
Seven Words You Can't Say

Comedian George Carlin was known for mixing observational humor with larger, social commentary.

His groundbreaking 1972 album "Class Clown" featured his most famous monologue, "Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television." Carlin's routine was aired by a radio station, caught the attention of the FCC and eventually wound up in the U.S. Supreme Court, where, in a 1978 5-4 decision, the high court ruled the FCC had the authority to prohibit such broadcasts (*FCC v. Pacifica Foundation*).

Regardless of what you think of Carlin's brand of humor, the point is that Carlin spent a lifetime appreciating and poking fun at the power of words.

Words, after all, give voice to our thoughts. A thought that's spoken then acted out produces a result. The result can be good. Or the result can be bad.

At a time when there's still anxiety in the workplace, your colleagues are looking to you for leadership.

And at a time when what worked in the past, may not be working for you now, it's time to bring a new view.

I'm not suggesting you change your principles. I'm suggesting you re-think your practices.

Change Your Thinking, Change Your Results

In the planning sessions I facilitate for leadership teams, we pose two critical questions to the leadership team at the beginning of the session. (The questions are posed privately to the CEO in advance; the leadership team responds spontaneously.)

Here are the two questions that launch a planning session:

1. What do you want to accomplish in our time together?

This question elicits responses of *A plan we can agree on...* and *A plan we can execute...* and *A plan that promotes teamwork...* and *A plan with new ideas to help us become more successful...* and similar answers.

Good stuff. Not original. But good, fundamental outcomes. Now for the second question:

2. What guidelines – or Clubhouse Rules, as I call them – should we agree to follow to get the outcomes you say you want?

The responses include words such as *Honesty, Respect, Open mind, Fun, Think outside the box* and similar thoughts.

These words have meaning, they have power, and they provide behavioral guidelines. We can refer back to them when a person's behavior is not reflecting these principles.

Planning – from my perspective – equals change. We are planning to improve our performance. We are planning to continue doing better and more intentionally the things that are working for us. We are planning to change or eliminate those things that no longer work for us.

And that brings us to the Seven Words You Can Never Say if you want to get better.

"We have always done it this way."

If you are serious about getting better, you must be seriously committed to consider new ways of running your business. Do not – I repeat, do not – toss out your principles. You must, however, be willing to look critically and thoroughly at your practices – your business proposition, your programs, your processes, your people – and make the necessary changes that can propel you to the next level of success.

The flip side of "always" is "never." Here are five other words that will kill your improvement efforts.

"We've never done that before."

Has the world changed in the last 18 months? Big time. Maybe it's time we tried something new.

Words matter. They express our thoughts. And thoughts drive behavior that produces results.

Don't just take George Carlin's word for it. Here's what Mark Twain had to say about change.

"There are those who would mistake us that to stick in a rut is a consistency – and a virtue. And that to climb out of the rut is inconsistency – and a vice."

What is the single biggest change you are willing to commit to undertaking – in your organization and in yourself – in 2010?

Think it. Say it. Do it. ■