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Simple word substitutions to increase our reliability and enhance our professionalism.

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It may be hard to imagine that a few simple word substitutions can exponentially enhance our reliability and professionalism. I'm not suggesting we spend more time talking and less time listening. I'm not suggesting we use ten words when five would do. I am suggesting we avoid ambiguous and vague terms.

Not a believer yet? Try these below word substitutions to transform your default speech patterns and deliberately increase your reliability and enhance your professionalism.

Introduction

The first step in improving our time management skills is to change the way we think and speak about time.

We may try to fool ourselves into softening our time commitments in hopes that others will be unable to "hold us to them". But relying on ambiguous and vague words to mask delays is self-sabotaging. We may not even realize that we are doing this. It may have become our default mode or habit of speech.

The simple fact is that when we speak in doubtful terms, we invite subterfuge, confusion, dissatisfaction and distrust.

Just like you can't improve your balance if you don't practice without continually leaning on something, you can't improve your time management skills if you don't practice making and keeping commitments.

Let's take a look at some of the words and phrases we often hear in normal conversations.

Conversations we often hear and use:

"I'm stuck in meetings all week. I'll get this out asap".

You may have eased your conscience a little by giving a truthful reason for your delay. But to your client or employer, it's just another excuse that they don't have time for. Frankly, your client or employer are not impressed that you overbooked yourself. They have their own set of problems and commitments. They want the work that they have paid for, in the agreed upon time frame. In their perception, you're not only "not delivering" but you won't tell them when they will receive it.

ASAP (and words like it) are intentionally meant to divert attention away from the plain fact that you did not deliver something as agreed. When clients hear "asap" they may be temporarily comforted and appeased because they are assuming they will receive it within the next hour. But you may have actually meant next week after all your meetings are completed. So, when your client doesn't receive the delivery (**again**), they are even more dissatisfied and distrustful than before.

“I like your proposal. I’ll get back to you when I’ve made a decision.”

You may feel like you’re in the driver’s seat, but you’re not. There’s nothing stopping your acquaintance or even employee from going somewhere else with their proposal.

“I handed that piece to John. That wasn’t my job and I don’t know where John is on that.”

It’s the “not my job” response. Unfortunately, the client doesn’t care “who’s on first”; they only know that you’re not making a “home run” with them.

“We definitely could meet here next Tuesday at 1:00pm.”

This is a particular pet peeve of mine, because it happened to me. I was waiting on Tuesday at 1:00pm for the delivery of his work. When I eventually caught up with him several days later, his response was “I said ‘could’, I didn’t really commit to it”. Needless to say, I’m not a big fan of his. I not only avoid working with him, I do not refer him to anyone.

Corollary to this (which also is a pet peeve of mine): Sending an email note in the late evening to **cancel** the next day’s early morning appointment. You’ll be surprised how many people do this. Sending a quick email while you are at the computer may be very convenient to you. But that doesn’t assure that the person gets the message in time. Remember – your goal is not to simply broadcast the message. Your goal is to actually get the message successfully conveyed, accepted and understood.

PICK UP THE PHONE and call! A phone message takes just as long. Even if it’s late at night or early the next day, the phone will record your message if the person is not available. The intent is to get the message **to them** before they leave for your appointment.

“Let’s do lunch sometime. I’ll call you to set this up later.”

Everyone that has heard these lines (or similar) assumes that you’re blowing them off. If that is not your intention, please use different language.

“Yes, we are behind, but we will work faster. It will be done before you know it.”

Doing the same things faster (the same things that made you late in the first place) won’t make up the lost time. Also, this language is assuming that your client is accepting your delays and approving the extra time (even though you aren’t telling them how much extra time is required).

“It’s difficult to estimate. These things take time, but I give you my word that it will be done soon”.

Your client can not plan their project line now. Your chaos is now the source of their chaos. They do not appreciate this havoc and may value your word even less.

“I’m working on it.” Or “I’m on it”.

These somewhat defensive phrases smack of desperation and “being snowed under”. Neither position distills confidence or professionalism. I, as the client in a similar scenario, had heard similar excuses and assurances for several months. Consistently there was no indication of what he had left to do or when he would be actually deliver. My final response before dropping him and cutting my losses was “That’s great. But you’ve been on this 3 month project for 8 months already. I do think you are brilliant. I just don’t think you know what you are doing.”

“Yes, that’s a good idea. “

We hear these words often in committee meetings. Even though everyone leaves uplifted, excited and inspired, nothing ever gets done with this “good idea”. This “good idea” becomes a member of the “good idea black hole club”.

“Obviously this delivery will include most of the features listed. It may include features like X, Y, etc. Customarily, it comes with user documentation either with the delivery or sometime afterwards.”

What exactly do you know about this delivery?

The list and scenarios are unlimited. Although your business or personal situations will certainly differ, using these vague terms will yield the same results. The common problem is that these terms are not measurable. There is also a lack of professionalism, accountability or responsibility in the above language.

So -- Let's rewrite our story a little.

Use transforming dialogue to create a measurable target.

“I'm stuck in meetings all week. I'll get this out asap”.

Transforming language: I misjudged the amount of time required for these meetings. I apologize for the delay in getting these reports back to you. I want to avoid any more inconvenience on your part. Therefore, is there a section of this report that you absolutely require today? Great, let's meet right now and I'll tell you the details of those areas. I will also hand deliver those sections to you by tomorrow morning. I'll personally deliver the rest of the report by next Friday. Is that acceptable? Does that give you the pieces you need to continue to move forward on your end?

To make up for my mistake and your inconvenience, please accept this gift certificate for -----.
(Or some small token of appreciation for their patience).

“I like your proposal. I'll get back to you when I've made a decision.”

Transforming language: I like your proposal. Unfortunately, I'm only one of the deciding stakeholders involved. I'm meeting with the executive team on Thursday. I will certainly pitch this to them. If they seem interested, would you be available to give them a more detail presentation? And how soon would you be able to give them this presentation? Great. I'll contact you once I've met with the executives on this topic. If you don't hear from me by Friday, March 19th – please pester me. Sometimes my calendar gets chaotic and I need some reminders.

Note: If you are on the other end of this conversation (your client is saying “I'll get back to you when I've made a decision”), ask them the: who, what, when, and how:

- Who is authorized to make the decision (to make sure you are speaking to the right person)
- What else do they need to make their decision?
- When do they think they can make the decision?
- How best to follow up with them?

Summarize the conversation by telling them that you will give them a follow-up call/email on xx date. Many people offer the sign-up incentive up front. One suggestion is that if they sign right then and there, give them the “extra” as a thank you for signing. If they are hedging, save the “extra” as an incentive during the follow-up call.

"We definitely could meet here next Tuesday at 1:00pm."

Transforming language: Yes. We'll definitely meet here next Tuesday at 1:00pm. I will have already sent over electronic copies of the work by Monday noon – to provide you time to review. Then we can sit down together to discuss any changes that you require.

Transforming language for the corollary email meeting cancellation: Call or leave a voice message: "Sam, I really regret the late notice on this and calling in the evening hours. But an emergency has come up that I have to deal with in the morning.

Therefore, I won't be able to meet you at 9:00 am, like we previously agreed. I realize that you were traveling out of your way to meet me on my side of town, which I truly appreciate. I would like to reciprocate. Let's meet <<suggest 2 or 3 date/time options>> at a location of your convenience. I'll call you at 3:00pm today (if we don't connect via email before then) to synchronize our calendars and select a place."

Note: Then you need to follow-up with the email and phone call at 3:00pm.

"Let's do lunch sometime. I'll call you to set this up later."

Transforming language: I'm excited about having lunch together. I see great potential in our collaboration. Let's get our calendars out and schedule now.

"Yes, we are behind, but we will work faster. It will be done before you know it."

Transforming language: Yes, we are behind. We underestimated the layout and design phase. To compensate for that oversight, we've located a local printer that will print the brochures in 2 days (versus our original printer time of 1 week). Although the printing will be slightly higher, you will not be affected by those increase costs.

We will be delivering the final draft to the printer next Monday. We will hand-deliver your brochures to you no later than Thursday morning, March 25th.

Because this is one day later than we originally promised, you will receive the color brochures at the lower black and white pricing. This will be a savings of 40% off your total project. Is this acceptable to you?

That's great. And thank you so much for your patience and understanding. I assure you that this was a rare incident. I hope you will consider using us again.

(Note – Upon delivery of the brochures give them a coupon or discount on their next order with you)

"It's difficult to estimate. These things take time, but it will be done soon"

Transforming language: There will be times when we do not have an "estimated time to completion". But you can always give people a date when you can give them an estimated time to completion. For instance: If you don't know when it will be done, then you need to somehow gather the data and knowledge to interpolate the finish date. Identify the list of things that you need in order to make that estimate. Then schedule and estimate when that information will be gathered. For example: "I can't comfortably estimate the completion date right now. I need to understand X,Y, and Z before I can give you an accurate estimate. I will have that pieces by Friday and I will give you a *Completion Date* by Monday March 15.

"I handed that piece to John. I don't know where John is on that."

Transforming language: Even though you've delegated parts to others, you (and every member of your team) are responsible for the delivery. A more professional response is to show one voice to the client.

"I'm working on it." Or "I'm on it".

Transforming language: If you have been consistently late, avoiding giving them status reports, not returning their calls – then you may be over your head. It’s time to come clean, review your project management status, show the client’s what is left to do and how long each step will take. It’s time to lay all your cards on the table. If the client decides to leave, it’s the best for everyone. Give them their full refund and some additional monies for their time.

“Yes, that’s a good idea. “

Transforming language: That’s a very good idea. I like that. Let’s see what other projects we have on the table and see if we can’t schedule and fund this. Jan, this seems up your alley. Can you do some preliminary background research on this? Include the required budget, resources, timeline and suggested staff? Jan, do you think you can have a preliminary proposal by next meeting?

Great! We’ll add the “yeah-ney” on this in our agenda for next week.

“Obviously this delivery will include most of the features listed. It may include features like X, Y, etc. Customarily, it comes with user documentation either with the delivery or sometime afterwards.”

Transforming language Your special delivery includes featureA, featureB and featureC, as outlined in our original contract. Although featureC is included, it only has the baseline enhancements as outlined in the enclosed user documentation. We acknowledge that your contract includes the premium feature set. Unfortunately, those particular enhancements did not meet our quality standards by the code freeze and release dates. Therefore, that particular enhancement did not make the delivery cutoff date.

Those premium features are now complete and undergoing final and thorough testing, to assure they meet our acceptance and quality criteria. We regret the delay and appreciate your understanding that we do not want to just fulfill our contract, but want you to be totally satisfied with the quality of the product.

You are receiving the current baseline feature product at the reduced product price. And you will receive the enhancement upgrade at no additional cost by or before March 25th.

Conclusion:

Although the circumstances may vary in your business and personal dealings, the message is consistent. Be specific, explicit and responsible. Include time lines, completion dates, and convey ownership. Own your words, deeds and actions. Atone for any mistakes and delays. Go beyond what is expected when atoning for your mistakes or misunderstandings.

Appendix: Some words to void:

Avoid	Substitute with
ASAP Almost immediately Before long Before you know it	Explicit date/time
I’m working on it	Outline the task left to do, and your timeline
Sometime or sometime soon	If you don’t have an explicit date, provide a date in which

	you will be able to give a completion date.
Soon, soon after , shortly	Explicit date/time
Could, might, possibly, may	Explicit date/time
Try	List dependencies and unknown, instead. List when those bottlenecks will be conquered.
Not my job	Delivery of a quality product or service is my job.
I was distracted, interrupted,	Plan for interruptions so that it doesn't derail your project. Use risk management, risk analysis, sprints and buffer techniques.
We'll work harder, we'll work faster	Identify the bottlenecks, detangle the resources, scope the delivery model – change something.
Always, Every, All, None, Never	If you use words such as these that denote something as certain and absolute, make sure that they are indeed, certain. Think of cases that violate them before making this level of commitment.
Certainly, Therefore, Clearly, Obviously, Ordinarily, Customarily, Most, Mostly.	These words tend to persuade you into accepting something as a given. Don't assume.
Some, Sometimes, Often, Usually, Ordinarily, Customarily, Most, Mostly	These words are too vague. It's impossible to rely on a feature or action that operates "sometimes."
Etc., And So Forth, And So On, Such As	Lists that finish with these words aren't measurable. There should be no confusion as to how the series is generated and what appears next in the list.
Good, Fast, Cheap, Efficient, Small, Stable	These terms are all relative. They mean different things to different people. They must be further defined to explain exactly what they mean.
Handled, Processed, Rejected, Skipped, Eliminated.	These terms can hide large amounts of items that need to be specified and communicated.
If... Then (but missing Else).	Always ask yourself what will happen if the "if" doesn't happen.

About the author

Laura is a certified business and personal life coach. She is also the Time Management Advisor for National electronic magazine: eXaminer.com. Read more of her time management articles <http://www.examiner.com/x-16459-Raleigh-Time-Management-Examiner>

She has been in the software and testing industry for over 20 years. She's worked with such companies as IBM, Ericsson, Staples, Fidelity Investments and Sogeti in various client advocacy and project management roles. The techniques she uses in her business coaching and client advocacy work saved these companies both time and money, which resulted in on-

time, quality product delivery with higher client satisfaction.

Laura now uses her client focus, project, quality and people management skills in her personal life coaching career. As a personal life coach, she helps people integrate their goals and dreams into their everyday lives. Laura uses creative and practical tools to help her clients realize what really matters to them. They then follow-through with project and time management techniques to create the reality they really want.

Laura authors many articles and workshops on time management and strategic scheduling. She is also the founder of the electronic magazine the Rose Garden: the Art of Becoming.

Laura offers one-on-one career and life coaching, small group coaching, seminars and workshops. You can learn more about her at www.RoseCoaching.info and contact her at LauraRose@RoseCoaching.info