

## WORDS ON WISE MANAGEMENT

### The toothpaste can't go back in the tube

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I recently watched a preschool teacher deliver a message on "Words that Hurt." The teacher creatively used a tube of toothpaste and a paper plate per student for this hands-on activity. I watched 12 small children eagerly squeeze the entire contents of a tube of toothpaste onto a paper plate, giggling as their plates filled up with minty fresh goo and their little hands became sticky disasters. Then they were asked to put the toothpaste back in the tube! Not only was the task frustrating to the students, but it was also obviously impossible to achieve.

The toothpaste was a metaphor for the hurtful words we say to others. The teacher emphasized that we can't stuff words back inside after they are blurted out, just like the toothpaste can't be forced back inside the tube once it's squeezed out onto the plate.

This communication reminder is appropriate for all age groups—from preschoolers to senior citizens. The lesson applies to every setting where people gather, from school playgrounds to workplace break rooms and even across the boardroom conference table.

Hurtful words reach us by written memos, e-mails, and text messages, or they are blurted out in office hallways, in meetings, or behind a colleague's back. There are many different means of communication, but the four basic forms at work are writing, reading, talking, and listening. No matter the form used, *words* are at the core of every message, and there are distinct roles for the communicator and the receiver—communicators write and talk, while receivers read and listen.

In a recent communication skills training session, I educated participants on the research around the effectiveness of business communications:

- We spend three-fourths of each workday communicating with others in some way.
- About 70% of business communication fails to achieve its intended purposes.

Yikes! How can we effectively run our businesses when we miss the mark 70% of the time?

First of all, we should recognize that communication isn't perfect because each individual brings

different life experiences and "perceptions" to the interaction.

In every communication skills training session I've ever facilitated, participants have been divided on what they see when I present an optical illusion—a classic black and white photograph. Some immediately see only white angel-like figures, while others see only black images of bats. Through this exercise, we learn that our perceptions distort our views of the picture. They also distort our views of what we read and hear. The following tips will help you base your communications on accurate perceptions, especially when you are dealing with hurtful words.

- Be willing to admit that what you heard or read wasn't what the speaker or writer intended.
- Question the validity of your conclusions, and when appropriate, check your perceptions with other people.
- Remember that one individual's view may be distorted by her perceptions.
- Know your own biases. You may need to make a special effort to listen or read carefully and avoid leaping to conclusions.
- Acknowledge that your own characteristics affect what you are likely to see or perceive about others.
- Accept the fact that situations perceived to be real *are* real. Perception is reality, and you can't ignore misperceptions because they make you uncomfortable.

To communicate effectively in the workplace, we all must choose our words carefully and listen more actively. This requires a concerted effort to engage the "filter" and think before you speak and/or hit the send button. We must also remain conscious of our body language, tone, rate of speech, and other non-verbal components of communication. Remember, you can't put the toothpaste back in the tube!

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