



IMPERFECT PHRASES FOR RELATIONSHIPS

101 COMMON THINGS YOU SHOULD
NEVER SAY TO SOMEONE IMPORTANT
TO YOU... AND WHAT TO SAY INSTEAD

ROBERT BACAL

Imperfect Phrases For Relationships

101 COMMON Things You
Should Never Say To Some-
one Important To You...

And What To Say Instead

By Robert Bacal

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ISBN-13: 978-1-926840-04-8
PDF Version

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface—You ARE In This Book..... vii

Section I — Introduction 1

Chapter 1 — You ARE The Words You Use.....	3
Chapter 2 — How To Use This Book.....	13
Working On Your Own	15
Working With Someone Else	17
And What About At Work?.....	18
Examples of Invitations	19
Activities For Better Learning For Teams, Groups, Families	21
Chapter 3 — Your Guiding Principles	23
It’s The Presuppositions That Hurt	23
What YOU Intend Isn’t Nearly As Important As What The Other Person HEARS	27
Eliminate “Less Than” Communication.....	27
Eliminate “One Up — One Down”	29

Section II—The Imperfect Phrases 33

1. And Another Thing.....	35
2. Are You Deaf?	36
3. Are You Really Going To.....	37
4. Because Those Are The Rules.....	39
5. Can I Give You Some Constructive Criti- cism?.....	41
6. Can You Get It Right This Time?	43
7. Calm Down 🍷	44

8.	Cheer Up!.....	46
9.	Do You Have Your Period?.....	47
10.	Don't Cry.....	48
11.	Don't Do Me Any Favors	50
12.	Don't Take It So Seriously	51
13.	Don't Take This The Wrong Way, But... ☛.....	52
14.	Don't You Realize...?.....	54
15.	Every Time We... ☛.....	55
16.	Everyone Agrees With Me	56
17.	Get Off My Back.....	58
18.	How Can You Say You Won't...?	59
19.	How Many Times Have I Told You.....	61
20.	How The Hell Should I Know	62
21.	I Definitely...	63
22.	I Don't Care.....	64
23.	I Don't Make Those Kinds of Mistakes	65
24.	I Don't Want To Start An Argument But..	66
25.	I Give Up ☛.....	67
26.	I Told You So.....	69
27.	I Tried That and It's A Waste of Time	70
28.	If You Really... ☛.....	71
29.	I'm Doing My Best	73
30.	I'm Going To Prove To You That.....	75
31.	I'm Not The Only One...Everyone Else Thinks So ☛.....	76
32.	It's All In Your Mind	78
33.	It's None of Your Business	80
34.	I Was Only Joking	81
35.	I Will... If You Will.....	83
36.	I've Told You A Hundred Times...	84
37.	Just Leave It, I'll Do It Myself.....	85
38.	Just Forget About It. It's No Big Deal.. ..	86
39.	Lighten Up!	87
40.	Listen To Yourself.....	88
41.	Most People Do It	89
42.	Never Mind.....	90
43.	No Problem. I'm Used To Being Dumped On...	91

44.	No!	93
45.	No, I Don't, Yes, You Do	94
46.	No One Ever Said Life Is Fair	96
47.	Not Now!	97
48.	Nothing Is The Matter	98
49.	Nothing I Ever Do Is Good Enough	100
50.	Pull Yourself Together	102
51.	Relax	104
52.	Should I Repeat This For The Fourth Time?	105
53.	Snap Out Of It	106
54.	Sorry, But... ☛	107
55.	Stop Being So Emotional ☛	109
56.	Take It Or Leave It	111
57.	That Doesn't Make Any Sense	112
58.	That's Never Going To Work	113
59.	That's Just Your Opinion	115
60.	That's Not True. I Saw It For Myself	116
61.	There Are A Lot of People Worse Off	117
62.	Typical. Just A Typical Male (or Female) Opinion	119
63.	Wait Until	120
64.	We Could Have... If You'd	121
65.	We Have To Talk	122
66.	Whatever... ☛	124
67.	What Do You Want Me To Do About It?	126
68.	What's Wrong With You?	127
69.	When Are You Going To Start (Looking For A Job)	128
70.	Who Do You Think You Are?	129
71.	Why Can't You Be More Like	130
72.	Why Don't You Talk To Me?	132
73.	Why Do You Need To Know?	133
74.	Why Is It Always Me That Has To	134
75.	Why Is This Such A Big Deal For You?	135
76.	Why Should I Care?	136
77.	Why Should I Apologize, I Didn't Do Any- thing Wrong ☛	137
78.	Why Would I Be Upset, Just Because	139

79.	Will You Be On Time This Time?.....	140
80.	You Always... ..	141
81.	You Aren't Listening	142
82.	You Can't... ..	144
83.	You Don't Appreciate.....	145
84.	You Don't Know What You Are Talking About.....	146
85.	You Drink Too Much	147
86.	You Knew I Was This Way When You Met Me	148
87.	You Made Me Do It ☛.....	149
88.	You Make Me Feel Stupid	151
89.	You Never Asked	153
90.	You Never... ..	155
91.	You Should Talk..You're [] Than I Am ..	156
92.	You Shouldn't Feel That Way.....	157
93.	You Started It... ..	159
94.	You Take Everything Too Seriously	160
95.	You Tell Me	161
96.	You'll Be OK. Don't Worry About It	162
97.	You're Disrespecting Me	163
98.	You 're Not Being Logical	164
99.	You're Just Like... ..	165
100.	You're Overreacting	166
101.	You're The Only One That Thinks That, You Know.....	167

Section III — Conclusions..... 171

	What You've Learned	171
	The Common Threads	171
	The Ten Commandments of Perfect Phrases .	172
	Well, We're Done...But You Are Not	173
	Our Support Website.....	174

PREFACE

You Are In This Book!

You're human. You have relationships, at home and at work that are important to you, whether they are with colleagues, and managers, or with family members. The quality of those relationships depends a lot on how you communicate, what you say, and how you say things.

The challenge is that we are all human, and we're all imperfect. We get upset. We say things we later regret. Sometimes we say things that, inadvertently make our relationships rocky, only finding out when the other person reacts negatively to what we've said. And sometimes, we're surprised when we get those responses.

No matter how good you think you are at communicating, no matter how much education and training you have had, and no matter how old you are, you make mistakes. And pay the price.

We've identified one hundred and one common phrases people use that damage their relationships, and I guarantee you that you will find phrases in this book that you've used, and probably still use. This doesn't make you a bad person. It doesn't make you someone who doesn't care about other people. It just means you are human — A human being who sometimes uses imperfect phrases. Make no mistake about it, though. Even

though we're all imperfect, and don't set out to harm relationships with those important to us, we can't avoid the negative impact of these phrases.

Every time you use one of the imperfect phrases in this book, you chip away at the core of your relationships. You damage trust. You damage credibility. You portray yourself in a negative light. As a result you create arguments when none are necessary. Bad feelings are created both for you, and the people around you. These phrases cause pain.

The Solution:

There IS a solution, and that's where this book comes in. It's simple. Once you know the 101 toxic phrases in this book, and why they are damaging, you can start to REPLACE those phrases with words that don't hurt, that invite discussion and dialogue rather than argument, and build the foundation of your relationships instead of eroding it.

Of course, success in relationships requires more than changing what you say, but you'll find that by changing the words you use, you'll take a massive step towards building the relationships you want.

This book is a practical solution to help you with your relationships. Each set of common imperfect phrases comes with an explanation of why the phrases are eroding your relationships, and more importantly, what to say instead.

Is it easy to change what you say? To eliminate the imperfect phrases from your vocabulary? You bet. While you can read as many books as you

like, it's still up to you to apply what you've learned to the world around you. The benefits are huge. But at least now, you have a tool, a guide, to help you identify the changes you need to make.

Dedication

I'd like to dedicate this book to Suzette Haden-Elgin, psycholinguist, science fiction author, and a whole lot more, who, many years ago, inspired me to look at how people use language, through her verbal self-defence books.

Disclaimer

The contents of this books should never be used to replace professional assistance — counselling, and services from psychologists and psychiatrists.

The contents of this book work generally, but keep in mind that each relationship is different and unique. Phrases that are toxic in one relationship may work well in another relationship, so you **MUST** use your own judgment as to what will work and not work in your particular relationship.

SECTION I INTRODUCTION

Chapter I: You ARE The Words You Use

Chapter II: Using This Book

Chapter III: Your Guiding Principles

Chapter 1 — You ARE The Words You Use

If you are interested in better relationships, at home and at work, you've no doubt come across a lot of the "advice" offered on how to create the relationships you want. After all it's important for your personal life, and career to forge positive, peaceful and constructive relationships.

Unfortunately, much of the advice is vague. You're told: Show the other person respect. Or Listen carefully. Or, stay calm. It's impossible to disagree with vague advice, because...well, it's so vague, and so superficially sensible that no sane person would object. It's all pretty useless and the worst part is you don't realize it's all pretty useless.

The problem is that vague advice focuses on ideas or concepts — respect, caring, politeness, as if they mean the same thing to everyone. They don't. They are also removed from what really counts, your visible behavior. You can only be known by what people can see, hear, touch...well you get the idea. So, you can't really have good relationships by "respecting" someone unless someone comes along to help you figure out what that could mean and HOW you can show respect to your partner. Or how you can show you care for the people around you.

Vague suggestions tend to mislead. If you have read other advice on how you can improve your relationships, was it specific enough for you to change your behavior to something better? If not it's unlikely you received very little benefit. You need to know EXACTLY what to avoid saying, and just as important, you need to know what to say instead. And that's the point of this book.

WHAT You Say Is A Huge Piece of The Relationship Puzzle

Think about the concrete things that make or break relationships. Clearly, what you DO, the actions you take are important. Whether you do what you say you will do. Whether the non-verbals you use send a message of caring and commitment, or the opposite.

The WORDS that you use, phrases is the term we use, are so important in building and maintaining relationships, because quite simply, we do so much talking. Talking is the way we learn about each other, make commitments, and the main way we are known by other people. It makes no difference what's inside of us — positive feelings, let's say, if we bumble along, saying things the wrong way.

And all of us say things the wrong way, at least some of the time, because our language habits are learned when we are too young to appreciate how much the words and phrases count. We all have bad language habits, and those habits cause us to blurt out things in ways that damage our relationships, at home and at work. The more upset we are, the more emotional, the more likely we'll fall back on the more child-like habits we have.

For example, have you ever heard two adults arguing about "who started an argument"? Or overheard someone say to another: "Chill out, you take things too seriously". Have YOU ever said these things? Chances are you have, and chances are you've used a number of words and phrases that make sense at the time, at least until come out of your mouth. Then, you get the negative reaction you hadn't thought you would get. OOPS!

Fortunately, relationships survive occasional mistakes. If that wasn't the case, we'd never pro-

create and the species would have died out long ago. Those mistakes, though, make relationships much rockier and challenging, as they create unnecessary friction and conflict that comes about ONLY because of the words we use. Conflicts and disagreements aren't always bad. We can learn from them. The exception is when the discussions become focused on WHAT was said, and HOW it was said rather than the real life issue.

An Example

Jack and Suzanne have been a couple for ten years or so. They have their disagreements and clashes, and in the past they've managed to get through them. Now, however, they are facing some financial difficulties, and Jack was laid off about six months ago. The bank balance is dropping, and they're both scared. Here's a conversation between the two of them.

Suzanne: Jack, did you forget to transfer money into our checking account? I heard from the bank that our the check for the electricity bill bounced.

Jack: I didn't forget. I did it like I always do it, every month. You must have spent the money somewhere else.

Suzanne: I did not. How can you say that? I've been responsible about money, like, forever.

Jack: Well, it's not my fault. You don't appreciate how hard it is for me, not having a job.

Suzanne: I DO appreciate it, but we have to pay the bills. When are you going to start looking for a job?

Jack: What the hell do you think I've been doing every day for the last four months...

Suzanne: Well, how would I know. You hardly ever talk to me about your day anymore.

Jack: You never ask.

It's not going well for the couple, is it? This kind of conversation happens all the time, and it points out the power of words. There are no direct, intentional insults. No swearing and name calling. Jack and Suzanne care deeply about each other, yet this has become a common way for them to interact. If they don't alter what they say to each other, they will erode the trust and commitment that's gotten them through tough times before, and that WILL threaten the relationship.

This conversation suffers from imperfect phrases, as both Suzanne and Jack make poor choices in the words they use. You can see what happens. At first, the issue is that a check has bounced, and Suzanne asks Jack whether he transferred the money to the correct account. Her choice of words isn't very good. Jack reacts with more imperfect phrases, and the original issue, a simple one, in fact, gets completely lost. Within two exchanges, the couple is arguing because of the imperfect phrases used. Not only are they unlikely to solve the issue of the bounced check, they are creating a slew of negative emotions that are both unpleasant and damaging to the long term health of the relationship.

An Example of "Better"

We could go through the little dialogue and analyse the heck out of it, but in keeping with the practical orientation of this book, let's start at the other end. Let's see how small changes in the words Jack and Suzanne used could change this exchange completely.

Suzanne: Jack, a funny thing happened today. I was told that our check to the electric company bounced. I know we have enough money to cover it, and I'm at a loss as to what happened. Do you have any ideas?

Jack: *No. I transferred the money from our savings into our checking account like I always do.*

Suzanne: *Was that on the 31st, like usual?*

Jack: *Yup.*

Suzanne: *Weird. Well, we should probably try to track this down, since we'll have to pay the NSF fee to the bank.*

Jack: *OK. Hey, I know. Let's use our online banking to check the transactions and bank balances.*

That's what they do. Here's the conversation, resumed in front of their computer.

Jack: *Hmm...I don't see any record here of the transfer to the checking account, and I'm sure I did the transfer.*

Suzanne: *Do you think something happened at the bank and the transfer didn't go through?*

Jack: *Could be. I'll have to contact the bank and ask.*

Suzanne: *Good. Can you recall if you checked the bank balances after the transfer?*

Jack: *Well, I don't remember, but I know I was in a hurry.*

Suzanne: *Ah. I have an idea on how we can prevent this from happening. How about if we print out the transaction and balances each time we use online banking. Then we can make sure everything is working properly.*

Jack: *Great idea. Let's do that from now on, and then we'll always know what each of us is doing with the banking.*

Quite a bit different, isn't it. The conversation stays on topic, and results in a practical solution to prevent the problem from occurring again. What changed?

We could assume that their attitudes differed in the two examples, or they "respected" each other

more in the second example, and perhaps that's true. We don't know, because attitudes and respect are INSIDE each person, invisible except for what we can see and hear. Or, we could look at the words they used and compare in the first and second example.

In the first example, almost every part of the exchange is littered with imperfect phrases, choices of wording that, while not "in your face" confrontational, put the other person in a defensive position. The result is that as feelings are hurt, things get worse, as each person "triggers" the other. The point is quickly lost.

In the second example, both Suzanne and Jack choose different words and phrases. For example, to start the conversation, Suzanne, removes the hint of blame embedded in "*Jack, did you forget to transfer money into our checking account?*" and comes at it differently, much more in the spirit of inquiry and working together. Jack, not feeling under attack, responds in the same spirit, and what could have turned bad, now ends up as a simple, direct and constructive discussion.

All that changed was the words. Certainly, things like body language, and tone of voice are important, no amount of positive body language and "loving tone" would have made a difference in the first example. You can't "fix" imperfect phrases in any other way than to find better ways to say similar things.

Not Just Important In Personal Relationships

At first glance, you'd think that the kinds of difficulties Suzanne and Jack encounter in the first example apply only to close personal relation-

ships, within families, between couples, with children. You'd be wrong.

The same issue, the power of our words, applies to our jobs, careers and friends. Job and career success has a lot of components, but you'll tend to find that those who move upwards along a career path tend to get along well with those around them. It makes sense. Bosses and other work decision-makers aren't inclined to promote people who make their lives miserable, or who communicate so badly, they create conflicts in the workplace, when those conflicts are unnecessary.

In fact, you have probably run in to people at work who are like Pigpen in the Charlie Brown comics. Everywhere they go, a cloud of conflict follows. This happens, even with highly competent people, because they:

- are unaware of how their words and phrases are interpreted by those around them
- they haven't developed the skills to combat the tendency we all have to use more child-like ways to express themselves particularly when we are emotionally invested in the conversation.

Sure, some may simply be "bad people", and some may be plain angry all the time, or have other personality issues, but all those things manifest themselves in the words and phrases they use. The saddest situations occur when a person, well intentioned perhaps, and even above average in terms of job related skills, ends up losing a job, or hitting a career wall, because of the words he or she uses.

Whether it's asking the boss for a raise, or working in a team, or...well, almost anything in the

workplace, if you choose the wrong words, you might well be harming your career, and in fact, your income.

A Special Note About Children — YOUR Children

Raising children is a challenge, and for many, it's the most important part of their lives. For that reason, it's worth looking at the words you use with your children, and your role in teaching them to communicate effectively, and "set them up" for future success in THEIR families, and in their careers.

You probably know what follows, but it's still good to review.

Your children learn about the world in a number of ways, but by far, the most important is that they see everything you do and SAY. They mimic you even before they have any clue as to the meaning of the words they copy. A little scary, when you come to think about it; how much influence you have whether you like it or not. In short, the words you use are exceedingly powerful.

Couple that with parental tendencies to get frustrated with their children, and it becomes particularly important to alter the imperfect phrases you use with your children, and replace them with better phrasings that TEACH your children how people can interact in constructive ways.

That's one of the differences between interacting with adults in your life, and interacting with your children. In most adult situations, your goal isn't to teach. Your goal is to build and maintain positive relationships sustainable over time, and re-

duce unnecessary disagreements and conflict.

Of course, you want that with your kids, too. With children though, there's the added responsibility of teaching them what's good to say, and what's not good to say, and they will learn those things FROM you, by watching and listening.

There's also an added challenge. Kids aren't just miniature adults. They process information differently, and depending on age, they have some built in limits for what they can understand.

There will be times when your frustration, and the press of every day activities will "push" you to use imperfect phrases with your children that send the wrong messages, or imply things you don't mean to say. You will be put in situations where you will blurt out things in ways you might later regret.

You're human, and thankfully, children are pretty resilient. Errors are not likely to cause problems unless you fall into long-term, consistent patterns involving the use of imperfect phrases.

Be particularly alert to the power of your words and phrasings. There may be times when, for example, you get so tired of nagging your kids to go to bed that you'll say something like: "Just because I said so". Apart from a comment on the "going to bed issue", what else does it teach the child? Those with the power don't, or shouldn't, offer explanations? You might not want to teach your child that might makes right.

The point here is that by becoming more aware of the impact of your choices in words, you can still get things done with your children, while at

the same time, teaching them how to interact in civil, cooperative ways. And, lord knows, we need more people who value that in our society.

Chapter Conclusions

- The words and phrases you use COUNT, and in fact have incredible power to build or destroy relationships.
- We all are prone to errors in phrasing what we say. Every one of us. Unless we pay attention to our words, and change imperfect ones into better phrases, we WILL pay a price in our marriages and intimate relationships. Stunted career development, and damaged relationships with our children, and friends can also result.
- To prevent the erosion of our relationships resulting from imperfect phrasing, we need to know what to STOP saying, and what to say instead.

In the next chapter, we explain how you can use this book, either on your own, or with others, to stop the pain of unnecessary argument and hurt feelings.

Chapter 2 — How To Use This Book

Introduction

Let's focus on what you need to learn in order to build better relationships at home and at work. That's the ultimate goal — the prize, we need to keep our eyes on. To do that, here's what needs to happen:

- You need to understand a very few linguistic principles that you can apply to anything you say, so you can avoid provoking unnecessary conflict and hurt.
- You need to become more adept at slowing yourself down, particularly during disagreements or when upset, and start listening to yourself as you speak. Better yet, This needs to happen before you speak as your words bubble up in your head.
- You need to identify, and replace the 101 common imperfect phrases included in this book.

Just by reading through this book, and working on a different imperfect phrase each day, you can achieve all of these goals in order to change what you say to the people who are important to you.

You can, of course, use this book completely on your own. You'll benefit from that. You can also use this book as a basis for improving an existing relationship, say with a spouse, boyfriend or girlfriend, by using this book together.

Before we provide some learning options for you, let's talk a bit about the content that is to follow.

In This Book

You've probably already read the first chapter, which explains why the words you use are so important, and you've seen how some simple changes to phrases can turn an angry, hurtful discussion between Jack and Suzanne into something pleasant and useful.

In the next chapter you'll find some basic guiding principles, largely drawn from psycholinguistics. Don't be daunted by the big word. You don't have to know ANY fancy terms to use language to build better relationships.

These principles are the bare minimum, to take control of your own words, and understand how seemingly innocent phrases you use can have a negative and/or unexpected response from other people. They ARE important to understand.

The remainder of the book walks you through the 101 imperfect phrases you need to either delete from your vocabulary, or improve. For each of the imperfect phrases we provide a short explanation of why it's problematic, and we provide examples of how you can change them to say similar things but without the hidden sting in the message.

As you go through the imperfect phrases try to think of similar phrases that seem to have the same issues and problems, but that aren't specifically mentioned. That will help you tune into language, and better appreciate how language works.

One more thing before we give you some more tips on how to use this book. While you CAN try to read this book from cover to cover, I can't recommend that you do it that way. One reason is you'll be bored out of your mind, because it's not writ-

ten in a way that supports that. It would be like reading the dictionary from cover to cover. Useful, but not riveting reading. It's really up to you, but I you'll find you learn more effectively by following the advice in the rest of this chapter.

Working On Your Own

There are a number of ways you can approach changing how you speak and what you say. Here are a few thoughts to guide you.

Work on only one or two phrases at a time. That is, let's say you want to start at the beginning.

1. Look at the first imperfect phrase.
2. Decide if you have ever said the imperfect phrase, and think about the situation in which you said it.
3. Think about what happened Did the other person react badly, or did it work out OK?
4. Read the explanation, so you understand WHY the use of that particular phrase often results in damaged relationships.
5. Then, look at the "Make It Better" section for examples of how the phrasing could be changed.
6. Imagine yourself back in the situation in which you used the phrase, and imagine saying the better phrases instead. Try to see visualize the interaction. You can even say the better phrases out loud if you like.

There's a reason I ask you to do it this way. In order to break bad language habits, and start new ones, so you don't make errors even when you are upset, you need to practice. Fortunately, you do NOT need to practice in real life. At least not yet. Rehearsing in your head is a powerful method for

change, and that's what we want to use here. The more vividly you imagine the situation(s) and using the improved phrases, the better you will remember them.

In A Hurry, Want To Do The “Short Course”?

Since 101 phrases is a lot to go through, you may want to fast track yourself. There are two ways to do that.

Study the Ten Worst Imperfect Phrases First

Some of the imperfect phrases listed will apply to you — that is, they will be phrases you have used before or think you might use in the future. Some may not apply to you, because you already know they are not good things to say.

To save you some time, we've made a list of the ten worst or most common imperfect phrases. You can start with them, following the procedure we outlined on the previous page. Then, if you have the time and motivation, you can go back to the other ones in the book.

The worst phrases have a box that looks like this:



It's located towards the top at the left or right of the page.)

Even easier is to use the Table of Contents. Each of the worst phrases has a little symbol: (💣) beside it.

Use The Triage Method

Another way to speed things up is to go through the table of contents and highlight the phrases you can remember using. Work on those first.

Important Note: It really is best if you work through ALL the phrases. While some even overlap, you'll find that doing them all, and enduring some of the repetition will help you develop better phrasing habits and better understand how the language you use makes a difference.

Working With Someone Else

If you are in a relationship that could benefit from better communication (and all relationships can), consider using this book as a basis for working TOGETHER to make things better. Two people reading, interacting, and learning about each other is far better than one person reading this book on his or her own.

So, you bought this book. You'd really like to work with your partner on changing how each of you communicates, How do you go about it? How do you even broach the subject in the first place without raising hackles?

Let's start there. Here are some important ideas to guide your approach to the other person.

- Always focus on WE, and not YOU. Nobody wants to "work together" to make something better, when it's clear the motivation is to get THEM to change. The process should always be about the two of you.
- Pick a time to broach the subject when both of you are relaxed, and rested. Do NOT bring up this book in the middle of an argument or dis-

agreement. It will just make things worse.

- Never use this book to bludgeon another person, or “prove” the other person is a poor communicator. It’s not about that.
- Don’t approach with an ultimatum. You know the kind of thing...*if you don’t read this book, I’m going to leave you.* Even if you force the other person to read the book, or discuss it with you, you can’t force someone to change unless they want to, and force tends to push people to resist changing.
- Don’t hand this book to someone and ask them to read it. Be part of the process.
- Take responsibility for your errors and communication gaffes. Prove to the other person that you are willing to change how you communicate, and you are eager to take into account the other person’s needs and wants.

And What About At Work?

The use of imperfect phrases, and the unfortunate upheaval they cause isn’t limited to personal relationships. In the workplace, even a single person who is the verbal “bull in a china shop” can cause dissatisfaction and anger among co-workers, and make managing “the bull” difficult. If you want to improve a relationship with a work colleague, you can use the exact same techniques and “invitations” you would use with those with whom you have a closer personal relationship.

If you are a manager, wanting to reduce workplace conflict, particularly with one specific individual, this book can be a great tool. And, if you haven’t thought of it yet, this is also an excellent resource for work teams that may be having communication difficulties as a result of overuse of imperfect phrases.

Examples of Invitations

Let's get more specific about what you can say — how you can phrase things to increase the likelihood the other person will FEEL invited, and see the overture as something positive for both of you.

- *Jenn, we've been together a while, and sometimes I sense I upset you with some of the words I use. Do you want to work together to see if we can improve things?*
- *John, I picked up this book to help me talk to you so I don't get on your nerves, but I need your help. Got a few minutes?*
- *Fred, we seem to be arguing a lot about nothing, so I'm wondering if you'd like to work through this book with me, so we won't argue for no reason.*
- *I've been reading this book on things couples shouldn't say to each other, and I'm finding both of us are in the book. Want to take a look?*

In the examples, you can see the speaker starts by demonstrating a willingness to change, and a desire to be a better relationship partner. That should be your starting point.

You can also work with your child using this book. Once he or she hits the age of ten or so, you can offer to sit down and work together. Here are some sample invitations:

With Linda (15 years old):

- *Linda, you and I seem to say things that start arguments, so I'm wondering if you'd be willing to sit down with me and spend a few minutes looking at a book that might help. What do you think?*
- *Linda, you've been mentioning you are having a lot of arguments with your best friend, Nancy. I*

picked up a book that I find useful, because it helps reduce the nasty arguments we can all have. Want to take a look?

With Joey (ten years old)

- *Joey, some things aren't good to say to people, because it makes them upset, so I'd like to help you know what to say, and maybe what not to say. We can even make a game of it.*

At Work:

If you are a manager charged with reducing conflict that is affecting productivity, you have more “authority”, so you can be more directive when inviting people to work with you to improve things. Just remember that you can't force someone to learn, even if you can push them to “participate”. Here are some examples you might use with a difficult employee:

- *George, I've been noticing you seem to have gotten into some arguments with other office staff, and I think we need to sit down to see if there are ways we can eliminate them. I have some ideas, so let's set a time.*
- *Jan, I don't know how you are feeling about how you are getting along with co-workers. If you are feeling you are getting into a lot of disagreements, I might have some ways to help. What do you think?*

With Teams:

- *I've noticed that in team meetings, we seem to spend a lot of time arguing, sometimes about HOW we communicate, and I'd like to address that. At each meeting, we'll be looking at some phrases that I'd like to see ALL of us stop using.*

Now that we've covered inviting people to work with you to improve communication, we'll turn to

the ways you can use the book content.

Possible Activities For Learning

- Each party goes through the book independently and chooses ten phrases they feel are used in the relationship, but are causing problems. Then agree to stop using them.
- Set aside ten minutes once or twice a week to discuss a different imperfect phrase. Discuss whether the phrase bothers each person, and whether both parties agree it should be “banned”.
- Go through the index together, and add any phrases that bother one or the other person that are NOT included in the book. Since people tend to differ on what they find problematic, this is a great way to learn about each other. Take action when necessary.
- On alternate days, each person gets to pick ONE phrase the other person has used in the past. That person explains how the phrase affects him or her, and parties agree not to use it.
- After both parties have gone through the book, agree that if either one uses one of the imperfect phrases, the other has the right to interrupt and politely point out the imperfect phrase usage, and what might be better to say.

For Teams, Groups, Families

One outcome to shoot for is to come to agreement on the “way we speak to each other around here”, which is a way at coming at the team, group, or family “culture”. It’s a process of establishing norms for the group.

- In team meetings, pick one phrase that has been used in the group in the past, discuss

how others might have felt hearing it, and resolve to replace the imperfect phrase with better ways of saying things.

- Have a family meeting, and alternate family members picking an imperfect phrase that causes the person upset.

Chapter Conclusions

- It takes a commitment to change language habits you have been using all your life. It's not hard, per se, but you have to work at it. While reading this book is a great first step, you need to start thinking about it, then living it.
- You can't improve things by coercing or forcing. When working with others, you need to "sell" working together to improve communication by focusing on the benefits everyone will receive.
- You may find other ways to use this book not listed here. Good stuff. Use your imagination, and when working with other people, get them to buy in to whatever process you use. That means discussing possibilities, not imposing them.