

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP

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Three Words You Should Never Say ▶ 07/08/10

You should never say this

Vince is a passionate guy who believes good relationships are the key to getting things done. In private, Vince expressed exasperation to me about the way many people handle themselves. "He should have known his email would backfire," he complained about a subordinate. Or, about the CEO, "Brad should have had the decency to let me know about that announcement." Or, on a positive note, "My team should be able to pull that off."

It wasn't long before I observed that he used the word "should" a lot and asked whose "should" he was referring to. He asked what I meant. "Well, for example, who says Brad 'should' have had the decency to let you know? Where is that written?"

"It's just common courtesy, don't you think?"

"Whether I do or don't, I don't see where 'should' comes into it," I said.

I explained that to me the word "should" sounds as if there's some universal truth everyone agreed to. We "should" wear sunscreen. We "should" eat fewer processed foods. We "should" get eight hours of sleep each night. We "should" do these things if we want to live a long, healthy life.

Good advice, but, of course, many of us don't do those things and live long, healthy lives anyway! So, other than producing guilt, what good do these "shoulds" do us?

Whose "should" is it, anyway?

I asked Vince, "When you say Brad 'should' have let you know, whose 'should' is it? Your mom's? Brad's mom? God's? Who's talking?"

"I guess I am," he said. "It's my 'should'."

"Then I'd like to challenge you. Any time you want to use the word 'should,' rephrase the sentence so it becomes a statement of personal ownership. Take away the 'should' and speak for yourself."



I gave him examples. The sentence, "Brad 'should' have let me know about that announcement" would become "I would have liked it if Brad had let me know about that announcement."

"He 'should' have known his email would backfire" would become "I'd like him to think carefully before he hits 'send'."

"My team 'should' be able to pull that off" would become "I believe my team has the talent to pull that off."

"Should" isn't a word, it's a mindset

Vince began to see that "should" represents a mindset that puts responsibility on the other person. But the other person is completely out of his control. So Vince's "should" mindset allowed him to feel like a victim of all those big, bad people who didn't do things the way he wanted them to. He got to feel righteous without taking any responsibility.

He didn't like the implications of that mindset. He quickly moved to eliminate "should" from his way of thinking.

Rosa's situation was similar but had a significant twist. The leader of a data management group, she'd received feedback saying she was brilliant but a downer. "She's Eeyore personified," someone wrote. "Asking her how she is can bum you out."

When I asked if she thought the feedback was accurate, Rosa sighed wearily, saying, "Oh, yes. I know I should be a better person."

I asked her to define what "a better person" meant. She said, "I should be happier."

"Who says?" I asked.

"Everyone," she said, sweeping her hand towards the feedback report.

"Is it what you want?"

"Yes, I should be happier," she said, putting us into a conversational loop.



Unlike Vince, whose “shoulds” were about what everyone else “should” do, Rosa’s “shoulds” were to herself about herself. Every “should” represented one more bullet-point in a long list of her failures.

Her “shoulds” made her feel guilty, but they also allowed her to feel complete: once she’d meted out her psychic punishment, she moved on. The next time she had a similar failure, she would utter another “should,” feel badly again and move on once more. “Should” absolved her of personal responsibility. Nothing changed.

If “should” has a place in your thinking, challenge yourself. Swap out every “should” for a statement of personal ownership. “Should” is a flawed concept.

The other two words

At the beginning of a recent staff meeting, everyone was present except for a woman named Hannah. There was a bit of stalling; no one wanted to begin without her. Finally, Caitlin, the leader, announced with some annoyance that they might as well begin.

About ten minutes later, Hannah rushed in breathlessly, mumbled an apology and took her place. Icily, Caitlin said, “This is unacceptable, Hannah. You’re always late.”

Hannah reacted defensively and a heated argument went on for several uncomfortable minutes.

Afterwards, Caitlin, knowing the exchange with Hannah had not gone well, asked me how she might have handled it differently. I replied, “I think the whole event might have been avoided if you hadn’t said one word: ‘always’. You accused Hannah of ‘always’ being late. Surely that’s not true.”

Now it was Caitlin’s turn to be defensive. “But she is,” she protested. “She’s late to these meetings and to our one-on-ones and even with her own staff. I hear about it all the time.”

“I understand she’s late a lot, but I don’t believe she’s ‘always’ late.”

After a bit more debate, Caitlin conceded that, no, actually Hannah wasn’t “always” late.

Say what you mean and mean what you say

The reason the word “always,” and its mirrored twin, “never,” are problematic is that they are usually inaccurate. Listen to doctors discuss data. Lives hang in the balance of their research; inaccuracy can



be lethal. Doctors don't use "always" or "never" because they are so rarely accurate. (Please notice I am not saying those words are "never" accurate!)

When faced with an "always" or "never" accusation, someone like Hannah can argue her case and she'll have a point: she isn't "always" late. She can let herself off the hook because the premise of the argument was flawed.

We build trust when we say what we mean. Using "always" and "never" are trust killers because they so rarely represent what we really mean.

We also build trust when we mean what we say. The word "should" often rings false because, although we say we "should" do this or "should" do that, we so rarely do anything about it.

The title of this Tip is, of course, ironic. Do I believe you "should" "never" say these three words? Of course not. But using them rarely, and only with conscious intention, will boost your credibility and propel you farther down the road of *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.

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