

Skills 360 – Mind your Language (Part 2)

Discussion Questions

1. If you want to soften your language, what words do you use?
2. How careful are you not to offend people when you express your opinions?
3. Do you like it when people express their opinions very confidently?

Vocabulary

To convey: to communicate an idea, feeling, impression, or thought; “Many artists convey their feelings better through art than through words.”

Perception: the way we see, understand, or think about something; “Marketers must be keenly aware of customers’ perception of their brand and products.”

To be miles apart: to be very different; “Management and the union are still miles apart in their positions.”

Relatively: in comparison with something else, or somewhat; “Although John is relatively wealthy, he does not have expensive tastes or habits.”

Wordy: using more words than necessary; “Don’t be too wordy when making a formal apology; just get to the point and say you’re sorry.”

Neither here nor there: if something is “neither here nor there,” it does not matter or is not relevant; “How we got into this situation is neither here nor there. The important thing is how we can get out of it.”

To transform: to completely change; “The new COO managed to transform the workplace culture, and now everyone wants to work at our company.”

Definitive: final, certain, and not likely to change; “Nancy gave me a definitive “no” when I asked for the last month of summer off.”

Mere: nothing more than; “mere” is used to emphasize how small or minor something is; “Optimistic economists are saying that the recent troubles are a mere correction, not the beginning of a recession.”

To let someone go: to release someone from a job; to lay off or fire; “In 2011, RIM let go thousands of workers in an attempt to reduce costs.”

Assertive: confident and expressing ideas or opinions quickly and surely; "While it is important to be assertive, you should be careful not to be seen as aggressive."

To qualify: when you "qualify" an idea or statement, you are changing or limiting it, especially by showing when it is *not* true; "I'm sorry, let me qualify that: a *few* employees have been filling out the timesheets incorrectly, not all."

Performance review: evaluation of an employee and the work he or she has done over a certain period of time; "During my annual performance review, my manager praised me for my positive attitude and work ethic."

To tone down: to make less strong or harsh; "Jack needs to learn how to tone down his criticism of new employees."

To show up: to arrive or appear at a place or event; "In some cultures, it is considered very impolite to show up at a party after the scheduled starting time."

Trendy: very fashionable or up-to-date, often used negatively; "I can't stand that trendy new lunch spot; let's go to the old diner on the corner."

Edgy: if something is "edgy," it is new or surprising in a daring or exciting way; "The advertising agency is known for producing edgy TV ads to revive old brands."

Pronouncement: an official or official-sounding statement; "Harold's pronouncement that he would be retiring came as a big shock to everyone."

Upfront: in advance or honestly; "During the interview, the candidate told us upfront that he was not very good at teamwork."

To ram something down someone's throat: to force someone to accept something; "A good manager discusses issues rather than ramming his ideas down employees' throats."

Demanding: asking a lot, or not easily pleased or satisfied; "I am tired of dealing with Janet because she is so demanding that I can't get my own work done."

To cloud: to make something confusing or less clear; "Sometimes bringing too many people in to deal with a crisis will just cloud the issue."

Counterproductive: having the opposite effect of what you wanted or intended; "Martin wants to improve his relationships, but his constant anger is counterproductive."

Transcript

Hello and welcome back to Skills 360. I'm your host Tim Simmons, and today we're going to look at more ways to mind your language.

If language was just about meaning we would probably communicate very directly with as few words as possible. But it's not, and we don't. Every time we speak, we are not only **conveying** meaning but also acting socially. We need to consider relationships, feelings, and **perception**. So we mind our language.

Last time I talked about modals and the difference between saying "you must" do something and "could you" do something. Those two ways of speaking are **miles apart**. Today I'll talk about lots of other ways to soften our language.

Let's start with three **relatively** simple adverbs: "rather," "quite," and "fairly." You can use these words before an adjective to soften the tone a bit. A co-worker asks you about a letter he has written. You think it's too **wordy**. But you don't say, "It's too wordy." Instead, you soften the effect by saying, "It's *rather* wordy." Or instead of saying "It's too formal," you say, "It's *quite* formal." You're only switching one small word, but it makes a big impact.

Now let's look at three relatively simple adjectives: "little," "slight," and "minor." Think about the difference between "The website has a problem," and "The website has a slight problem." It's **neither here nor there** how big the problem is. Calling it "slight" helps to make the statement less forceful.

It's really amazing how adding just single words can change the effect of what we are saying. Two of the most common softening words are "maybe" and "perhaps." These words can **transform** a **definitive** statement into a **mere** possibility, like this: "Perhaps we need to consider **letting a few employees go** for the summer." Or this: "Maybe what you should do is talk to Jane directly."

All of these words I've mentioned are part of what we call "hedging" language. Hedging language simply makes our statements less **assertive**.

There are more ways to hedge. One useful technique is to **qualify** the number, frequency, and certainty. Qualifying numbers means using expressions like "a few," "some," or "several." So instead of saying "There are mistakes," you can say, "There are a few mistakes." It's softer. Qualifying by frequency means using expressions such as "occasionally," "sometimes," or "from time to time." On a **performance review**, for example, it may be useful to say, "From time to time Joe does not prepare sufficiently for presentations." And qualifying by certainty means using modals such as "might," "could," and "may." So rather than saying, "Our bid will not be successful," you can say, "Our bid *might* not be successful." In all of these examples, you can see how one expression can **tone down** the strength of our statements.

Sometimes hedging and qualifying require more than just one word. There are a variety of expressions we can use to change a statement of fact into one of opinion or curiosity. Here's a situation: a designer **shows up** at a meeting with some new brochure designs. You think the designs are too **trendy** for your company.

So here's what you say: "I wonder whether these designs are a bit too **edgy** for our brand." By introducing the idea with "I wonder whether," it sounds like you are just thinking out loud, rather than making an assertive **pronouncement**. It's softer, and the meaning will get through with less risk of offending someone.

You can also admit **upfront** that what you're about to say is just your opinion. You can do this with expressions like "from my perspective," "the way I see it," and "in my opinion." These phrases are diplomatic because they seem to say "I understand that you might have a different opinion."

And that's important. People are more likely to accept your ideas, opinions, suggestions, and directions if they think you're not trying to **ram them down their throats**. When you come across as too assertive, **demanding**, or authoritative, your social message will **cloud** your real message. And that's **counterproductive**.

That's all for today. If you'd like to test yourself on what we've just covered, have a look at the **myBEOonline.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. According to Tim, when we speak we are not only conveying meaning, we are acting _____. MC
 - A Selfishly
 - B Professionally
 - C Socially
 - D Riskily

2. Which of the following statements uses a softening adverb or adjective? MS
 - A These cookies are too sweet.
 - B Those machines are somewhat expensive.
 - C There is a minor problem with the printer.
 - D The event was a complete disaster.

3. Tim says that the two most common or useful hedging words are **P**_____ and **M**_____.

4. The expressions "a few," "from time to time," and "might" are examples of how we can qualify by...
 - A Degree, number, and quality
 - B Number, frequency, and certainty
 - C Certainty, possibility, and necessity
 - D Quality, frequency, and timeliness

5. What expression can we add to the beginning of the following statement to hedge?

"Our expansion plans are too ambitious."

 - A I'm certain that
 - B It's pretty obvious that
 - C Someone knows if
 - D I wonder whether

6. What is the expression "the way I see it" an example of?
 - A An assertive pronouncement
 - B Qualifying with adjectives
 - C A mere possibility
 - D An upfront admission of opinion

Review Answers

1. According to Tim, when we speak we are not only conveying meaning, we are acting _____.
C socially
2. Which of the following statements uses a softening adverb or adjective?
B Those machines are somewhat expensive.
C There is a minor problem with the printer.
3. Tim says that the two most common or useful hedging words are **perhaps** and **maybe**.
4. The expressions "a few," "from time to time," and "might" are examples of how we can qualify by...
B number, frequency, and certainty
5. What expression can we add to the beginning of the following statement to hedge?
"Our expansion plans are too ambitious."
D I wonder whether
6. What is the expression "the way I see it" an example of?
D an upfront admission of opinion

Online Practice

Click the "Launch" button to open the **online practice**:

