

Words Have no Meaning Until You Give it to Them

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You hear the word “alcoholism” and react unemotionally as you say that it is a disease that can have sad side effects. Your friend reacts passionately every time the subject is discussed.

You share strong, definitive opinions when pay inequities for women are discussed. Your friend agrees dispassionately that it is unfortunate.

Words have no meaning. They are the symbols the sender uses to express thoughts, beliefs and ideas and the intonation is affected by his/her background, values, experiences, behavioral style and knowledge. The receiver uses the same criteria to interpret the words. That’s why the sender doesn’t always get the expected response or the same response from two people.

This is one of the principles of communication that makes the process more difficult at work and at home.

In the first example, your friend still vividly remembers how his alcoholic father left when he was eight. He remembers, too, how his mother worked two jobs to pay the rent in their small apartment and how his sister was the only one home with him much of the time. You, on the other hand, have never personally experienced the disease with family or friends.

As a woman, however, you have experienced pay inequities personally and are now seeing your daughter still experiencing the same thing. It makes you angry! Your friend is a well-paid single attorney, and his sister is living a comfortable life as a mother and homemaker. His mother worked as a cleaning woman and in a restaurant so he thinks she was paid fairly for what she did. He’s never given much thought to gender-equitable salaries.

As these examples show, different people can react emotionally or intellectually to the same words. Sometimes, as the sender you try to get people to respond more intellectually or more emotionally depending on your purpose for communicating. What throws you off guard is when you think you have chosen your words carefully and your audience of one or one hundred reacts differently.

The sender and receiver are equally responsible for trying to make the communication process work. Here are some hints to help you in both roles.

Hints for the sender

- Purposely avoid discriminatory language in the gender, race, religion and age arenas.
- Listen carefully with your ears and eyes. Become an astute student of body language and watch for furrowed brows, crossed arms or legs and other signals that you may have upset the other person(s)
- If you making a presentation to an association or company, do your research! Ask if there are any subjects or words that are taboo.

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Hints for the receiver

- If feasible, clear the air immediately if a word or words concern you. If you harbor anger, resentment, hurt or confusion, it will cloud the rest of the interaction and maybe even future ones.
 - During one of my DiSC-based communication workshops, I divided the participants into groups and asked them to list good qualities of other behavioral styles. One of the groups used the word “robotic” in what they thought was a complimentary way. The people who were being described found the word to be unfavorable. Working together, they came up with “structured,” which was agreeable to all of them.
 - In another workshop exercise that required participants to think of words they customarily use that might be perceived differently than they intended, one man shared the following story. He is a computer trainer and said he started a class by saying, “Today, you will be receiving the bible of all computer training.” One of his attendees immediately said, “I know of only one Bible, and it doesn’t deal with computers.” The man admitted he was shaken and is much more careful in his word choice today.
- Keep your personal filter clean.
 - List your prejudices and work to overcome them. Ask yourself if are they based on race, gender, religion, age, status, educational background or others.
 - Form your opinion in the moment. Don’t prejudge situations, presenters, your co-workers or parents or children’s reactions, a book before you have read it or the taste of food before you have eaten it.
 - Be proactive. Read books and magazines, attend seminars, listen to CDs, watch select TV programs to help you grow personally and professionally.
- Listen carefully to everything the other person has to say even when you may not agree.
- Wait to speak until the other person has finished.

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