

By Bill Guertin

*The 800-Pound Gorilla*

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## **It's What You Say AND How You Say It**

It was upside down and backwards. But we didn't know that.

It was 3 pm, and my friend Andy and I were just returning from a meeting in Chicago. Coming out of the Monroe Street parking garage, Andy inserted the pre-paid parking ticket that would lift the barrier and let us go on our merry way. For some reason, however, the ticket was not working.

A rather large security officer approached the car from the area of the ticket booth. "Can I help you?" he said to Andy on the driver's side of the car.

That tone didn't sound quite right, I thought to myself. Andy heard it too. His tone caught Andy so off guard, he sat for a moment in silence, not knowing what to say.

"Can I **HELP** you?" he said again, staring eye-to-eye with Andy. His tone was even weirder than before. Something's going on here, I thought. Where is the communication barrier here? Who is this guy, really? I was beginning to worry a little.

Andy snapped out of his surprise, and began explaining to the uniformed man that he was attempting to put the ticket in, but it apparently wasn't accepting it, and—

The man interrupted Andy, and in a slower, annoyed inflection said again, "CAN I HELP YOU!?"

Then it hit us. He meant to say something like, "Can I **ASSIST** you?" We finally got it.

"Sure, you can help me," said Andy.

The man was relieved, as if he was not allowed to do anything until we answered in the affirmative. He took the ticket from Andy, deftly put it right-side-up into the machine, and the gate opened like magic.

He handed the ticket back to Andy, said "Have a nice day" in a semi-bored tone, and walked off.

We both looked at each other.

"What just happened here?" I said.

Someone must have trained this security guard to use those exact words when customers are having trouble with their tickets. And it's obvious that he doesn't like it very much.

Maybe he used to be a warm, friendly guy who used to use phrases like, "Hey, buddy, can I give you a hand?" or "Having a little trouble?" Someone complained, and now he has to use the company's words instead of his own. If he only knew that those same words spoken with a little bit of care and concern would have helped us a great deal, he might feel differently. But he's resisting. He feels like his individuality has been stripped. He thinks he can't do what comes naturally.

If you're simply giving "the right words" to your staff, it isn't enough. You also have to instruct them HOW to say them, and WHY those particular words are the right ones to use.

For example, take the simple phrase "I did not say I lost my dog." If you emphasize each one of the words in that phrase differently, it changes the entire meaning of the sentence. "I did not say I lost my dog" has a completely different tone than "I did *not* say I lost my dog", and so on. Try it. Say the sentence out loud, emphasizing a different word each time, and see how different each one is.

It's also important to explain to front-line staff WHY the chosen words are important to use. Here's an example:

Nurses in hospitals are incredibly busy people, going full speed for 12 hours or more at a time. A very successful service training firm specializing in hospitals suggests that nurses should ask each patient before they leave each room, "Is there anything else I can get for you? I have time."

Most nurses across the country are shocked when this phrase is suggested, because in their minds they really don't have time. But when they hear the explanation, they are much more inclined to give it a try.

The training company has studied the problem and found that answering patient call lights is the number one task that gets in the way of a nurse's time schedule. (Those are the little buttons you can push if you should need the nurse for anything.) What they have found is that by asking if patients need anything before they leave the room, patients feel better cared for AND the call light volume is reduced by up to 40%. Knowing this, the nurses are much more inclined to get on board with a program that reduces call lights by that much.

Imagine if our security friend at the parking garage was given the explanation of the words, as well as the proper way to say them. Chances are we would have had a much different encounter.

If you're training your staff to use the right words, don't leave out the How and the Why. Otherwise, it'll be like putting in the ticket upside down and backwards, and wondering why the program's not working.

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