

Article from SupervisionMatters.com (April 24, 2017)

Words Can Be Disruptive to Teamwork

Language matters. The words we use can cause harm or healing, hope or hate, motivation or disengagement.

Recently, I heard a male supervisor refer to his colleagues as "guys and girls." This manager was shocked and confused when his female coworkers were insulted by his word choice. He didn't understand. To him, it was no different than using the term "guys" for his male colleagues.

In a different context, I heard a woman tell her colleagues "All lives matter" when someone mentioned going to a Black Lives Matter event.

Words matter. Whether this is a situation with someone you supervise or peer managers, these words matter. In both of these circumstances, the words spoken pushed people away. The man's use of "girls" made the women in the group feel infantilized. The woman's words showed she did not understand the pain and priority of years of black lives not mattering as they were killed at a much higher rate than any other group of individuals, while committing no more crimes.

Words have history and context that make a difference. In addition, they have history and context that are understood most acutely when you are part of the group that was oppressed by those words and actions in the past. Paying attention to our words is sometimes trivialized as being "politically correct." When I hear that phrase, it tells me that the speaker doesn't care about anyone else's perspective or experience; if the language is ok to them, then so what? Political correctness is a way to dismiss the impact of hurtful words.

If you want to be effective as a supervisor, you need to understand that words matter and pushing people away with thoughtless words matters. It will put distance between you and your staff, or you and your colleagues. And that distance will make you less effective in your work.

So pay attention. According to a recent article in the New York Times, here's a short list of some of the words and phrases that cause people to cringe:

"Them or those people"

"Model minority"

"Reverse discrimination"

"Not really black"

"Well spoken" (as code for "sounds white")

"White trash"

I attended a diversity training many years ago with [Frances Kendall](#) and someone asked her, "But what if they call me a racist?" Frances' answer was a game-changer for me. "So what?" she said. "I am a racist. I was raised in a racist society; I'm sure I am a racist. And I am trying hard to learn not to act racist."

I learned to pay attention to my words and the impact of those words. Here's a few steps that I learned to do if someone tells me I offended them or said something inappropriate:

1. Believe them.

I don't have to understand but I do have to trust their experience. They wouldn't say anything if there was not a significant impact, either in that moment or cumulatively over time. Don't try to talk them out of it.

2. Try not to get defensive.

If you were not trying to offend, then accept that you made a mistake and try to learn from it. We can always learn from others' experiences and perspectives.

3. Remember that intention is not the same as impact. Your intention may have been good, but the words may still harm someone. Intention does not equal impact.

4. Get curious. "Can you explain what I did wrong?" is a good start. They might not want to have to educate you however. In that case, believe them when they tell you they were offended and then research it on your own. Ask someone else for help if you need it.

If you are the receiver of cringe words or hear them directed at someone else:

1. Try not to shame the speaker.

That will immediately cause defensiveness and they won't hear anything else you say. This isn't about being "nice" or trying to protect the speaker; it is about wanting to keep the focus on work.

2. Use I-statements.

Speaking from your own experience, explain why the word choice may be hurtful. Relate it to work and work relationships so it doesn't verge into telling people what to think. This is about work.

3. Redirect.

If you don't have time or patience or inclination to explain what was offensive, then suggest they talk to someone else, or HR, or do research. It is not your responsibility to educate everyone who offends you but in the work place, you want to prevent this from happening again if you can.

In the workplace, words matter greatly. Words can facilitate collaboration or encourage factions. Words can inspire or create distance. As a supervisor, you need to be thoughtful of your words so that you are not creating liability in terms of harassment or discrimination but also so that you can work in partnership with your staff and your colleagues.

When I heard the man call women girls, I responded calmly and directly. "I need to let you know that as a professional woman, it is difficult to hear you refer to other women as girls. When you call grown professional women "girls" it can be heard as demeaning. It connects to all the decades and centuries when women could not be equal partners in the workplace and were in fact subject to harassment, discrimination and extremely limited choices."

Words matter. And when you are a supervisor, your words carry weight and power because of your position of power. That weight is especially important when you are the one speaking but it is important when you hear things also. When you ignore the good work of your staff and only comment on problems, your words will lead to disengagement, not improvement. When you ask someone for their opinion on a problem facing the department, that will lead to participation and engagement. (Assuming that you consider their ideas and you're not just asking because you think you should.)

Even if you don't understand why your words were offensive, do what I told the manager who called women girls. "Just stop it. It hurts people. Don't do it!"