

Three Words

that changed my life and the life of my camp;
invest 5 minutes in yours

Did you know that Portland, Oregon exceeds 10 out of 12 benchmarks for poor air quality? The Environmental Protection Agency's air quality rating scale places Portland at 16 out of 100 (higher is better). That's amazing, because the air in Portland looks perfectly lovely, even pristine. Similarly, when at a camp, the setting is often picturesque, and the air crisp and fresh. Yet, that can be deceiving, and the quality of the emotional "air" at camp may not be quite as healthy.

The appropriate use of these three words, or more accurately word families, can shockingly change the emotional air quality at camp, and quickly. Why and how? Because every human interaction can be rated on a scale from emotionally nourishing to emotionally toxic. Poorly utilized, these three word families are emotionally toxic to others, yourself, or both. Speaking with compassion is nourishing, and combining that with power and conviction yields compassionate ACTION. Who doesn't need more of that?

Why

Healthy "Why"

If you are asking for a fact, or scientific explanation, "why" is great.

"Why" also works when problem solving a situation (referring to "it," such as "I wonder why it broke?").

Unhealthy "Why"

Otherwise, the only real response to "why?" is "Because . . ." Because is the beginning of a defensive stance. One must reference the past, and seek justification for one's actions. People shrink and get angry/defensive/passive when focusing on the dark. They respond positively to moving toward the positive/light/solutions.

If any of the following make sense in the reply, via specific words or their intent, then "why?" is a poor question.

"Because I'm wrong / stupid / (pause) mad / bad / sad."

All "why" questions can be rephrased, usually with better results. "Help me understand . . ." "Tell me more about . . ." Still, we need to watch out for the *intent* of "why!" "What were you thinking?!" has the same effect as "why?". Similarly, "How could you do that?" or "When did that crazy thought enter your mind?" focus on how the person is wrong/stupid/bad, and the speaker is just and right. Consequently, any response must delve into the past to seek justification or incrimination.

Should

Unhealthy "Should"

Would, Could, Wish, Ought, Supposed To, Want, Gotta, and Need often fit here as well. These words can create a *judgment*, and rarely are they followed with *intention/action*. More often, they are spoken with *regret, guilt, obligation, shame, or disdain*. If the phrase appears to pointing a finger at others or yourself, then it is a negative judgment.

Note that it is impossible to experience anger without the word or sentiment of "should." This concept really threw me for a loop, but I have yet to think of an exception. Anger always involves a "should." "They/he/she/I should(n't) do it this way!" Let me know if you can think of one – I'm still racking my brain!

Opinions are a special case of "should." In politics or with advice, the *sentiment* of "should" can be present, even without the word. Rather than expressing one's thoughts on a matter reasonably and with curiosity about the other position, the speaker believes the other person "should" take on their point of view. The closer the position is tied to the ego, the more "should" sentiment is attached to it.

In group settings, an individual will often offer something to the group using a "should" sentiment. "Hey, we should think about this some more." "We could look at some other options as well." "I think we're supposed to be doing this instead." All of these are a form of soft telling. Make a personal and specific request instead. "I like the idea of recycling and composting in the dining area; how does everyone else feel about that?" "I find announcements work better when they are all done together; what does the group think about that approach?" You will find that "should,"

“could,” etc. statements can be glossed over, and often are, but a personal request will certainly be addressed. Speak with conviction (Taylor Mali video). Link info = <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SCNIBV87wV4>

Healthy “Should”

Try removing the “should family” from your vocabulary and see how your intentions and actions change. Make a specific, positive choice of your own free will that includes intentions/plans with traction.

Sneaking should back into your vocabulary: Using should as a guess at the future, without referencing people, is innocuous, but substitute “expect” for should to train your mind initially. If you can substitute “shall” for should, it is likely a genuine question without judgment or negativity. “Need” instead of should can be used *in instructional situations* without judgment or negativity, but otherwise it likely carries a negative judgment. Rarely, “oops” can be substituted for should without implying judgment, but it is a razor’s line to walk.

“That should (I expect) happen around 3pm.” “Sam should (I expect him to) be home by then.”

“Should (shall) I pick up some milk at the store?”

“You should (need to) be on page 36 now.”

“Oh! Ha, ha, I should have (oops) put the oil in before the flour.”

Yes / No

There are three common uses of a yes or no question, with the third being alienating/degrading, and the first two being largely healthy uses. The intent of the speaker is key, as is how that intent lands/feels. Generally, more expansive questions, requiring more than a simple yes or no, feel better and are more empowering.

1. Confirmation

“We’re leaving at 3 o’clock, right?”

“Did you say you were going to stop by the store on your way home?”

2. Request

“Would you mind doing the dishes tonight?”

“Do you want something to drink?” “Would you like tea or coffee?” (dual choice)

3. Telling (couched as a request / confirmation / rhetorical)

“Didn’t I tell you that was going to happen?” “Did you think about that before you did it?”

“You know better than that, don’t you?”

“Did you think you were going to get away with that?”

“You’re doing the dishes tonight, right?”

“Come on, you know the answer to that, don’t you?”

“You didn’t go to the bathroom when I told you to, did you?”

“Were you going to clean this up today or tomorrow?” (dual choice)

“Did you have to say/do it that way?”

5 stages of development

In my experience, people go through five stages in the implementation of these concepts. It is important to understand this progression, as otherwise folks seem to get stuck at the stage they are at, and believe that is the end of the road. Stages 2 and 4 are particularly sticky, yet time with a mentor and practice always yields progress.

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| 1. I don’t get it. | No application. |
| 2. I get it, but I can think of tons of exceptions. | Confused application, often being very literal/example driven. |
| 3. I get it, and I understand the exceptions. | Apply it with thought and effort, with those specific words |
| 4. I understand the principles involved. | The intention behind the word is recognized (e.g., need, dual choices) |
| 5. Seamless integration. | Beyond conscious application. |

Change the application of these word families, both yourself and at your camp, and you’ll change the emotional air for the better; I guarantee it. Train your staff, before the summer or via a booster session, and seed the groups with a few more highly trained individuals. Certainly, there are numerous other “air scrubbers” important to an emotionally intelligent camp, such as (links) *Difficult Conversations Made Easier*, *The 5 Approaches to Counseling*, *The Success Counselor*, *The Heart of Camping*, and *The Six Faces of Dirty Communication*, among others. Still, this is a quick start that yields fast results. Let me know how it goes, or any questions/challenges you have – I want to hear them.