

By Jeff “Chief” Urbaniak
COLUMNIST (www.AdviceChief.com)

Words have power. Words like “shut up” and “stupid” will close doors between you and someone else. “Please” and “thank you” open them. There are a few phrases that can unbolt shut doors, leave open doors ajar, and cut passages where none existed. For example:

“In My Opinion...”

I often have to dispense counsel, but the advice I give often comes down to opinion based off of experience, insight, and analysis. But it’s still an opinion and I tell people that.

Does saying “in my opinion” show weakness? On the contrary, those three words signal strength--that you’re taking full responsibility for what you’re about to say. That shows confidence, and listeners take their cues from the signals we send. In fact, the more certain I am about something, the more likely I am to preface or conclude my words with “in my opinion.”

“What Do You Think?”

In the greatest textbook ever written, one proverb says, “Where there is no counsel, the people fall; but in the multitude of counselors there is safety.” The best counsel givers are counsel seekers. There were many times I had to make swift and timely decisions on my own, but when I knew it was going to have a profound impact on many others, I asked for other people’s opinions and ideas whenever I feasibly could. I never overlooked someone’s advice because of their job title. That kind of arrogance prevents or interferes with the biggest discoveries.

Over the years I’ve seen leaders make major decisions without the benefit of much more than a counsel

of one. Certainly a leader is free to override advice--ultimately he or she is left with final judgment--but to form that judgment without seeking information, news, and opinions, and without listening to the dissenting side, often causes the wisdom of one to turn out not to be as wise as it could be.

“Let Me Ask You a Question”

In an interview on his writing, award-winning Czechoslovakian author Milan Kundera parted the curtain on his technique and offered a tip to everyone who wants the full story: ask questions. He said, “The stupidity of people comes from having an answer to everything. The wisdom of the novel comes from having a question for everything.” He continued, “It seems to me that all over the world people nowadays prefer to judge rather than to understand, to answer rather than to ask, so that the voice of the novel can hardly be heard over the noisy foolishness of human certainties.”

Let me put it this way: knowledge has right answers; wisdom has right questions. So are you employing the power of a question?

It is almost impossible to disregard a good question. Just the phrase “Let me ask you...” attracts attention. Try it in your next meeting. Used wisely, a question is your passage to new information, more time to think, and the regard of the people you’re talking to. In our culture, questions show interest, they flatter. And good questions will sharpen other people’s own thinking, which benefits them greatly.

“I Don’t Know”

When Bill Graham turned seventy, a *Newsweek* interviewer asked him why, given his mighty public influence,

he never ran for political office. Billy Graham told the reporter he wasn’t smart enough. An attorney I know gave me the same kind of answer when I asked him why he didn’t pursue criminal law. He said it was because he failed miserably at it--that he was better at bankruptcy law. Unfortunately, though, these two men are the exceptions. Most leaders or those in highly responsible positions avoid admitting their lack of strength or lack of knowledge.

Great men and women, accomplished artists, and gifted leaders are confident about their strengths and equally comfortable admitting their weaknesses. In fact, show me an expert willing to say, “I don’t know,” and I’ll show you a constituency who trusts what he or she *does* know.

I am not advocating a string of shrugs, needless ignorance, or lack of preparation. But I do suggest that you take up the confidence-inspiring habit of refusing to blow smoke. I would even suggest that people who say “I don’t know” usually know more than it might appear, while those who don’t ever acknowledge it almost certainly know less.

One of the best things leaders can do for their children, spouses, employees, clients, and anyone else is to make it acceptable not to know. In an atmosphere of honest questioning, people are more likely to collaborate--to shoot out suggestions, think out loud, and discover information no single know-it-all could have developed alone.

Use these four powerful phrases when and where appropriate and you will take great strides in legitimizing your leadership ability.

~ The End ~