

Skills 360 – Mind your Language (Part 1)

Discussion Questions

1. How do you feel when people tell you what to do?
2. How important is it for a boss to be polite to his or her employees?
3. How do you soften your language to make suggestions?

Vocabulary

To mind: to be careful about something; "You should mind the tone of your voice when commenting on someone's work performance."

What on earth: adding "on earth" after a wh- question word shows surprise or strong emotion; "What on earth were the designers thinking when they made the website? It's terrible!"

What if: "what if" is used to introduce a hypothetical or imagined situation; it is a short form of "what would happen if;" "The arrangement looks good now, but what if interest rates go up?"

Forceful: strong or powerful; "Ben is a very forceful negotiator, so I'm glad he's on our side."

Diplomatic: skilled at dealing with people in a sensitive way without making them offended or upset; "A good manager should be diplomatic in a crisis or when dealing with difficult employees."

Authoritative: showing the confidence of someone who is used to being respected or obeyed; "The project team likes James because he's authoritative yet still kind and polite."

To foster: to help or encourage something to develop; "Open communication between managers and employees can foster a positive workplace culture."

Superior: someone who is higher in position; "You should be careful when criticizing the ideas of your superiors."

Subordinate: someone who is lower in position; "Ted's subordinates are afraid of his fiery temper."

To grit your teeth: when you grit your teeth, you press them together hard; as an idiom this means to accept a difficult or unpleasant situation; "Facing a tight deadline, I had to just grit my teeth and work into the night."

Come to think of it: when we suddenly think of or remember something, we can introduce it with the expression "come to think of it;" "Yeah, Sam is often late. Come to think of it, he hasn't been on time once this week."

A bunch of: several or some; "A bunch of warehouse employees are talking about forming a union."

Order: an instruction given by a boss or authority; "I was just following the COO's orders when I shut down the server."

Tone: the sound of someone's voice that shows feeling; "Nancy was smiling, but the tone of her voice told me that she was angry with me."

To be opinionated: if someone is opinionated, he has strong opinions, is unwilling to change them, and is not afraid to express them; "Opinionated people often find themselves shunned by coworkers."

To come across: to give an impression; "The interviewee came across as intelligent and sincere, but his former employer says that he is difficult to work with."

Jerk: "jerk" is a very informal word we call someone who is rude, unkind, or foolish; "Bob is such a jerk. He arrived late and then laughed at our ideas for the new brochures."

Imperative: in grammar, an imperative is when we tell someone to do something, using a verb but no subject, such as "paint the wall;" "Rather than using an imperative, you should *ask* people to do things for you."

The king of: the greatest, most extreme, or most well-known; "In the North American market, Ford continues to be the king of the light truck."

To be put off: if you are "put off" it means you don't like something or someone because it bothers you; "Customers like the layout of the store, but they're put off by the background music."

To be disgruntled: to be disappointed, annoyed, or upset by something; "Several disgruntled employees came to the staff meeting with a list of complaints."

Downright offended: completely or very upset or angry by something someone has said or done; "David was downright offended when I suggested his skills were better suited to delivery than sales."

Transcript

[0:11] Welcome back to the Skills 360 podcast. I'm your host Tim Simmons, and today I'm going to encourage you to **mind** your language.

[0:22] **What on earth** do I mean by, "mind your language?" Well, consider a statement like this: "We have to cut costs. Meet me in your office at 2:00 so we can talk about how to do this." How does that sound? The statement doesn't have any problems with grammar or vocabulary. But how does it *sound*? Is it acceptable? Well, **what if** I said this instead: "I think that cutting our costs might be a good idea. How about sitting down to talk about this? Would 2:00 in your office work?"

[0:59] You can surely see that the second statement is softer than the first. I don't just mean it's more polite. I mean it's less **forceful** and more **diplomatic**. Now, I don't want to suggest that forceful or **authoritative** language is *never* useful or necessary. It *is* useful for some people in some situations. But in the majority of our everyday communication, we need to mind our language. I'm not just talking about keeping things nice for clients and customers. I'm also talking about **fostering** good relationships with colleagues, **superiors**, and **subordinates**. Yes, today's managers have to mind their language when speaking to those they manage. So let's talk about how we can do this.

[1:54] For starters, we need to look at a very important group of words called modal verbs. Modals are words like, "might," "would," and "must." These words carry not just meaning, but power. Just think about it. A project leader comes to you on a Friday morning and says "You must come in tomorrow to finish the report." And you **grit your teeth**. Or he comes to you and says "We really should get that report done before Monday. Would you be able to come in tomorrow and help get that finished?" The difference is clear. The second statement uses "should" and then "would" to make a *request*. But the first statement uses "must," which is too forceful. **Come to think of it**, how often do you really hear people use the word "must?" In fact, it's simply too strong for most situations.

[3:01] Okay then. How are these modals grouped? Well, we've got a **bunch** of strong ones, including "must," "have to," and "need to." These modals present no choice. They are used for giving **orders** or showing obligation. Then we have a group of medium-strength modals, such as "might," "may," "can," "should," "could," and "ought to." These expressions can be used for recommendations, suggestions, and advice. Then we have requests, which we can make with words like "can," "will," "could," and "would."

[3:50] Now listen to how changing one word slightly can change the **tone** of a statement. Imagine a colleague comes into your office to talk about a presentation you have just given. He says, "You should have used fewer slides." Or he says "You could have used fewer slides." Can you see how using "could have" sounds like a gentle suggestion while "should have" sounds too **opinionated**?

[4:22] This is really about tone and effect rather than just meaning. The trick here is that we often use softer language even when we want to express a stronger idea. For example, what if I'm a senior engineer talking to a junior technician. I want to tell him to do something. He doesn't really have a choice. But I really don't want to

come across as a **jerk**. So I don't say, "you have to finish those drawings today." Instead, I say, "We really should have those drawings finished today." Or "those drawings are important, so could you have them done by the end of the day please?" You see? I'm using the language of recommendation or request to tell the technician what to do. My language might seem to indicate that he has a choice, but given the context, he doesn't.

[5:26] This is an important idea. It relates to something called *imperatives*. An imperative is an order, like "close the window" or "clean my cup." There's no subject there, just a verb. In many languages, imperatives are not considered rude. But in English, they are generally too forceful. So we avoid them by using requests. You will hear people during a meal say "could you please pass the salt," rather than "give me the salt." In fact, "give me" is **the king of** impolite imperatives. This has produced a rhyme that many children grow tired of hearing adults recite: "gimme gimme never gets, don't you know your manners yet?"

[6:21] So, while our parents kindly remind us to mind our language, our colleagues, supervisors, and clients will not. They will simply be **put off**, **disgruntled**, or **downright offended**. Today we've covered modals, imperatives, and requests, but there are lots of other ways we can soften our language. Tune in next time to find out how.

[6:49] That's all for today. If you'd like to test yourself on what we've just covered, have a look at the **myBOnline.com** website. There you'll find a quiz about today's show as well as a complete transcript.

So long. And see you again soon.

Review

1. What does Tim say about forceful and authoritative language?
 - A It is never useful.
 - B It is sometimes necessary.
 - C It is common in everyday communication.
 - D It is polite in some languages.
2. According to Tim, why should we "mind our language?"
 - A It helps generate sales.
 - B It demonstrates good language skills.
 - C It can help us deal with difficult managers.
 - D It promotes good relationships.
3. Modals verbs like "might" and "must" carry not just _____ but also _____.
4. Which of the following can be categorized as "strong" modals? [Select all that apply.]
 - A have to
 - B might
 - C may
 - D must
 - E could
 - F ought to
 - G need to
 - H can
5. Which of the following is a soft and diplomatic way to ask someone to take out the trash?
 - A Take out the trash please.
 - B The trash is getting pretty smell. Would you mind taking it out?
 - C That trash really needs to be taken out. I think you should do it.
 - D Do you think you could take out the trash sometime?
6. What does Tim say about *imperatives* like "clean your desk"?
 - A They are generally too forceful in English.
 - B They are impolite in all languages.
 - C They are useful for rhyming.
 - D They are effective when leading a group.

Review Answers

1. What does Tim say about forceful and authoritative language?
B It is sometimes necessary.
2. According to Tim, why should we “mind our language?”
D It promotes good relationships.
3. Modals verbs like “might” and “must” carry not just **meaning** but also **power**.
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B The trash is getting pretty smell. Would you mind taking it out?
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6. What does Tim say about *imperatives* like “clean your desk”?
A They are generally too forceful in English.

Online Practice

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