

Executive Challenge #9:

“I’m generally a positive person, but it’s easy to turn negative in this economy. How do I avoid that?”

Most senior leaders use negative language on the job without even realizing it. It may come from destructive phrases used unconsciously, the use of cynicism in your language, or simply from an unfortunate choice of words. When leaders use negative language, it can have destructive power on others.

Negative language often shows up in feedback. We give feedback that we believe is constructive when it’s actually *destructive*. This kind of feedback can have a big impact not only on the morale of the team, but on the development of your people as well.

Here are some examples of feedback that are subtly destructive and counterproductive:

“Why did you...?”

“What if you had done it like...?”

“What I would have done is...”

“That’s great, but...”

Notice how these phrases are negative and/or focused on the past – a past that you cannot change. Now, read these phrases instead:

“What did you learn from having done...?”

“How can you grow from this?”

“Next time, what will you do differently?”

“That’s great. What else can we do to develop it even further?”

Do you see how these phrases are positive and focused on the future – a future that you *can* change? This is how you turn feedback into growth opportunities both personally and professionally. This type of language gets your team thinking about what improvements can be made. It stretches the abilities of your team and keeps them feeling positive about what they *can* accomplish rather than what they did wrong in the past, which they probably already regret.

It’s also a good idea for leaders to become aware of the negative words they use. You may not be aware of it, but how often do you use the following words: “No,” “Yes, but...,” “However,” and “Nonetheless”? These seemingly innocuous words can actually stunt growth. No matter how you sugar-coat them, use of these words is akin to the sound of fingernails screeching down a chalkboard. They’re flat-out irritating. Instead of these phrases, try saying, “Yes, and...” and see how positively people respond. You’ll be amazed at the difference.

To help you eliminate your use of negative language on the job, begin by paying attention to what you say and how you say it. Let your team know you want to stop using negative words, and enlist their help. Tell them that every time you use a pre-defined negative word or phrase, they should point it out, and you will automatically put 20 baht into a jar. Make it a game, and get everyone involved. It will not only help you to change your own bad language habits, but it will motivate others in your company to do the same. It’s

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an engaging way to change your own behavior while getting everyone else to realize the power of destructive language. (Use the money you've collected for a fun "positivity" party at the end of the year.)

The big daddy of all negative language – probably the biggest "office crippler" – is the word "can't." Many leaders use "can't" regularly. We offer it up as if it's nothing, but it's actually like hitting a brick wall at rapid speed. Not only does it stop you in *your* tracks, but it stops your *employees* in their tracks, too. If you really "can't" do something, you have nowhere to go – and that means no business to grow.

In my workshops, I do an exercise with participants called "The Paperclip Challenge" to help participants become aware of and break the habit of saying "can't." I arrange them into teams (although you can do this alone, if you want) and give everyone a paperclip. Each team has four minutes to brainstorm every activity they *cannot* do with that paperclip.

Be tough! For example, someone might say, "I cannot *eat* a paperclip." But that isn't true. You *can* eat a paperclip – you would just be crazy to do it. Someone might say, "I cannot *write* with a paperclip." But that isn't true either. If you unfold the paperclip and dip the tip of it into ink, you can definitely write with it. Get the idea?

After four minutes, the entire group reconvenes and reviews each team's "can't" lists. By the time we've finished reviewing the lists, we always find that what *can't* be done with a paperclip is actually a very short list. The longer lists suddenly become what *can* be done with a paperclip. This analogy applies to everything. More often than not, you *can* do what you think you cannot do.

So, pay close attention to your negative language as a leader in your organization. It will affect how much you and your teams can accomplish. If you think something won't work before you've even tried it, you will most likely create a self-fulfilling prophecy. On the other hand, the more your language allows for possibility, the more possibilities will open up to you.

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In one of her recently released books, *Would YOU Want to Work for YOU™? How to build an executive leadership brand that inspires loyalty and drives employee performance*, Brenda brings her many years of transformational coaching successes, insights, examples, and real-world stories to the rewarding task of helping leaders reach their full potential.



After earning her MBA from Harvard, Brenda spent the bulk of her career as an executive in Fortune 100 multinationals, building brands across dozens of countries spanning four continents. Now, as President of her own company, Brand Development Associates International, she travels the world speaking, training, and coaching individuals and companies to greater success through creative, yet practical, corporate and personal brand development. Visit www.BrendaBence.com.

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