

## Words Matter

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While tone of voice and body language matter very much, don't underestimate the power of words. .

### Words Matter

Despite the high volume of e-mail and text messages circulating constantly, there is often no substitute for talking with people. Indeed, in many organizations, big decisions are made only after in-person conversations. Many career-minded people take this seriously. Herein lies an opening for misjudgement – particularly for those mindful of the 7% rule.

#### **present with sincere gusto**

It is not uncommon to find a white-collar worker who believes that tone of voice and body language are underrated in effective speaking. Some polish their hand gestures and rehearse specific tones of voice because they believe that substance without style is weak. It's not just content, they say, but delivery. Seeking an edge, some even have the famous 7% rule memorized.

The 7% rule states:

- 55% of meaning comes from presentation.
- 38% of meaning comes from tone of voice.
- 7% of meaning comes from the words themselves.

Though practising this has brought confidence and success to some, there remain many people who pay more than 7% attention to the words others speak. Neither is a fringe group. However, only the latter has the backing of scientific research.

#### **still misunderstood**

In 1967, Dr. Albert Mehrabian and his UCLA colleagues concluded studies in communication that yielded an astonishing result: The words you use in speaking to others do not matter nearly as much as the tone of your voice or your body language. As the press picked up the story, the idea was extended: Written words also take a back seat to presentation and tone.

#### **good for shock value**

According to Mehrabian and his team, the original studies were never well understood. They have always asserted that words matter very much. Perhaps they didn't use the right presentation and tone, or perhaps the media were hunting for shock value.

#### **single-word expressions only**

The Mehrabian studies attempted to reveal the relative impact of facial expressions and tone on the understanding of spoken words. Subjects listened to recordings of a female voice saying single words (such as "maybe" and "honey") in differing tones. They were also shown photos of female faces with differing facial expressions. The subjects were then asked to guess the emotions portrayed in each, and to link the recordings with the faces.

#### **presentation and tone as guides**

The results of the studies appeared in full in Mehrabian's books, *Silent Messages* (Wadsworth, 1971) and *Nonverbal Communications* (Aldine Atherton, 1972). In both books, he clearly states that for inconsistent or incongruent communication of single-word expressions, body language and tonality are more reliable indicators of meaning than the words themselves.

#### **when tone mightier than a sword**

There we have it. Presentation and tone are more reliable than words alone for interpretive guidance with single-word expressions. These are not general circumstances.

### **earn 93% on your first Chinese test**

In a 1994 issue of *Anchor Point*, Dr. C.E. Johnson writes, "If these percentages were really valid, it would mean that learning foreign languages could be greatly abbreviated. After all, if the words only account for 7% of the meaning, we should all be able to go to any country in the world, and simply by listening to tone and carefully observing body language, be able to accurately interpret 93% of their communications!"

### **choose words wisely**

In a 1997 issue of *The Toastmaster*, J.E. Pearson asks, "Imagine if Nathan Hale had said, 'Okay; I'm willing to die for my country,' instead of 'I regret that I have but one life to give for my country.' Imagine Franklin Roosevelt saying, 'Don't be afraid,' instead of, 'We have nothing to fear but fear itself.'"

### **say what you mean**

Yes; tone of voice and body language matter - very much with single-word expressions. When speaking within a common language and culture, though, do not be fooled by the fallacy of the 7% rule. Words matter - probably much more than 7%.

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