

THE POWER OF POSITIVE WORDS

STAN TOLER



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Introduction

THE POWER OF YOUR WORDS SHAPES YOUR OUTCOMES

Throughout the course of time, words have shaped and impacted various outcomes. The number of significant words and phrases quoted from world-changers are in many ways historical anchors for what we say and who we have become as individuals, our culture, and as a nation. Words form powerful statements and become memorable markers of our culture.

And with the influence of media and social media, our words carry a much greater influence on how words are leveraged, used, and shape our culture—both positively and negatively.

Leaders desire positive outcomes, but many are unaware of how their thoughts and words may undermine their success. Your words do have a direct effect on the outcomes of others around you, an organization, and yourself.

The Power of Positive Words provides insights of how words create and shape values, outcomes, timing, endurance, attitude, impact, and powerful truths. May this book serve as a reminder that our words are more than just what we speak. Rather, our words play a significant role in our outcomes toward success or failure.

Stan Toler

The background of the image is a light gray color. It features a large, thin white circle centered in the middle. From the center of this circle, several dashed white lines radiate outwards in various directions, creating a network-like pattern. There are also three solid white circles of different sizes scattered across the background: one in the top right corner, one in the bottom left corner, and one in the bottom center.

Part 1

THE TRUTH ABOUT WORDS

Chapter One

WORDS CREATE

Words have the power to shape reality, so we must learn to evaluate the intention behind the words we say and hear.

"Words are singularly the most powerful force available to humanity. We can choose to use this force constructively with words of encouragement, or destructively using words of despair. Words have energy and power with the ability to help, to heal, to hinder, to hurt, to harm, to humiliate and to humble."

YEHUDA BERG¹

Sir Paul McCartney, bass guitarist and singer for the Beatles, was going through a difficult time in the late 1960s. The Beatles were on the verge of breaking up. He was agitated, “living hard and playing hard,” as he put it.

One night he went to bed, exhausted, and somewhere between deep sleep and insomnia, he had a comforting dream about his mother, who had died when he was only fourteen. Although he had not seen her for fourteen years, he saw his mother clearly, especially her eyes. She said to him very gently, reassuringly, “Let it be.”

Later when he awoke, he had a great feeling, like she had visited him at this difficult point in his life and had given him this message: “Be gentle, don’t fight things, just try and go with the flow and it will all work out.”

Being a musician, he went right to the piano and started writing a

song, which he titled “Let It Be.” Later he played the song for the guys in the band and around a lot of people. Eventually it became the title song of an album.² That dream initiated a wonderful moment of creativity for him. They were certainly the right words at the right time.

You may not have had a dream that sparked great creativity. Or perhaps you have. Maybe you have a different experience of how certain words initiated creativity for you. Paul McCartney’s mother’s words came to him at just the right time to stir his creative energy.

POWER TO CREATE

Words do have the power to create. That is because words are not mere collections of sounds or letters. They are ideas released into the world. As such, they have creative power.

From the beginning

In the very beginning, God created the world by speaking it into existence. The ancient script tells us, “And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.”³ Your words may not have the dramatic power to create the universe, but when you speak ideas they do take on power in the lives of others.

Words also have the power to destroy. In this chapter, you will understand why words have the power to shape your reality. You will also learn to evaluate the intention behind the words you say and hear.

We have all had the experience of conversing with someone and saying the wrong thing. Instead of creating a connection, we inadvertently caused the other person to put up a wall. So how can we use words to build a bridge to others?

Creating a connection

Freelance writer Jennifer Merin asked several so-called experts for tips on how they bond with people in conversation. She observed these “experts” had “the ability to express extraordinary personal charm in brilliant conversation.”⁴

Modeling agency guru and image-builder extraordinaire Eileen Ford confessed she doesn’t do all the talking. “Mostly, I ask questions,”

she said. “Really, the most important thing is to express a keen and genuine interest in the people you’re speaking with.”

Malachy McCourt, Irish actor, writer, and politician, likes to seed his conversations with witty expressions that show interest in the other person. He declared, “They say there are ten words that always make people laugh. Of the two I can recall, one is ‘Irish.’ And the other is ‘prunes.’ And remember there’s a big difference between blarney and baloney. Blarney comes from the heart, but baloney is from the mouth.”

The late Rev. Jerry Falwell said his communication skills came from his genuine love of people and his desire to help them. “In the pulpit, I preach to the lost person, the underdog, the one who is in deep personal trouble and doesn’t know why another day is worth living. My goal is to let them know they are important to me and to God. To make a person aware that he or she is of great importance to you, you must show genuine interest.”

He went on to say, “They won’t share if you don’t care. As quickly as possible, make people know that you care about their accomplishments and their burdens...and it’s got to be genuine.”

What Merin endeavored to show in these examples is that learning to be a good conversationalist “wins friends, influences people and brings success in professional and personal life.”⁵

What did all these conversational experts try to create with their words? Not only with words but also by body language and good listening skills they created a bridge of communication, understanding, and caring. When we show sincere interest in others, we open the gate to cross such a bridge.

Words shape your reality

Henry Ford said, “The man who thinks he can and the man who thinks he can’t are both right. Which one are you?”⁶

His statement is true because the way we think determines the way we act. The words that flow through our minds determine what is real. Before you ever speak a word, you think that word in your mind. Sometimes people complain that a friend or coworker “speaks before he thinks.” It may seem to be true, but in some miraculous way, even

faster than we realize, the words originate in our minds before our lips utter them.

Scientists believe the human mind is capable of far more than we may think. Studies done on a mouse brain reveal that it contains seventy million neurons, while a human brain contains a thousand times that many neurons. Neuroscientists have created three-dimensional images of a mouse brain that compare to the size of a grain of salt. The data within that tiny segment is about one hundred terabytes, the equivalent of twenty-five thousand high-definition movies.⁷

If this boggles your minds, as it does mine, just think of the vast potential in the human brain for thinking positive thoughts or for contemplating negative ideas. Whichever one we major on determines the reality we believe about ourselves.

Perhaps you have heard the parable of the two wolves. It is based on the idea that within every person are two wolves, who are constantly fighting each other. The good wolf represents things like kindness, courage, love, truthfulness. The bad wolf represents things like hatred, fear, lying, cheating, cruelty. There's no big secret to which one dominates your life. It's the one you feed.⁸

The words we speak to ourselves in our thoughts arise from these positive and negative forces within us. They have been fed by what we read, what we watch on television, and how past relationships have affected us. Those whose parents have affirmed them and encouraged them are more likely to grow up with positive self-talk. They face life with greater confidence. Those who grew up with parents who criticized, condemned, and insulted them, instilling feelings of failure, are more inclined to suffer from negative self-talk.

We can learn to reject the negative self-talk. People can learn to have a positive self-image, but it takes more work if our early input has been negative.

Paul J. Meyer said, "Whatever you vividly imagine, ardently desire, sincerely believe, and enthusiastically act upon must inevitably come to pass."⁹ That's more than a catchy affirmation. You will notice it begins with imagining, thinking, forming words in our minds that inspire us and eventually lead to action.

Words shape other people's reality

Just as your internal speech affects your reality, you have the power to shape other people's reality by the way you talk to them. Parents have the first opportunity to affirm us by the words they use.

Lee Strobel, who was an award-winning legal editor for the *Chicago Tribune*, hungered to hear his father say, "Lee, I'm proud of you. You're really special to me. Son, I really like who you are."

Strobel admits his father may have tried to communicate such feelings in other ways, but it would have meant so much to *hear* it. Lee is sure his own workaholism through the years was an effort to heal the wound created by the lack of affirmation and an effort to earn his father's respect.

His father died while Lee was in law school. He flew back home for the wake and was amazed at the people who stopped by to greet him and say such things as: "Are you Wally's son? Oh, he was so proud of you... When you went off to Yale Law School, he was just thrilled. When you'd have a byline in the *Tribune*, he was always showing it to everybody. He couldn't stop talking about you! You were such an important part of his life."¹⁰

However, his father had not told him these things. He did not know until his father was dead. We can only guess at how it might have changed his life had he known these things when his father was alive.

It is all too easy to ignore people we should recognize, bypass people we should notice, or fail to affirm people who need our encouragement.

It's amazing how the right words can create a new reality in the workplace. Paul White, a psychologist who has specialized in working with businesses, families, and organizations for many years, asserts that by effectively communicating appreciation to your staff, you can create a more positive work environment: "You help not only the team members, but even the supervisors and leaders enjoy work more because they have fewer disgruntled team members and employees."¹¹ He says it contributes to longevity in the organization and provides better customer service because staff is more engaged.

Words can create relationships

Before you can create relationships you must be open to them. Judson Swihart described people who are not open to relationships:

Some people are like medieval castles. Their high walls keep them safe from being hurt. They protect themselves emotionally by permitting no exchange of feelings with others. No one can enter. They are secure from attack. However, inspection of the occupant finds him or her lonely, rattling around the castle alone. The castle-dweller is a self-made prisoner. He or she needs to feel loved by someone, but the walls are so high that it is difficult to reach out or for anyone else to reach in.¹²

If that describes you, then my best advice is to get out of your castle. Lower the drawbridge, cross the moat, and dare to interact with others.

Les Parrott III and his wife Leslie started offering a course at Seattle Pacific University several years ago that promised to answer questions openly and honestly about family, friends, dating, and sex. In other words, its purpose was to teach the basics of good relationships.

At the time, Les said, it was difficult to find a course in any college or university anywhere on how to have good relationships. He was a psychologist and Leslie a marriage and family therapist. They had stacks of relationship research that showed, with a little help “most of us can make our poor relationships better and good relationships great.”¹³

While a college course on the subject would be ideal, all of us can learn to develop good relationships if we’re determined to do so.

Saying the right thing at the right time is an invaluable skill to cultivate. If you say the wrong thing at the wrong time, you alienate the very people you love or at least want to get to know better.

How much you value a relationship will dictate how hard you work at making it better. Leonard Sweet tells about flying to a speaking engagement in Phoenix, where his friend Tom Wiles picked him up at the airport in his red Ford Ranger pickup. They began to talk about trucks and laughed at the bumper-sticker truism: “Nothing is more beautiful than a man and his truck.”

Later as he climbed into Tom's truck for the ride back to the airport, Sweet noticed two big scrapes by the passenger door. "What happened here?" he asked.

"My neighbor's basketball post fell on the truck and left those dents and white scars," Tom mourned.

"How awful! This truck is so new I can smell it."

"What's even worse is my neighbor doesn't feel responsible for the damage."

Sweet was indignant. "Did you get your insurance company to contact his insurance company? How are you going to get him to pay for it?"

Tom confessed that after a lot of soul-searching and discussions with his wife about hiring an attorney, it finally came down to this: he could either be in the right, or he could be in a relationship with his neighbor. "Since my neighbor will probably be with me longer than this truck, I decided that I'd rather be in a relationship than be right. Besides, trucks are meant to be banged up, so I got mine initiated into the real world a bit earlier than I expected."¹⁴

Wow! Now that is a person who values relationships. Tom could have ranted and raved, cursed, nursed a grudge, given his neighbor the cold shoulder or a hot tongue-lashing. Instead he put the relationship ahead of his feelings about the damage to his truck.

It goes along with what I read somewhere: "Keep skid chains on your tongue: always say less than you think. How you say it often counts more than what you say."¹⁵

People may forget what you say, but they'll never forget how you say it. And they will never forget how it made them feel.

THE RIGHT WORDS AT THE RIGHT TIME

The ancient wise man said, "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: a time to be born and a time to die...a time to be silent and a time to speak."¹⁶

Have you heard of Job? He was a wealthy man who lived in the Middle East in the second millennium BC and had a big family—ten children in all. He owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand

camels, five hundred donkeys, and five hundred yoke of oxen. You can imagine how many servants it took to care for all his livestock and tend his fields.

But Job fell on hard times. One day, marauding tribes swooped down and stole all his oxen and donkeys and killed the servants tending these animals. One servant escaped to give Job the bad news.

Then another servant arrived, giving Job the message that lightning had struck his fields, burning up the sheep and the servants who cared for them. A third messenger came, informing Job that three raiding parties had swept down on his camels, making off with them and killing his servants.

Can you believe it? Another messenger arrived with the tragic news that a tornado had caused the house to collapse where his sons and daughters had gathered for a feast. All his children were dead.

As if that weren't enough, Job became afflicted with painful sores from head to foot. Meanwhile, his wife, doubtless suffering her own grief from the loss of her children, told him he would be better off dead.

Then three friends showed up to comfort Job. It's commendable that they dropped everything else to come and visit their friend. When other family members and friends had abandoned Job, they stayed by his side, saying nothing. That was a good plan. Sometimes the best thing to say is nothing.

But after a while, the silence got to them and they began to speak, one after another, and they did what too many try to do in times of tragic sorrow: they tried to find reasons for the tragedy and assign blame for the loss.

There's a time to speak and a time to keep silent. They did well when they were silent. They were miserable comforters when they spoke.¹⁷

Obviously, whether trying to comfort suffering friends or trying to motivate a work force, we want to speak the right words at the right time. We want to connect with friends, neighbors, family members, or employees in a way that builds people up, not that tears them down.

Words of affirmation

Saying or writing some positive thought to a friend or coworker

goes a long way toward creating a feeling of well-being in that person. Hans Finzel even created an “affirmation continuum” to illustrate how different people require different kinds of affirmation.¹⁸ At one end of the continuum are the “desperados,” which Finzel describes as people who can’t get enough praise. They are desperate for words of approval. “‘Warm fuzzy’ is their middle name,” he says. Some people especially need it when they are new to the job and are looking for evidence they are accepted and that they’re doing a good job.

At the other end of the continuum are the “auto-pilots.” He calls these people “Energizer Bunnies.” If you try to praise them or give them a compliment, they brush it off as if it’s a pesky gnat buzzing around their head. Or such a person may be skeptical and wonder why you’re buttering them up. Or they wonder what you really want.

In between are the “up-and-downers,” those who seem to go through peaks and valleys. Sometimes they’re fine. They work well and don’t need a thing. But when they hit a snag, they really need to be propped up with words of encouragement. You know who these people are in your life, whether they’re family members or coworkers, and your words of affirmation make all the difference in the world to them. You create a new reality for them every time you affirm them.

Finzel suggests there are actually “normal” people, the many folks who putter through life without an apparent need to be affirmed. However, the more you think about it, the more you realize that, as John Ortberg says, “Everybody’s normal until you get to know them.”¹⁹

According to Tom Peters, the management excellence guru, “We wildly underestimate the power of the tiniest personal touch. And of all personal touches, I find the short, handwritten ‘nice job’ note to have the greatest impact.”²⁰ He cited a former boss who took about fifteen minutes a day to jot a half-dozen notes to people with whom he had interacted through the day. He was astonished by the people who would later thank him for thanking them.

Words of affirmation create an atmosphere of encouragement.

Words of confidence

The renowned Italian tenor Enrico Caruso was a person of great

confidence. But at the beginning of his career, he was uncertain. One opening night at the opera, Caruso was standing in the wings, waiting to go onstage, when he had an attack of stage fright. He felt his throat was constricted. He began to perspire and actually shake with fear.

The stagehands nearby heard him say, in little more than a whisper, “Out! You miserable ‘little me,’ get out of my way! Out! Out!”

“By that tremendous effort of will,” Norman Vincent Peale observed, “Caruso was changing his self-image.”²¹ He changed his fear into confidence, went onstage, and sang as only Caruso could.

That’s a wonderful illustration of using words to change your own reality. But how can we instill confidence in others? How do we give them the boost they need to overcome their fears and insecurities?

Of course, parents are the best equipped to do this if they will instill what Bobb Biehl calls “life confidence” or “core confidence” when children are young. This happens when parents give a child unconditional love and affirmation for what she or he has done. This does not mean the parents never discipline their children. All good parents set boundaries and establish consequences when a child crosses those boundaries.

At the same time, when a child does something positive, Biehl says, parents should affirm their children with words like, “That was good; you really did a great job on that; that’s pretty; that’s nice; that’s wonderful.”²²

When children grow up in this kind of environment—rather than an atmosphere of yelling, criticism, and negative comments—they develop confidence. Unfortunately, many children do grow up in negative environments and come to adulthood putting on a “mask of confidence.”

When we live or work with those who do not have true confidence, it becomes all the more important to give words of praise, of gratitude, or affirmation when a family member or coworker does something well. If you are the boss, it can be crucial.

Charles Pitts, the man whose company built the Toronto subway, said, “When you ride up to a site and find fifty or a hundred people standing there waiting for the boss to make a decision, you don’t call a committee meeting. You get them busy immediately. If you don’t know

exactly what to do, you at least get them doing something that won't hurt. People have got to feel the boss knows what ought to be done."

Fred Smith, commenting on Pitts's observations, said, "A leader simply must have the confidence to lead. You can't afford to get confused in front of your people. If you want to be confused, do it at home! Confusion, like prayer, is best in a closet."²³

Confidence builds confidence. If you're confident—as long as you're not cocky and overconfident—you will instill confidence in those around you. Your actions as well as your words can boost the confidence of your coworkers, friends, and family members. Let them know you believe in them, that you trust them, that you know they can do it.

Words of confidence create feelings of security.

Words of humility

Is it possible to *create* humility with words? I believe it's possible to *express* humility. For instance, Winston Churchill led the nation of Great Britain through World War II, from which they emerged victorious. People often gave him credit for inspiring the nation to persevere. During his eightieth birthday address to Parliament on November 30, 1954, Churchill reflected on his role in leadership: "I have never accepted what many people have kindly said—namely that I inspired the nation. Their will was resolute and remorseless, and as it proved, unconquerable. It fell to me to express it. It was the nation and the race dwelling all round the globe that had the lion's heart. I had the luck to be called upon to give the roar."²⁴

That incident certainly gave Churchill the chance to *express* a humble attitude. But what words could we use to *create* humility? David McKenna, who served as president of two colleges and a seminary during his career, remembers his seven-year-old son's question shortly after his first inauguration as a college president. It was in the early 1960s and the lad asked, "Daddy, is President Kennedy great?"

"Yes," McKenna answered, "he is a great president."

The boy hesitated a moment and asked, "Well, you're a president. Why aren't you great?"²⁵

We have all had the experience of being made to feel humble when a family member confronts us with the reality of who we are. But that isn't quite the same as *creating* humility. We do have to be careful about assuming a humble persona. That can too easily degenerate into pride over our humility.

As Lisa Edmondson pointed out, "A talented trumpeter who toots his own horn winds up playing to an empty theatre. A talented trumpeter who lets others recognize his talent winds up a legend."²⁶

Perhaps we come close to creating humility when the word picture we create produces feelings of humility in the person who hears us. For instance, William Beebe, the naturalist, used to tell a story about Teddy Roosevelt. The two men would go out on the lawn at Sagamore Hill in the evening and search the skies for a certain spot of light near the great square of Pegasus. Then Roosevelt would recite: "That is the spiral galaxy in Andromeda. It is as large as our Milky Way. It consists of a hundred billion suns. It is one of a hundred billion galaxies." Then, with a grin, he would say, "Now I think we are small enough! Let's go to bed."²⁷

That sets an example *and* speaks words intended to create and inspire humility.

Words of peace

On the island of Oahu, Hawaii, visitors saw a slogan decorating hotels and restaurants in early December 1941: "A World of Happiness in an Ocean of Peace." Amid the fragrant flowers and warm surf of the Pacific, who could imagine anything but peace? The word *pacific* even means "having a soothing effect; peaceable." Many residents of Honolulu didn't even lock their doors. It was a world of happiness in an ocean of peace.

Then on December 7, 1941, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and peace disappeared.²⁸

The night before he died in Warm Springs, Georgia, Franklin D. Roosevelt wrote, "We seek peace—enduring peace. We must cultivate the science of human relations—the ability of all peoples, of all kinds, to live together and work together, in the same world at peace."

President Dwight D. Eisenhower titled the second volume of his

memoirs *Waging Peace*. And President John F. Kennedy said in his inaugural speech in 1961, “Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate.” And the motivation? Peace is more rewarding than war.²⁹

Nobody questions we need peace in our world, peace in our families, and peace in the marketplace. Amiel Handelsman suggests some simple ways to improve relationships and create peace among your coworkers.³⁰

- Apologize. Especially if you have done something in the past that hurt or offended your coworker. A sincere word of apology can make a big difference.
- Say thanks. Be on the lookout for even little things the other person does that are meaningful to you. Be specific as to what you appreciate.
- Have a conversation for relationship. In other words, “speak genuinely and listen openly.” Just spending time with an individual means a great deal.
- Turn toward them. Whenever it is feasible to do so, turn to them for help. Ask a question. Be open to their suggestions.
- Stop doing something that bothers them. If you know this person has a pet peeve, don’t do it.
- Acknowledge changes they have made. When they do something positive, acknowledge it. You don’t need to compare it with former behavior. But recognize the positive result.

How much better will life be at home and at work when your words contribute toward an atmosphere of peace? Words of peace create an atmosphere of calmness.

Words of wisdom

English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote, “Common sense in an uncommon degree is what the world calls wisdom.”³¹ Yet, as we all know, common sense is very uncommon.

Several years ago, authorities confiscated quite a menagerie of reptiles in an undercover sting in Kentucky that was part of a crackdown on the venomous snake trade. Included in the raid were forty-two copperheads, eleven timber rattlesnakes, three cottonmouth water moccasins, a western diamondback rattlesnake, two cobras, and a puff adder. Altogether—a deadly bunch of critters.

As a part of the sting, undercover officers bought more than two hundred illegal reptiles. Some were advertised on websites. Jim Harrison, director of the Kentucky Reptile Zoo, said, “You can purchase anything off the Internet except common sense.”³²

Like common sense, wisdom is very uncommon. Wisdom is more than knowledge. Knowledge is the accumulation of facts we have stored in our brains. Wisdom is knowing what to do with the knowledge, especially how to apply it to life. Most of the people I consider to be wise have had some life experience. Life has taught them that some things work and some other things don’t work. Theodore Roosevelt said, “Wisdom is nine-tenths a matter of being wise in time. Most of us are too often wise after the event.”³³

That’s true, of course. But perhaps it’s true because we learn from the event. Fortunate are we if we think of the wise thing to do or say during the event, on the spur of the moment, in real time. However, we don’t need to hang our heads if our wisest ideas come after reflecting on what happened, what was said, and what was done.

Life lessons teach us common sense. When words of wisdom are spoken, people often think, *Of course, why didn’t I think of that?* It seems so obvious after we hear someone say it. Yet those commonsense people are the ones to whom others turn with their questions because the answers are so wise.

Words of wisdom create a sense of assurance and well-being.

Words of encouragement

Everybody can be an encourager. All you have to do is look beyond yourself and say something positive about another person.

Truett Cathy, founder of Chick-fil-A restaurants, was a great believer in encouragement. He said, “Do you know how you can tell when a

person needs encouragement? If he is breathing! We all need encouragement. I get a lot of encouragement, but I never got an overdose.”³⁴

Charles Schwab would have agreed with that statement. He believed that no one “could do real work except under the stimulus of encouragement and enthusiasm, and the approval of the people for whom he is working.”³⁵

Young Tommy had a difficult time in school. He couldn’t seem to keep up with the other students and failed every time he tried something. His teacher gave up on him. She told his mother he would never amount to much because he just couldn’t learn.

However, Tommy’s mother was a nurturer. Furthermore, she did not give up easily. So she began teaching him at home. Every time he failed, she encouraged him. She gave him hope.

Tommy grew up to be an inventor. Eventually he held more than a thousand patents. You may know him as the one who invented the phonograph and the first commercially practical incandescent electric lightbulb. Yes, you guessed it: young Tommy was Thomas Edison, who, like most of us, thrived on encouragement.³⁶

Words of encouragement create an atmosphere in which people can thrive.

No question about it: words create. What words will you use to create a better life for yourself and others?