



The Transformative Power of Positive Language

Especially during times of constant change and uncertainty, people expect their leaders to set the tone and direction for their organizations. One way to step up to this challenge is as simple as the words you choose to communicate your messages.

To set an affirmative tone in the workplace, regardless of the circumstances, make a conscious decision to use language that enables people to focus on the positive aspects of any given situation instead of the negative. For example, many agencies face serious resource constraints that limit their ability to keep their communities safe, healthy, and economically viable. Consider the difference in the likely behaviors engendered by these alternative approaches to this issue:

“We can’t implement this program because we don’t have the money.”

“Given our existing resources, what can we do to move this program forward?”

A positive approach is especially effective in helping agencies move forward productively after an incident that was handled badly. Asking negative questions (e.g., “Whose idea was it to do it that way?”) directs attention to a past that cannot be changed, causes defensiveness because we seek to assign blame, and does nothing to move the agency forward. On the other hand, asking positive questions (e.g., “What did we do well in this situation?”) requires people to identify what worked and discuss how those elements can be repeated in the future. The latter approach encourages people to build on the strengths that will enable the agency to be successful.

The words we choose, and especially the questions we ask, are critical to organizational success because we tend to find whatever we seek. As Henry Ford is reported to have said, “Whether you think you can or you think you can’t, you’re right.” In fact, questions

have been characterized as “fateful” because they send us in either positive or negative directions to search for answers. Consider two different perspectives on a disciplinary process:

“How can we create a professional standards division that corrects employee behavior?”

“How can we create a professional standards division that helps employees become fully successful?”

Which question is more likely to result in a process under which you would prefer to work? The words we choose and the questions we ask create mental pictures that guide our behaviors. Thus, language is a critical determinant of workplace performance. If you want to maximize your agency’s results, begin by asking and answering this question: “What kind of language am I using?”

More about Dr. Pat Lynch

Pat Lynch, Ph.D. enables first responders to elevate the level of public safety in their communities and to keep their personnel safe. She is the primary author of *Every Fire-Rescue Professional is a Leader: A Practical Guide to Individual, Team, and Organization Development*.