



Something for the weekend

By Linda Anderson

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The way that you speak can be as important as what you say and can have far-reaching implications for your career, according to the latest research.

Popular perceptions characterise a successful leader as someone who uses powerful and assertive speech, while the use of phrases such as "don't you think" and "this may be a bad idea but" are thought to go hand in hand with a less confident individual who is less likely to be given promotion.

But **Alison Fragale**, assistant professor of organisational behaviour at the Kenan-Flagler Business School at the University of North Carolina, says that in certain situations the opposite may be true. She says "powerless speech", which relies on tentative phrasing and hesitations, can make the speaker seem warm and collaborative. In team situations these characteristics are considered to be more effective and more deserving of promotion.

Powerful speech works well when people are expected to work on their own, says Prof Fragale. But where a significant amount of teamwork is required, powerless speech is seen as co-operative and the speaker is seen as someone possessing good team skills. In such situations, she says, these attributes are considered far more important than how dominant an individual is.

For those wishing to advance their career, Prof Fragale advises tailoring speech to the task you are involved in.

"Modify your communication style to the characteristics that are demanded in a particular group or organisation," she says. "The subtle communicative behaviours do matter."

Expecting employees to understand new tasks immediately and perform them successfully almost from the outset can be counterproductive. Early negative feedback can result in high stress for employees, especially for those who are most conscientious, and can subsequently lead to poor performance.

Researchers say that instead of setting performance targets from the outset, managers would do much better if they first allowed their employees to focus on learning how to perform the task well.

Gerard Seijts, an associate professor of organisational behaviour at the Richard Ivey School of Business at the University of Western Ontario, Canada and co-authors Anna Cianci from the LeBow College of Business at Drexel University and Howard Klein at the Fisher College of Business at Ohio State University, say that giving employees learning goals initially can ease the tension of any negative feedback potentially delivered during that time.

"None of us really appreciate negative feedback," says Prof Seijts. "But when the most conscientious employees receive negative feedback, they start to work harder, but what needs to be done is to work smarter. Rather than looking to impress, they should be focusing on learning."

In too many cases companies focus solely on performance outcomes, says Prof Seijts, but no two employees are the same and whilst performance goals might work for one individual, they might not for another.

The Effect of Negative Feedback on Tension and Subsequent Performance will be published in an upcoming issue of the Journal of Applied Psychology.

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Text	alison fragale
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Subject	All Subjects
Industry	All Industries
Region	All Regions
Language	All Languages
Results Found	1
Timestamp	4 August 2020 9:01 AM