Words and Phrases that Can Sabotage Your Credibility

Career Development

If I started this column with, “This article isn’t very good, but I just want to share it with you in case you like it” or “I’m sorry if reading it is a waste of your time,” how would you feel about me as the author? Not too great, I assume. With indirect language, we undercut ourselves at work. This

month’s career column tackles the words and phrases we use that subtly undermine us.

Nondefinitive emotional language

Often, this category of phrases that subvert us start with: "I think," "I feel,” and "I believe.” Picture the impact of each of these responses to a question from senior management:

> Question: What is holding up the Company C negotiation?
>
> Answer number one: I believe we’re still negotiating limitation of liability.
>
> Answer number two: Limitation of liability. We can’t agree on the limit, but we’re getting closer.

The first answer makes you sound like you have no idea what’s going on; whereas, the second answer shows your grasp of the situation. If you’re asked a question that you genuinely don’t know the answer to, that’s OK. Don’t start your answer with, “I believe…” Be clear that you don’t know and tell the person asking that you’ll find out the answer or give the requester the name of a person who knows the answer to the question.

"Just"

I’m guilty of using many of the words and phrases discussed in this column, but I’m trying to stop using them in situations that torpedo me. “Just” is an example of a word I’m constantly deleting from my messages because my inclination is to include it.

An example of using “just” in a way that is subversive is, “I’m just following up on that request I made two weeks ago.” The “just” implies that you should not be bothering the person you are communicating with. You include the “just” to soften the request, but all it does is reduce you to a less important person than whoever you’re emailing.

Don’t get me wrong: Being polite in the workplace is a wonderful and underrated habit. The difference is that the use of “just” in this context and scenarios like it is not polite; it’s unnecessary and subtly diminishes your worth.

"I'm no authority on that"

Chances are the person who came to you did so because they think you are an authority on whatever they’re asking. If you’re not, that’s okay and state why. However, if you’re using “I’m not an authority on that” as a self-deprecating tool, eliminate it from your vocabulary.

Self-deprecation in the workplace can be an effective ice-breaking and bonding mechanism, but not when it’s about something as important as your job. Saying you’re not an expert to make yourself or the person you’re talking to more comfortable doesn’t do anyone any favors, especially you.

Filler words

If you watch reality television like *The Bachelor*, you’ve heard a lot of, “I’m, like, really, like, enjoying

our, like, time together, and I, like..." You get the point and I wish I were exaggerating.

Filler words are just what they sound like: Unnecessary words that are inserted into our conversations as a nervous habit. Examples include, “Like," “basically,” “um,” “uh,” "pretty much," and I’m sure you can think of many others you use or hear others use.

Relying on filler words is one of the most important habits to break for at least two reasons:

- First, filler words are distracting for your listener. They start to focus so much on words like “um” and “like” that they miss the full impact of your communication.
- Second, these words are unwittingly self-sabotaging as they can unfairly signal insecurity, frivolity, or incompetence to the listener.

Sometimes, using these fillers is so routine that we don’t even hear them anymore. If that’s the case for you, ask a trusted family member or friend to call you out every time they hear you use “like” or “uh” or your filler word of choice.

Confusing and/or flippant responses

An example of this type of response is answering a yes or no question with "Yeah, no,” and then actually answering the question. I don’t know when this started, but I find myself doing it sometimes. It seems like a nervous habit or a brain glitch when you have too much to say and can’t say it all at once. What comes out (“yeah, no”) makes no sense. It’s also confusing to your listener and may even seem flippant.

To correct this behavior, take a beat or two after you’re asked a question. This pause — though short — will allow you time to gather your thoughts and answer coherently rather than responding quickly and nonsensically just to get something out.

“Actually”

Many of the words and phrases addressed in this month’s column don’t need to be banned altogether from your lexicon. It’s their context that causes your use of them to undermine you.

“Actually” is one such word that can be helpful or detrimental in your message. This word can serve very useful purposes. However, when used in the context of what can be done, “actually” may make you seem less capable than you really are.

For example, picture your boss asking you if you can take on a project. If you respond with, “I can actually do that,” the addition of “actually” makes it seem like people would have assumed you couldn’t do it. If, instead, you respond with, “Absolutely,” or a similarly assertive word or phrase, you’ll seem as adept as you are.

Excuses

This includes excuses for anything that you should know or do. For example, I hear people say, “I'm not good with names” a lot, but that is an excuse. Find a way to be good with names.

My grandfather always quoted Dale Carnegie: “A person's name is to that person, the sweetest,

most important sound in any language.” If you need to keep notes on names or use mental tricks to remember names, do it. It makes people feel valued and gives you professional credibility; thus, it’s important.

Saying that you’re not good with names offers an excuse, making you seem like you lack a decent memory or don’t care about people enough to remember their names. It may even cause someone to think you’re disrespectful. So, eliminate excuses as much as you can.

Negative preambles

Negative preambles are those qualifiers we use when we’re about to present an idea or work product. Starting with comments such as, “This may not be good,” undercut us before we even begin.

We probably do it if we’re insecure about what we’ll present or as a self-defense mechanism to get ahead of any criticism we may receive. If we flip our way of thinking so that we prepare and feel confident in our work and so that constructive criticism is welcomed, we can overcome this self-defeating language.

Time qualifiers

You might say something like, “This won’t take long” or “This will be quick.” These types of statements indicate that others’ time is more valuable than yours. Again, courteousness and concern for others’ time are important and appreciated.

There are times when it is considerate to indicate that you will be quick if you know someone has a call, a meeting, or some other deadline, but don’t make a habit out of it because you somehow feel less important than others.

Honesty qualifiers

When you say things like, “Honestly,” “Frankly,” “If I can be honest with you,” “Let me be frank,” “I’ll be candid,” or “To be honest,” it sounds like you’re overcompensating for a lie. You may not be because this has become a bit of a filler, but it sends an odd message.

Starting a sentence with something like, “To be honest,” makes the listener think, even if subconsciously, “versus the alternative?” Ditch the honesty fillers and just be honest.

“I can't”

When asked to do something, responding with, “I can’t,” erodes your reputation as a capable professional. Instead, direct the person to someone who can help them or explain your challenges and ask additional questions so that you can help them.

“I’m so stupid” and other self-deprecation

Being self-aware and constantly working to be a better professional and a better person are wonderful, but negative self-talk for no benefit needs to be eradicated from your thought process. If

we talk down about ourselves long enough, we start to believe it in a dangerous way because we don't realize that we're verbally abusing ourselves. If we talk down about ourselves long enough, others may start to believe the negative buzz about us too.

If you're having trouble kicking this pattern, fine yourself for each infraction. Put a dollar in a jar every time you talk negatively about yourself. Use the money to buy a self-help book or some other self-improvement item. Or, use the money to reward yourself with a treat when you go one month without negative self-talk.

"Fine"

Why answer with "fine" when you can give a more robust response? Many people seem to interpret "fine" as curt or not entirely responsive.

Imagine your boss asking how a particular litigation matter is going. You can respond with "fine" or you can respond with something like, "It's going well. We seem closer on settlement. We offered X dollars and the other side is discussing a counter."

The latter is, obviously, the superior answer because it has more details and it shows your command of the matter.

Uptalk

This last one is not a word or phrase, but another speech habit that undermines people. Do you notice how your voice goes higher at the end of a question? Have you heard people use that same inflection in statements that aren't questions? Does it unconsciously make you think that they're less confident or capable?

That's uptalk, and while it might seem innocuous, this wishy-washy tone can weaken your message. It sounds like you don't know what you're talking about or if you should be talking at all.

To sound more capable, speak boldly and definitively. If your colleagues are asking for your input, that means that they trust your opinion and experience. Show them they're right with a self-assured tone.

Conclusion

These words and phrases are habits that corrode our messages at work, whether they're in writing, on phone calls, or in person. But, with enough mindfulness and practice, you can reduce and eventually eliminate these words and establish yourself as a reliable expert in your team.

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