that from 60 to 90 percent of a message's effect comes from nonverbal cues. I mean:

- Appearance
- Body language
- Silence, time and space

Appearance: It conveys nonverbal impressions that affect receivers' attitudes toward the verbal message even before they read or hear them. For instance an envelope's appearance – size, color, and weight – may impress the receiver as "important", "routine" or "junk" mail. Next, the letter, report, or title page communicates nonverbally before its contents are read by the kind of paper

used, its length, format, and neatness. Finally, the language itself, aside from its content, communicates something about the sender. Is it carefully worded and generally correct in mechanics such as spelling grammar, and punctuation?

What is the effect on oral messages?

Whether you are speaking to one person face to face or to a group in a meeting, personal appearance and the appearance of your surroundings convey nonverbal stimuli that affect attitudes toward your spoken words.

Personal appearance: Clothing, hairstyles, neatness, jewelry, cosmetics, posture, stature are part of personal appearance. They convey impressions regarding occupation, age, nationality, social and economic level, job status, and good or poor judgment, depending on circumstances.

Appearance of surroundings: Aspects of surroundings include room size, location, furnishings, machines, architecture, wall decorations, floor, lighting, windows, and view. Surroundings will vary according to status and according to country and culture.

Body language: Included under body language are facial expressions, gestures, posture and movement, smell and touch, and voice and sounds. The eyes and face are especially helpful means of communicating nonverbally. They can reveal hidden emotions, including anger, confusion, enthusiasm, fear, joy, surprise, uncertainty, and others. They can also contradict verbal statements. For example: because he was embarrassed, a new team member answered “yes” when asked by his project manager if he understood his instructions. Yet, the project manager should have noticed the employee’s bewildered expression and hesitant voice and restated the instructions more clearly.

In the United States, direct eye contact is, but not staring, is considered desirable when two people talk. The person whose eyes droops or shift away from the listener is thought to be either shy or dishonest and untrustworthy. However we must keep in mind that it is not exactly the same in other cultures, and also it depends on the situation.

In some occupations, actions speak louder than words. Gestures and movements are culture-specific. The meaning of a gesture in the United States may be completely different in Europe and Asia. In the United States, a clenched fist pounding on the table can indicate either anger or emphasis. Such a display in Asia would be unacceptable. Continual gestures and movement such as pacing back and forth may signal nervousness and may be distracting to listeners. Handshakes reveal attitudes, sometimes handicaps, by their firmness or limpness.

Legs too, communicate nonverbal messages. Consider, for example, a man sitting with his legs stretched out on top of his desk during an interview; a person shifting from one leg to the other in rhythmic motion; a woman pacing back and forth while speaking. Posture and movement can convey self-confidence, status or interest. A confident executive may have a relaxed posture, and yet may stand more erect than a timid subordinate. An interested listener may lean forward toward the speaker; one who is bored may lean away, slump, or glance at the clock. Various odors and fragrances sometimes get across the emotions of the sender and sometimes affect the reactions of

the receiver, especially if the receiver is sensitive to scents. Also, touching people can communicate friendship, love, approval, hatred, anger, or other feelings.

Your voice quality and extra sounds you make while speaking are also a part of nonverbal communication called paralanguage. Paralanguage includes voice volume, rate, articulation, pitch, and the other sounds you may make, such as throat clearing and sighing. The words “You did a great job on this project” could be a compliment. But if the tone of voice is sarcastic and said in the context of criticism, the true meaning is anger.

A loud voice often communicates urgency while a soft one is sometimes calming. Speaking fast may suggest nervousness or haste. A lazy articulation, slurring sounds or skipping over syllables or words, may reduce credibility. A lack of pitch variation becomes a monotone, while too much variation can sound artificial or overly dramatic. Throat clearing can distract from the spoken words. Emphasizing certain words in a sentence can purposely indicate your feelings about what is important.

Silence, time and space can communicate more than you may think, even causing hard feelings, loss of business, and profits. It pays to know these differences across cultures. Suppose you wrote a request to your supervisor for additional funds for a project you are developing. If you receive no answer for several weeks, what is your reaction? Do you assume that the answer is negative? Do you wonder if your supervisor is merely very busy at the moment and has not been able to answer your request? Do you think your supervisor is rude or considers your request unworthy of an answer?

Concepts of time, however, vary across cultures and even in the United States. Americans and Germans, for example, are quite punctual. Middle Eastern business people think little of arriving after an agreed-upon time, not out of discourtesy, but rather a feeling that the task will be accomplished regardless of time. If you arrived on time for a meeting in Spain, your host might wonder why you came so early.

8. Case Study

I managed a project for the Spanish Foreign Ministry. It was an infrastructure project focused on creating the right hardware and software architecture to encode and decode messages between worldwide Embassies. The IT manager (José) had very clear requirements for that project, but he never wrote them down. We did it for him. I had the perception that he was a difficult person, very rude, and prone to speaking and acting out a negative behavior.

I still remember that he said that I was always smiling, and he was disappointed about that. However, his people worked well with me and my team. We took care of using respectful sentences working with them, and they appreciated the difference between us and their boss.

One day we had a database problem and we needed to work overnight with the whole team. The customer IT manager was not there, but when he came back the next day in the morning, his first sentence was: “Hello, are you working or talking as always?” Can you imagine the feeling from everyone who heard that sentence?

The database problem was corrected and the project, although with some time delay, finished according to cost and requirements. The IT customer was happy about the results, and we had lunch together. At the end of the lunch the IT manager said to the team: “Congratulations for the project success, but you delivered the project overtime”. I continued working for that customer with my team in other projects.

After some years I gained good credibility with this customer, and from time to time we went for lunch together. In one the lunches he told me: “Alfonso, my people respect you very much. They are happy when you come to my office. What do you do?” I answered him, “I am listening to them, respecting them, and I tell them that I need them for achieving project success. I smile frequently because every day is a good day”. I told him, “José, spend more time with your people, talk to them, don’t be negative with them, be more aware of the words you use with them and appreciate their efforts and achievements personally. The return of your investment will be significant.” I feel happy about this story because now this customer meets me with a big smile every time, I see him. He has changed his behavior to be more positive, and his people appreciate him so much more for it.

Summary

- Remember that many times your words have much more power than what you can imagine. They can build a bright future, destroy opportunity or help maintain the status quo. Your words reinforce your beliefs, and your beliefs create your reality, and then contribute to your project.
- You cannot keep repeating negative words and expect to be a high achiever. And that is because negative words will always lead to the reinforcement of negative beliefs and eventually to negative outcomes.
- Our vocabulary affects our emotions, our beliefs, and our effectiveness in life. Fortunately, you can control your words, which means that you have the ability to build a positive belief system, and to produce the results you want. The first step is awareness.
- Remember, it is up to you to speak in a way that will move you toward what you want in life and in the projects, you are managing.
- Speak the language your audience understands, so gather some information regarding the audience and their expectations when possible.

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