

# Want to be a better leader? Watch your language

By James E. Lukaszewski

Every school board member and school administrator I've ever met has had the same goal: improving schools. Some of the solutions can be quite complicated. I have a simple one: Replace your negative language with positive words that are powerful, authoritative and strategic.

The problem is that most of us, mindlessly, fall into the "If you don't eat your peas, you won't get dessert." style of communication. Every one of us, including me, routinely uses negative language in our daily speech and the documents we write. Some of us have moved from single negatives (can't, couldn't, don't, never, not, unable, won't) to compound negatives ("I don't disagree" "My answer is not no" "It's not inappropriate" and even, "No problem, it won't be any trouble at all.")

Negative statements create negative results. The truth is that one negative creates confusion. Two negatives contained in a single thought, sentence, or explanation causes consternation. And three negatives can demotivate, even paralyze the most energized adult.

Also, negative language energizes critics. Protestors, opponents, activists and reporters all seem to thrive on negative language.

I have worked with corporate chief executives and other leaders on communication issues for more than 30 years. Of all leaders I've encountered, school board members are among the ones whom I think could benefit the most from a shift in their communication style, because school boards conduct most of their business in the public eye. It is a virtue that school board members are ordinary citizens, but their use of ordinary communication styles often hinders them in achieving their goals.

At school board meetings, do you ever find yourself saying things like "I don't like that idea," "That's not our fault," "We can't talk about that," or "We're not ready for that"? If so, you are manufacturing confusion and stoking the fire of contention. School board members feed critics and squeeze out positive feelings from their districts when they say to each other, "Your facts are wrong," or "That's impossible."

Is it ever useful to use negative language? Yes, but only for rhetorical necessity. The Gettysburg Address has some negative language. If Lincoln had asked me, I might have suggested a few revisions, though (see sidebar).

As a school leader, your language should be predominantly positive. In coaching we learn that for every negative mentioned about another human being, at least three to five positives are needed to mitigate the damage. That's why we need to replace our negative phraseologies with positive ones.

## Improving Lincoln?

*Could Lincoln's Gettysburg address be improved by substituting positive language for negative phraseologies? I think so. See if you agree:*

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation, so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate—we cannot consecrate—we cannot hallow—this ground. Only the brave men, living and dead, who strug-



gled here, ~~have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract.~~ **can adequately consecrate this ground.** The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it ~~can never forget~~ **must remember** what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the ~~unfinished work that remains to be done~~ which they fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us – that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion – that we here highly resolve that these dead shall ~~not have died in vain—that have died so~~ this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government: of the people, by the people, for the people, shall ~~not perish from the earth last forever.~~

– James E. Lukaszewski

### Replacing negative language with positive language

Here are some examples of converting negative language into positive declarations:

**Negative:** You're wrong.  
**Positive:** My belief, based on the facts, is that . . .

**Negative:** I don't believe it ... or you.  
**Positive:** Here's what I believe. This is my perspective.

**Negative:** It won't work; it never worked.  
**Positive:** Here's how it might work. Let's try another approach.

**Negative:** That's a lie.  
**Positive:** Check the facts more carefully and you'll find . . . or, here's what I believe.

**Negative:** We don't invest in benefits our employees won't use.  
**Positive:** We have three categories of employees, each with distinctly different benefit needs.

**Negative:** We've never done that.  
**Positive:** Here, specifically, is what we do . . . or have done.

Transforming your style into one that is truly positive, constructive and helpful requires discipline. First, monitor yourself. Write down your negative phrases and think about how you could re-word them as above. Second, commit yourself to lis-

ten for and collect the negative phrases of others and go through the exercise of making them positive, adding them to your lexicon of transformed negatives. Third, put your personal transformation into practice every day. Correct others gently but persistently.

### Use 'power words'

What makes President Barack Obama such an effective speaker? Part of the answer is his use of power words. Power words add energy, thickness and momentum to the conversation and to writing.

Power words are critically important for confronting "color" words – words that are emotionally negative in nature, words like ashamed, afraid, worried, frightened, embarrassed. Color words grab the spokesperson or an audience by their guts. Use power words to make statements and verbal images more important and to detoxify the emotional power of color words:

**Color question:** Was it a bad or stupid choice?

**Power response:** It was an important choice critical to our progress.

**Color question:** Will this problem destroy your reputation?

**Power response:** Our most crucial concern is that they understand the seriousness of the circumstances so we can all resolve it together.

**Color question:** You've certainly bumbled and fumbled this last effort; humiliated was the word we heard often.

**Power response:** We're surprised at the public reaction, but intend to respond powerfully and aggressively to the public's concerns.

School board members can benefit from positive language because they deal with so many contentious situations: community upset, labor problems and negotiations. You can wage a war with negative words or wage peace with positive language.

As you communicate your next series of commands, suggestions, or recommendations, or response to the commands, recommendations, and comments of others, remember that using positive language produces calmness, clarity and understanding. Positive language reduces contention and contentiousness. Disagreements, criticism, arguments, divorces, antagonism, bullying and wars are initiated and prolonged by negative language.

I hope you had an epiphany while reading this article, or were reminded of a truth you've already learned. If every school board member and school administrator in New York State used positive language, the effect would be far greater than the federal stimulus package that Congress just passed. The effects would last longer, too. It's a legacy worth striving for.

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## Four myths that hold you back

Here are four common myths that undermine leadership:

- The best ideas come from the clash of intellects and perspectives; it is a virtue to be contrarian.
- Strong leaders say, "No." There must be limits.
- Good leaders are tough, and being tough means being negative.
- If someone attacks, abuses, accuses or bullies us, we must respond in kind or we will look weak and ineffective.

Recognizing these beliefs as myths and affirmatively avoiding these behaviors and concepts will make you a more effective leader. I guarantee it.

– James E. Lukaszewski