

Words that Bite You in the “But”

By Deborah Grayson Riegel, MSW, ACC

I am always a bit wary when I receive one of those seemingly innocuous dental appointment reminder cards in the mail. Like most people, I have never been a huge fan of the dentist- and after my recent visit I was reminded of just why.

As I sat in the examination chair, feet up, bibbed, and suctioned, Dr. W put on his four-lens glasses and attempted to relax me:

“I’m just going to take a look, so this won’t hurt yet.”

Yet? What did he think would possibly be soothing about the word “yet”? In one fell swoop, his three-letter utterance “yet” undermined the entire message that preceded it. As several four-letter words crossed my mind, I braced myself for dental impact.

According to a proverb, “a bird that you set free may be caught again, but a word that escapes your lips will not return.” Because we only get one chance to mean what we say and say what we mean, words that undermine or negate the ideas surrounding them should be used like salt: sparingly.

Here are some words to use with extra care:

But: As in, “I love you, but...” or “Your work is excellent, but...” That “but” is a magic eraser that wipes out the gentle, kind and compassionate part of your message, leaving no trace behind. Instead, become so liberal and deliberate with your support and encouragement on a regular basis that you can deliver bad news clearly, concisely and quickly. The cushion should already be in place to give your critique a soft landing.

Many managers offer feedback using the “sandwich” technique, which delivers a performance critique in this order: Positive Feedback, Negative Feedback, Positive Feedback. Think of this as a “Big But” Sandwich: 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 confusing counterarguments that does less to improve the performance of an employee and does more to make the supervisor feel less guilty. Besides, what kind of sandwich packs the middle with something unpalatable?

Everybody/Nobody: Ah, the power of absolute! Very rarely does the “everybody has one” argument work (as my children can tell you) and all you need is one example of a “somebody who” and your whole argument crumbles. Better to stick with Many/Few to keep your credibility intact.

Always/Never: 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. And 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.

The good news is, my dentist didn’t hurt me at all. The bad news is, it didn’t matter because I was already primed for pain. Our words have the power to confuse or clarify, deflate or inspire, wreck or renew.

Let me know what words prime you for pain or pleasure!