

## ▶ MANAGING EDITOR'S DESK



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I've been intrigued by the power of words for years. In fact, one might say that Nelson has been a student of words—not so much from the standpoint of building a vocabulary but from the standpoint of realizing that we can learn a lot about people through the words they use.

Those who know me know that I tune into people as much for the words they use as for the content of what they say (or write). In fairly short order I can usually tell if people are kind, reflective, lazy, studious, wise, happy, confident, irritable, inspiring, aggressive, cooperative, and so forth, based not on what they say but rather on the words they use. Depending on the words a person chooses to emphasize, even more can be learned about who that person really is and what's important to him or her. It's a skill that is really not that difficult to master. The next time you are in conversation with someone, by all means pay attention to what he or she is saying. But in addition, *listen* to the words the person uses and even how he or she uses them. You'll come to know that person much better—I promise.

Why is this skill (if indeed this way of listening merits being called a skill) of any interest to us?

I believe that relationships are the key to just about everything (something I learned, by the way, in physics, not sociology). It therefore follows that knowing more about the people with whom we are in relationships helps us to make those relationships more fruitful, enjoyable, and successful. And make no mistake: the work of environmental health requires us to have many relationships. The better those relationships are, the more successful (and less stressed) we can be in the work that we do.

## Real Power!

*There is a huge difference between telling a woman, "when I'm with you, time stands still" versus "your face could stop a clock!"*

Knowing about who a person is also gives us a context for what he or she says. Without context, content has little meaning. (A philosophy professor of mine once talked about how a "cup of coffee" was meaningless unless it had the cup [context] to be in.)

As much as I've enjoyed tuning into words over the years, my respect for their awesome power soared even further following my recent read of Malcolm Gladwell's book, *Blink*.

Gladwell's book deals with our subconscious ability to quickly read a situation and in a "blink" draw surprisingly sound conclusions. This fast-paced process occurs without ever tapping into either the vast processing power of our brains or our honed reasoning skills.

Talk about interesting words: in his book, Gladwell introduces his readers to terms such as "rapid cognition" and "thin slicing."

He describes rapid cognition as the lightening fast attainment of a conclusion or perspective. Thin slicing refers to taking just a tiny "slice" of information about any particular issue or situation and then arriving at a surprisingly well-grounded conclusion. He makes a convincing case that our subconscious has evolved to give all of us these impressive capacities.

While the portions of the book that dealt with such topics were quite interesting, his considered discussion of "priming" fascinated me the most. The impact that priming can have on our views and behaviors is actually a little scary.

Gladwell describes numerous experiments in which people were unconsciously led to assume certain behaviors and/or judgments through the clever use of words. These test subjects never even realized that they were being moved in such directions! A couple of examples will help explain how this was done.

The first experiment involved something that Gladwell described as a "scrambled sentence" test. In this test, the subject was given 10 sets of 5 scrambled words (e.g., one set consisted of the words "shoes, give, replace, old, the"). The subject was then asked to construct a sentence using four of those words (in this case, the correct answer would be, "Replace the old shoes.").

The experimenters discovered that after giving this test to numerous subjects, the subjects walked more slowly out of the room than they did when they entered it. "Huh," you say! Why would that strange behavior happen?

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It turns out that within each five-word set, the experimenters had dropped in a word that had to do with old age. In the set above, the word “old” was included. In other sets, words like “wrinkle,” “gray,” “bingo,” “lonely,” and so forth were used. Though the test subjects had no idea that these words had been carefully sprinkled into the experiment, the subconscious part of the subject's brain picked up on the idea of *oldness*, which caused the subjects to act more like older people! Hence, they walked more slowly out of the room!

In short, the subject had been “primed” to act in a certain way without the subject even knowing it through only the clever use of words.

In another equally fascinating experiment, two sets of subjects were given different scrambled sentence tests. The scrambled sentence sets for the first group included the words “aggressively, bold, rude, bother, disturb, intrude, and infringe.” The second group's scrambled sentence sets included the words “respect, considerate, polite, appreciate, patiently, yield, and courteous.”

After unscrambling the words and completing the sentences (without of course knowing that they were being subconsciously influenced by the words they were looking at), the subjects were instructed to walk over to the professor running the experiment to get their next assignment. The professor purposely set things up so that he would be speaking with someone else when the subjects approached. The subjects who had been primed to be rude waited only five minutes on average before they interrupted the professor to ask about their next assignment.

Of the subjects who had been primed to be polite, 82% never interrupted and just stood there until the professor intentionally ended his conversation after 10 minutes had passed!

We can only gasp at the power of words once again! Words can actually impact our behaviors and judgments without us even realizing it.

So why am I talking about Gladwell's book and the insights that we can gain from knowing more about the power of words?

I write this only days after the tragic shooting in Tucson. In the aftermath of that tragedy, we've all read more articles than our eyes can handle about civility and the importance of being able to work together effectively.

Environmental health is a profession that doesn't just encourage teamwork; it requires it. This is despite the fact that a lot of our work begins in an adversarial setting that pits the regulator against the regulated.

On the pages of this very *Journal*, voices within our profession have long conducted a stimulating debate about the extent to which we should be relying on education (as opposed to enforcement) to achieve our regulatory goals. While we can't always avoid the hammer of regulation to get to the results we seek, the literature is pretty clear that an educational approach usually results in better outcomes over the long haul. When people understand and internalize the reasons why a change is necessary, they are much more likely to make and sustain that change than if such a change is forced upon them by another.

So how can we achieve—through education—higher levels of voluntary compliance with the environmental health principles and regulations we stand for? And while I am at it, how can we improve our teams and the work that we do together?

I submit that more can be achieved if we pay more attention to the words we use. Whether it is a discussion with a colleague or a recalcitrant business owner, think about the words the other person is expressing and what those words reveal about that person. Then use those insights to choose the words that you will use as you move your discussion to a place where the two of you can connect and build something.

Similarly, when involved in a situation where a behavior change is sought, think for a moment and then pull the words from your vocabulary that support the direction that you are encouraging a person to go in. Maybe you are looking for ways to open up a doorway for understanding. Perhaps you need time to carefully explore an issue with someone. Or maybe you are facing a tense situation that you need to disarm. The words you choose (irrespective of content) can help get you where you need to go.

The victory is often fleeting when you climb up on that tractor-trailer and bulldoze your way through an obstacle. You more often secure longer-term resolutions and lasting cooperation by tailoring your comments to the obvious concerns and sensitivities of the other person. In the end, whether the goal is problem resolution, cooperation, or teamwork,

success is often just a matter of finding and using the right words. As I was taught many years ago while in the dating world, there is a huge difference between telling a woman, “when I'm with you, time stands still” versus “your face could stop a clock!” The content or meaning is the same in both cases. But I assure you, the reactions to those different ways of making the same point are very different!

It is truly amazing how powerful words can be. Words can wound or heal, alienate or educate. Use this power wisely.

Postscript: In my last column I mentioned that I now spend at least an hour a day reading economic literature. After writing this column, I carefully went through hundreds of articles I've read and saved to pull key words out of each. I was astonished at what I found.

My list was overwhelmingly populated with words and phrases like “gloomy,” “recession,” “demoralized,” “high unemployment,” “weak dollar,” “deflation,” “joblessness,” “deficits,” “unemployment,” “dark clouds,” “taxation,” “worries,” “alarming,” “black hole,” “needed financial reform,” and so forth. Knowing what I now know about priming, I couldn't help but wonder if the collective impact of all this material has subconsciously victimized us into believing that the economy is in worse shape than it actually is. True or not, I am more alert to the power of these words than I was before and I now factor that into my thinking as I try to understand what the economic data is really telling us. ☹️

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