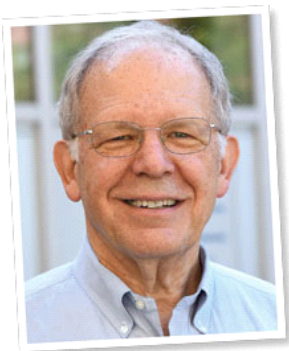


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# Soft Skills for Hard Conversations

*Bill McCurry*



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While watching Motor Vehicle clerks recently, I flashed back to my assignment as a clerk inside the military stockade (jail) at Fort Ord, California. The décor and paint color—and the antagonism between jailers (clerks) and prisoners (Motor Vehicle customers)—felt familiar.

Waiting for my number to be called, I eavesdropped on nearby counter conversations and had another flashback. This time it was when Sam Horn was the guest on my radio show, *Successful Ventures*. Sam had just released her best-seller, *“Tongue Fu! How to Deflect, Disarm and Defuse Any Verbal Conflict.”*

The concept Sam offered was common sense: Appeal to the interest of the other party and you can both get what you want. Unfortunately, the Motor Vehicle clerks didn't have the benefit of this wisdom. I heard them say firmly, “You have to get me an original title to the vehicle.” Usually, the customer would loudly recite a litany of reasons why that couldn't happen. And so the battle lines were drawn.

Sam will tell you the phrase the clerk used, “You have to ...” are “words to lose.” You should replace them with “words to use.” For instance, say, “As soon as we have a clear title to the vehicle, we can record the transfer and assign your license plates.” This shifts the request from a barked challenge to a clerk who understands the customer's needs and offers an outline of the steps to get there. Originally, the clerk's words, while accurate, were also inflammatory. Neither clerks nor customers were enjoying these verbal exchanges. Sam shows how altering the request would result in a faster and more pleasant result.

What does this have to do with you? Until now, this column has never been centered around a book because I hadn't read one that had appeal for all of us. However, after 27 years, Sam Horn has expanded on “Tongue Fu!” with a new book, *“Talking On Eggshells: Soft Skills for Hard Conversations.”*

Today, “words to use” are needed more than ever before. We seem to have lost our ability to think before we speak. People coming into the workforce demonstrate fewer verbal communication skills. We can put the blame on social media, computerization, texting or missing school during formative years. The reason is irrelevant. However, the situation is causing dissent and/or unpleasantness between humans, whether customers or colleagues.

I suggest that giving a copy of “Talking On Eggshells” to each team member is a great way to start. Schedule weekly meetings to cover new chapters, while reviewing those already discussed. Assign each person a chapter that would best improve their interpersonal skill level. If everyone in your company is striving to identify “words to lose” and

agreeing on “words to use,” communication and mutual support will flourish.

You’ll also find the book addresses critical life skills. Roughly half the text revolves around Part II: “Keep Your Cool in the Heat of the Moment.” Obviously, this has application in all our daily lives, but it’s just as critical for those who interact with your customers every day.

Part III helps the reader to “Manage Your Expectations, Emotions and Mindset.” It’s a critical skill for those who aren’t comfortable speaking up. Many outstanding employees, with the skills for leadership, are hesitant to simply voice an opinion. What if it’s misunderstood? Or the boss doesn’t agree? Should I just keep my mouth shut? The book strengthens the ability of the reluctant speaker to voice opinions without offending others.

Googling Sam Horn’s videos and podcasts can be one way to share her ideas, but for your team, having the book in their hands may be more beneficial. They can then refer to it when a situation arises. And when you buy these books, consider sourcing them from your local independent bookstore—maybe even a partial trade for plants. Your workforce’s enhanced interacting skills will more than pay for those books. **GP**

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*Bill would love to hear from you with questions, comments or ideas for future columns. Please contact him at [wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com](mailto:wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com) or (609) 731-8389.*