

YOU ARE WHAT YOU SPEAK

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*Your Words Are A Window To Your Inner Self.
Use Them To Develop And Maintain A Positive Self-Concept
And Increase Your Personal And Professional Success.*

Often when I am addressing groups of salespeople, I am asked the question, “What do you think is the most important trait of someone who is happy and successful in life?” The answer is simple: *a positive self-concept*. When you feel good about yourself, respect yourself, accept yourself, you can do anything.

“But it's hard to keep myself feeling good about myself day after day,” I am told, “especially when I can't seem to get ahead in spite of working long, hard hours, when I have problems with other people, when I have financial troubles... I feel frustrated and start getting down on myself. What can I do to keep feeling good about myself?”

The answer starts with your *self-talk*.

When you are not feeling good about yourself, you will invariably find that you are smothering yourself with negative self-talk. Without realizing it, *you become what you tell yourself you are*. In other words, *you are what you speak*.

To change yourself, you need to change your self-talk. It doesn't happen overnight. It takes a lot of time and practice.

The first step is making yourself aware of the way you structure your view of yourself through the words you use. You can then open yourself up to changing *you* by first changing your words!

Does that sound ridiculous? Stop for a moment. Consider the possibility that you *choose* every word you speak. You do not select words by accident. You select them because they reflect what you want to say—even when you blurt something—when speaking seems to be automatic. In that tiny, microsecond before the words came out of your mouth, you—through the magic of your brain—make a very rapid word-selection decision.

Making that decision is based on a number of things: verbal habits over the years; the meanings you wish to convey; the beliefs you hold; how you feel about yourself at the moment; and so on. Whatever gets cranked into your choice of a word, the fact is that *you* make a decision to use it.

Because you choose your words, they are a window to the inside of you. They are signals that convey to yourself and others what you think, what you believe, and, most important of all, how you feel about yourself.

Let's take an example. You are in a crowded restaurant at the height of a bustling lunch hour. The waiter has already taken your order and you are sitting at the table, comfortably chatting with your friend. You realize that you are thirsty. So you decide to ask the waiter for a glass of water. You look around and see him coming toward you, carrying a loaded tray, obviously heading for the table next to you. As he approaches, you say: “Waiter ... ah ... when you get a chance ... ah ... would you please bring me a glass of water?”

Now let's replay this scene. Let's say you are having lunch in that same restaurant with your friend, Harry, who you view as a very successful person. You really admire this man. He is confident, poised and very comfortable in any social situation. Let's say *he* decides to ask the waiter for a glass of water because he is thirsty. When the waiter approaches the table, Harry raises his hand and firmly, but politely, says, "Waiter... Bring me a glass of water, please."

Look at the words used in these scenarios and see how they are a window into your inner self.

Notice first that your words convey much more discomfort than the words of your friend. Notice how tentative they are: "... ah ... when you get a chance ... ah ..."

Next, notice how you asked permission: "... would you please ..." Why would you have to ask the waiter permission for him to do his own job?

Third, you gave the waiter the "power" in this interpersonal transaction by telling him to bring the water to you when he gets a chance.

You apparently do not feel secure in making a straightforward request. The waiter appears to be very busy and rushed, and you feel uncomfortable about intruding on his time and space. You don't want to be the bad guy or gal.

Meanwhile, Harry's words convey much more self-assurance. He does not hesitate at all. He does not ask permission. He does not give his power to the waiter. He simply, confidently, and straightforwardly says, "Waiter... Bring me a glass of water, please." He is firm, yet polite. He is obviously very comfortable and not concerned about being the bad guy.

Do you see the difference? More importantly, do you see how the words you use become a window to your inner self? (And, by the way, words are accompanied by nonverbal movements, such as the tentative look on your face or the firm raise of Harry's hand. These are also important parts of the window to your inner self. But working on them comes only after you train yourself how to be aware of the words you use.)

This restaurant example is just a simple one. All you did was ask the waiter for a glass of water. Multiply this simple situation one hundred times over for all the other words you speak in a given day. Indeed, you can really see that *you are what you speak!*

Now add to that, a thousand times over, the number of times during a given day that you think or talk to yourself about yourself. Listen carefully to the words you use. Again, you will discover that those words reflect your inner state. Again, *you are what you speak.*

So, coming back to our original aim of improving your self-concept, start by changing the window to your inner self. Start by changing the words you speak, *especially the words you use when you speak to yourself.*

"Now why would that work," you ask, "when those words *reflect* my inner self?" The answer is that it really is a "two-way street." Your words both reflect and shape your inner self. Let's take a closer look at what happens when you self-talk.

Every time you say or think negative words to yourself about yourself, your words are accompanied by a blip of negative feeling. Sometimes the blip is a big one. At other times, it is barely a trace. But it is always there.

Conversely, every time you say something good about yourself, there is a little blip of good feeling. The more you believe it, the bigger it will be. The more often it happens, the more you will believe it.

Throughout your whole life, your feelings about yourself have been shaped by those little blips. Even when the words come from others, your act of listening often internalizes them as your own words. The positive blips pump you up and the negative ones push you down. Thousands and thousands of those little blips have shaped your self-concept over the years into what it is today.

The terrible thing is that we all have a tendency to selectively remember and emphasize the negative things about ourselves. In light of cultural dictums to be modest, we often downplay talking about our assets, while exaggerating our self-criticisms way out of proportion. Then, we enter into a vicious circle, sending our negative self-images out to others through the words we choose. Those others then pick up the meanings of the words and send them back to us via their own uncomfortable reactions to us.

This vicious cycle of negative self-talk is one of the biggest villains in the development of our self-concepts.

Consider just one example. You get up in the morning and sleepily stagger to the bathroom after a restless night. You glance in the mirror. Ugh! Who or what is that?

Blip. You are not too pleased with the bags under your eyes, the messed up hair, the drawn look on your face. Blip, blip, blip. What a wreck. Blip.

You wash yourself, comb your hair (if you have any—blip!), and dress. You take another look in the mirror. Some improvement, but your suit is a little ragged. Blip. Time to get a new one, but you are a little short of cash because things haven't been going too well lately. Blip, blip.

You start to worry about how well you will do today, given a shaky track record for the last week. Blip, blip. You just can't seem to get it done as well as Harry who seems to have the golden touch. BLIP! Maybe you just weren't cut out to be a success. Bliiiiiip!

Every time you get into this vicious cycle of negative self-talk, this self-critical chant, you weigh yourself down with another layer of unfavorable self-images. And then, insidiously, when you start mixing with people, you end up subtly communicating that self-criticism to them through the words you use—tentative, apologetic, second class words.

They, in turn, usually do not give you a positive response. In all probability, they will reflect negative blips back to you because people respect confidence and personal strength and feel uncomfortable in the presence of others who lack those qualities.

“So,” you ask, “how do I go about changing my self-talk when I am not feeling good about myself? Are you asking me to deny reality?” My answer is: when it comes to how you feel about yourself, *you* define your own reality.

Your self-concept is the product of a whole lifetime of experience and accompanying self-talk. You cannot undo anything that has been done or said in the past, but you do have control over what you do and say from this moment on.

If you choose to define yourself from this moment on as inadequate, you will choose ways to act and talk inadequately. If you choose to define yourself as confident and competent, you will find ways to act and talk with confidence and competency. It is up to you.

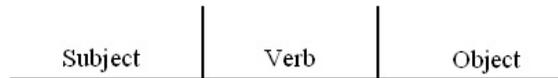
A good starting point is to work on your self-talk, to work hard at programming yourself with positive blips instead of negative ones. Here is a set of six guidelines to help you with that task.

1. Listen To Your Self-Talk.

In the beginning, simply observe what you have just said *or* thought and pay attention to the words you've chosen. Did they have a lot of negative loadings?

You will find it helpful when examining your word-loadings to look at the grammatical parts of your sentences. Many years ago, teachers of grammar used a visual technique known as “sentence diagramming.” It was a graphic method for identifying elements of speech and the proper uses of those elements in a sentence.

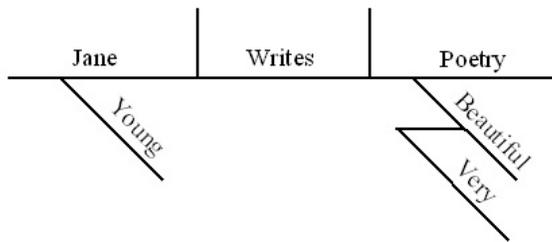
This method essentially consists of translating a sentence into a diagram of horizontal and vertical lines. The three most important parts of the sentence, the *subject*, the *verb*, and the *object* are placed on a horizontal line:



For example, “Jane writes poetry” would be diagrammed as:



Notice that this is a very simple, logical sentence. It has no good, bad, happy, or sad loading. Let's see what happens when we add some *modifiers*: “*Young Jane writes very beautiful poetry.*”

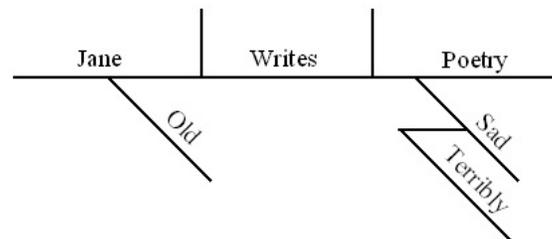


Now we have a sentence with a very positive, feel-good loading!

Notice how the diagram reflects the basic structure of the sentence: the main part of the sentence, the “skeletal” part, so to speak, is on top of the horizontal line, while everything below the line “modifies” or adds a positive loading to the rest of the sentence.

The skeletal part of the sentence could stand by itself and still be understandable: “Jane writes poetry.” The modifiers, below the line, are really unnecessary for basic, factual communication. But they do add flavors—the sentence is richer in meaning with them.

We could completely change the loading of our basic sentence from positive to negative by changing the modifiers: “*Old Jane writes terribly sad poetry.*”



What a difference! Now our basic sentence has an entirely different meaning.

In other words, *your choices of modifiers* (such as adjectives, adverbs, and modifying phrases) are particularly important.

As another example, notice that the sentence “I am talking to people” is simply a statement of fact with no positive or negative loading. But when I modify it by adding some words, the sentence becomes very negative: “I am *not very good at* talking to people.” You can make the sentence even more negative by adding more modifiers: “I am *not very good at all, in fact, I am terrible at* talking to people. Or how about: “I am good at socializing.” That has a positive meaning compared to: “I am *bad at* socializing.”

You don’t have to diagram everything you say or think. But knowing just a little about sentence structure gives you the first tool for becoming aware of your inner Self. Often, people are not even aware that emotional states inside them dictate their communication choices.

So, stick with me for just a bit and let me show you how to use this helpful tool.

The skeletal part of our communication is most likely (not always) a thinking decision. We wish to communicate a basic fact, so we select appropriate words: “Jane writes poetry.”

On the other hand, modifiers are most likely (not always) feeling decisions. Modifiers generally reflect the emotional states of our inner Selves.

“The beautiful girl.” “The ugly girl.”

“The silly, young, foolish, empty-headed girl.”

Each of these examples conveys a specific “feeling” message—the direct result of what we are feeling when we think about the girl. And sometimes, we are not aware of those feelings.

The words just “pop” out of our mouths. We do not realize that we have made determined, emotionally based communication choices.

Knowing how to identify those choices is an important first step on the road to Self-awareness.

You do not need to get into the technical intricacies of sentence diagramming. All you need to keep in mind is the underlying principle of this technique, the identification of the structure of our communications. It is not necessary to diagram anything.

Start listening closely to what you say. Distinguish between the “skeletal” (thinking) parts of what you communicate and the “modifying” (feeling) parts of your messages.

Focus on the modifiers. Identify the feelings behind them. Then, determine the physical location of those feelings.

The physical location?

What I am referring to here is the kind of physiological responses you are having. Remember that our emotional responses to events are actually physiological responses—neurological, glandular, biochemical reactions to whatever is happening in our lives. This means that we can make ourselves aware of bodily correlates to what we are feeling.

A lump in my throat.

Butterflies in my stomach.

Tension in the base of my neck or in my shoulder muscles.

Learning the physical concomitants of your feelings is very valuable to you. It will enable you to have a more immediate awareness of what is going on in your life.

Being in touch with our feelings before we communicate gives us the marvelous opportunity to reflect for a quick moment on the possible unhappy consequences of our actions, and, thus, the opportunity to behave differently!

Examine your self-talk for a period of time. Don't try to control it at first, just be an observer. And, for heaven's sake, don't berate yourself if you hear yourself talking negatively! There's no sense in adding any more negative blips!

2. Challenge The Thoughts That Accompany Your Self-Talk

This you do after you have trained yourself to listen to your self-talk. Start by looking at the whole collection of your thoughts as you deliver messages to yourself.

For example, suppose you are looking back at the past week, in which you have had a huge argument with your spouse about an upcoming trip, you insulted your best friend, Harry, and you embarrassed yourself by getting loud at an important office party. You tell yourself, "I'm really lousy with people—I never seem to get along with anyone!" Stop for a moment and examine all of the thoughts—*your* thoughts—surrounding your self-talk:

—"What a miserable week."

—"When it comes to people, things always seem to go wrong."

—"What a stupid idiot I am for making such a fuss about that trip."

—"God, how embarrassed I am about that party! I always seem to make a fool of myself."

Challenge that self-talk!

—Was every single moment truly miserable? Every second?

—Do things go wrong with people one hundred percent of the time?

—Am I really a stupid idiot, or am I exaggerating at this moment?

—Remind yourself of the many enjoyable times you have had with your spouse, Harry, and the people at the office.

—Everybody at that party knows how enthusiastic you are about things—in fact, they typically enjoy your company!

3. Look At Every Difficult Situation As A Problem To Be Solved

In addition to challenging your thoughts, become a *problem-solver*. So, you are not happy with the way you are currently dealing with people. What can you do to improve? What things can you do to keep yourself more in control? How about pausing and taking a deep breath when you feel your temper rising? What other things can you try? Maybe it would help if you talked it over with your spouse—he or she knows you better than anyone else and might have some good suggestions.

The point is, *take a problem-solving stance*. Focus on problem solving, *not* blaming. Successfully solving a problem generates a burst of confidence. That's one more positive blip. The more problems you solve, the more positive blips. The more blips, the better your self-concept. The better your self-concept, the more likely it is that you will choose actions that lead to success.

Richard Bach, in his fascinating book, *Illusions*, puts it this way: "Every problem is a gift in your hands."

4. Use Every Situation As An Opportunity To Learn

This step is very much related to taking a problem-solving stance. Learning is good food for your brain. The more you learn about yourself, the more skills you develop at whatever work you do, the more you learn about your favorite hobbies and interests, and the greater your general knowledge base, the more “success” experiences (positive blips) you will have when working and mixing with people or just plain relaxing. *Feed your brain!*

And, as you learn new skills and acquire more knowledge, tell yourself how good you feel about it! Complement yourself for your new bag of tricks. Don't be modest with yourself. Give yourself the credit you deserve.

5. Find The Silver Lining

Don't kick yourself with adverse self-talk when things don't go the way you want them to. Stop focusing exclusively on the negative things that have happened. Tell yourself, “In spite of feeling out of sorts this week, I did manage to accomplish some things that needed to get done” instead of: “God—I was really in a lousy mood this week—I was just off base on everything!”

My wife lovingly calls me Dr. Oops. Being a tall person who is constantly focused on what I am doing or thinking about, I have a tendency to get into clumsy situations, like catching and ripping the pocket of my trousers on a door jam while walking through it, or knocking over a cup of coffee with a gesture of my hand as I speak.

It would be so easy to say to myself in those awkward moments, “There you go again, you clumsy oaf! Just another example of your complete lack of grace.”

But I've learned to find the silver lining. I've learned to smile at myself in those moments and tell myself: “NOBODY CAN DO THAT LIKE I CAN!”

I am not advocating becoming a non-thinking Pollyanna. What I am saying is that you have much more power to make situations positive than you ever may have dreamed.

6. Deliberately, Programmatically, Feed Your Positive Image

Constantly look for and implement ways to make yourself feel good about you. Start right off at the beginning of the day. Notice what makes you feel good in the morning and then practice it. Maybe you like to step into a long hot shower when you first get up—to get you started and refreshed for the day. Maybe you like to spend a half hour over a hot cup of coffee, browsing through the morning paper. Maybe you like to run a couple of miles before you do anything just to get your juices flowing. *Whatever your choice, allow time for it and practice it.*

Pick out the clothes that fit your mood. Then when you dress and look in the mirror you can feel good about the way you look. By the way, don't hesitate to use that mirror to say nice things about yourself. You may have heard about doing this somewhere else and concluded that it is a silly thing to do, but in light of what I have been saying about layering yourself with positive blips, do not underestimate the power of a mirror!

Speaking of mirrors, a few years ago, I had the pleasure of spending some time with Jim Perkins, then the General Manager of Chevrolet. His office is in the corporate headquarters building, a large, rectangular, multi-floored building with two banks of escalators, one at each end. Jim was on a campaign to infuse enthusiasm into Chevrolet managers to feel proud about belonging to an organization that he sees as a significant part of Americana. As the following example shows, he clearly realized the importance of feeding a positive self-image.

Ceiling to floor mirrors were installed on each floor by the escalators so that you see yourself in the mirror as you come up the escalator. The first thing you see as you are moving upward is the top of the mirror on which is inscribed, in pretty blue script letters, “Chevrolet Proud.” Then, as you come up further, you see yourself—first your head, then your body, then a full-length image. At about that point, you see the bottom of the mirror. Written across the bottom, in large white letters, are the words: “You Are Looking At A Winner!”

Think about that for a moment. Every time every person in that building uses an escalator to move up to a floor, he or she gets a little positive blip. And the chances are that many people use those escalators several times a day. What a wonderful message for everyone in the building. I first saw those white letters while ascending the escalator with an associate. At that moment, we turned to each other and simultaneously said: “You're right!”

Put the Guidelines to Work

So much for guidelines. Now the real work starts. Apply what I have said for the next month and tell me if you don't feel different, more in control of the positive you.

Remember the central point to these six guidelines: *you define your own self-concept by the way in which you talk to yourself about you.* The actions I've described are ways for you to make you constantly positive.

There is one final side benefit to following these guidelines. Not only do they give you insight into and control of yourself, they provide you with a strategy for learning about *other people!* Use these guidelines and you will find yourself much more in tune with your customers!

As much as your words are a window to your inner self, so, too, are the words of your customers' windows to *their* inner selves. By listening to *their* words in the same way you train yourself to listen to your own, you will learn a tremendous amount about them, information that will help you be more sensitive to their needs, information that will help you communicate more effectively with them, and information that will help you increase your success at selling, as well as your success at home or play.

Remember: We *all* are what we speak!