

## Words Matter

“Your words have power; use them wisely.” *Anonymous*

Over my many years in the business world, I talked often about the importance of carefully choosing the right words when communicating to clients, associates, family, coworkers and friends. I encouraged our team (and myself) to understand the power of their words and to speak and write with care. Much of my focus on the impact of words stemmed from my own occasional slips of the tongue or use of sarcastic humor when an insensitive comment caused hurt feelings. On the other hand, I often noticed that a bit of tasteful humor or an occasional kind word could energize an audience or brighten a person’s day. Words matter.

In recent years, as I became more mindful of what and how I phrased things; my verbal gaffes were few and far between. Yet, at a recent non-profit event, while presenting with a close partner, I unintentionally described a group of young people in an inappropriate manner. My thoughtless comments in that moment caused considerable harm - to our partner and his non-profit, my associates, the event host, and the audience. Beyond the hurt feelings and disappointment, it’s difficult to gauge the extent of damage done. Just as a good deed generates a positive ripple effect, so a thoughtless comment can have an equally negative impact.

Once I fully understood the impact of what I had said, I was stunned. How could this happen, particularly when it seemingly goes against my actions, beliefs and values? When one screws up, it often prompts intense soul searching. I’ve replayed the moment over and over with no great insights but maybe some reasons and certainly a path for future action. I know I can sometimes be glib and careless; that most likely played a part. But was implicit bias also a factor? While difficult to accept, I believe it did influence my comments.

Of course, I apologized profusely to all that were impacted by my remarks. They were far more forgiving, kind, and supportive than I expected. While I very much appreciated that support, I can never unsay those hurtful remarks. Words matter.

"Be careful with your words. Once they are said, they can be only forgiven, not forgotten." *Anonymous*

This commentary is not meant to be cathartic for me nor another apology to those I offended but more about possible lessons. [Trabian Shorters](#), a New York Times bestselling author and one of the world's leading social entrepreneurs, says, "You can't lift people up by putting them down". He is a global authority on [asset framing](#), a cognitive tool that “defines people by their aspirations and contributions before noting their challenges and investing in them for their continued benefit to society. The

sequence and word choices in that definition are very important. How you introduce someone, or something, makes all the difference in framing.” I knew of Trabian’s asset framing concepts, yet somehow managed to use “deficit framing” language instead, defining that group of young people by their challenges and ignoring their aspirations or contributions. I could and should have done better.

As for potential lessons, I believe mindset plays a prominent role when speaking to any group. It’s important to know your audience but also recognize that your values and beliefs are conveyed, either directly or subtly, whenever you address a group of people. This demands a mindful and caring approach. Though one’s intentions may be pure, a slip of the tongue can reveal an unconscious bias that results in inadvertently offending people. While many of us are at our best when we speak off the cuff, being on stage and not thoughtfully preparing can lead to unfortunate comments. As Winston Churchill famously said, “I am just preparing my impromptu remarks.” Public speaking requires competence and confidence. Had I been better prepared and maintained a more focused mindset, this situation could have been avoided.

This recent experience is prompting me to question some of my beliefs and assumptions. I hope to better understand other perspectives and to more effectively discern my own implicit biases. I know that we all have biases. But, since many of our biases are unconscious, they are also elusive. Ruth Bader Ginsburg said, “I think unconscious bias is one of the hardest things to get at.” Investigate and acknowledge them, then make an effort to understand and address them. This requires education and determination. I’ve learned that in many ways, we are shaped by our mistakes. True learning rarely comes when things are going well. But embracing the lessons that come from our mistakes can be transformative.

There are many valuable courses and trainings on overcoming unconscious bias. This [article](#) from the Harvard Business Review references a quote from a recent Microsoft training program, “The next time you catch yourself making a judgment about someone’s background or working preference, ask yourself, could this be an asset? This is a simple way of reframing your thinking about a person or a situation.”

Words do indeed matter and have great power, for good and otherwise. My recent public comments have compelled me to take a harder look at myself. Yet, it’s not enough to simply increase one’s awareness. That’s just the first step. Changing behavior is the ultimate goal. This experience has fueled my commitment to be more actively mindful of others’ perspectives and to address my biases in a more constructive way. I hope some of the realizations I’ve had to face and hard lessons learned can be of value to others.

“You can never have an impact on society if you have not changed yourself.” *Nelson Mandela*