

## The Big 'But'

The power of words



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**A** Jewish proverb states, “a bird that you set free may be caught again, but a word that escapes your lips will not return.”

For coaches, words are our currency, our stock-in-trade. We listen for what is being said – and for what isn't being said – by our clients. We use our words to make distinctions, ask powerful questions, and reflect back what we are hearing.

We give our clients the space to use words to express what they feel, what they want, and what's possible. And when words fail them, we offer suggestions, alternate means of expression, or even silence if that's what the moment calls for. With words at the heart of our connection with our clients, we need to pay extra attention to what we say, how our words land with our clients, and how our clients use words that can drive them forward or push them back.

A case in point is the manager's favorite lunch: the “feedback sandwich.” Many of the managers I coach rely heavily on this technique, which delivers a performance critique in this order: positive feedback, negative feedback, positive feedback. The goal of this approach is to surround the challenging news with comforting news on both ends. While I understand that this method aims to soften the blow for both deliverer and deliverer, it actually confuses everyone involved. I think of this as a “Big But” Sandwich (which I think they may actually serve at my local deli): Here's what you are doing well BUT here's what you're not doing well BUT here's

what you're also doing well. It's a series of counterarguments that does less to improve the performance of an employee than to make the supervisor feel less guilty. Besides, what kind of sandwich stuffs the middle with something unpalatable?

There are several words that undermine or negate the ideas surrounding them. Think of these words like salt: using them isn't inherently bad for us or our clients, and in fact, can be a healthy part of a well-rounded coaching conversation. Overused or sprinkled with abandon, these words can raise blood pressures and erode away at our coaching relationships.

**Here are some words to use with extra care, and to listen for when our clients use them:**

**But:** As in, “I admire you, but ...” or “Your work is excellent, but ...” The “but” is a magic eraser that wipes out the gentle, kind and compassionate part of any message, leaving no trace behind. When acknowledging a client, make sure that there's no ‘but’ in the vicinity, and listen for whether a ‘but’ shows up in response. When your clients' ‘buts’ show up, invite them to give that ‘but’ a name, and then ask it to step aside. Or, if need be, give the ‘but’ some airtime so it can be heard – and then integrated into a more effective approach.

**Everybody/Nobody:** Ah, the power of absolute! When my daughter Sophie told me for the tenth time that everybody in her third grade class had an iPod Touch, and could she please, please have one, I told her that I had

a very hard time believing that everyone had one of these \$199 devices. I also reminded her that she was battling 0 with me in negotiating for things that she wanted by using the “everybody has one” argument. A quick study, Sophie tried a new approach: “Mom, guess what? Nobody in my class has an iPod Touch. Can I have one now?” Smart cookie, but I wasn't biting. “Nobody” falls into the same category as “everybody.” One example of a ‘somebody’ and your whole argument crumbles.

Watch your use of these absolutes, and see where your clients may need to moderate their language – and their beliefs.

**Always/Never:** I'd love to say that Sophie is never getting an iPod Touch. What I really mean is “it's unlikely.” I learned to modify my unyielding stance on expensive electronics after I had told my kids for years that they were never getting a Nintendo Wii. Then their beloved Aunt Debby bought them one for the holidays. “Never” was no longer the truth, and my integrity suffered a small blow. Sure, I could have returned the Wii to keep my credibility, but it didn't seem worth the risk that two children and one sister-in-law might not speak to me again for decades (see, not “never again” – just decades). Listen for always/never when you speak to your clients, and again, press your clients to test their assumptions about absolute language.

As coaches, our words have the power to inspire, encourage, enrich and renew. And with awesome coaching comes awesome responsibility to use our words as well as we can. •