



What did You Say?

The hallmark of effective teaching is based on successful communication. The basis of successful communication is intrinsically bound to our use of words. Words have power. Rudyard Kipling goes so far as to say, “Words are, of course, the most powerful drug used by mankind.”

As children we are conditioned to ignore the impending effect of words through schoolyard taunts like, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” The fallacy of this statement becomes apparent, however, when, as adults, we realize the actual impact words have had upon our lives, whether for negative or positive.

Words, whether echoing within our own minds, spoken or written, have the power to transform, not only ourselves, but the world we live in. As teachers, our use of words becomes a major player in our ability to instruct, run a successful program, but also in our ability to guide young people into their futures.

In my extensive career in and around music education, I have heard in nearly every way imaginable, words attempting to inspire the best in the young people. This is how words can and should be used for the most optimal effect.

Unfortunately, I have also heard things spoken over and over that tear down students and undermine confidence and performance. It seems that we forget that words have the power to create. They create impressions, images, expectations, dreams and concepts. They influence how we think. Since thoughts determine actions, it is imperative that teachers understand the powerful connection between the words they use and the results they get.

In defense of teachers, we have to admit that the nature of music instruction and performance inadvertently cultivates an atmosphere of perfectionism. Influenced by this pressure, our words often reinforce the negative in an honest attempt to get a positive result. Sometimes it is not even our words, but how we say something. Here are some examples: “That is the worst intonation I have ever heard.” “There is a problem in the percussion section.” “This is going to be a lousy season.”

Poorly phrased corrections may cause a completely opposite reaction than intended. What you are trying to correct may actually be reinforced. This can be corrected by adding a positive qualifier to the criticism. “That is the worst intonation I have every heard and that surprises me because we’re better than that.” In this way you are building self-esteem at the same time as making a correction.

“This appears to be a challenging section for the percussion, let’s take a different approach,” might be a better way to get more out of your percussion section. Effective word usage is more than just semantics. In this case there are inherent



thoughts and feelings connected to the words used. Problems are fixed and challenges are met. Different words evoke different feelings.

Even among staff, if you constantly refer to your students as “bodies” or “dots on the field” you may find yourself struggling with morale problems among your group. If you see your students as interchangeable pieces of a puzzle rather than individuals playing an important role in the group, that is what they will begin to feel like. Performance levels will diminish and your goals will stay just beyond reach.

The words you use, not just when speaking to your students, but also when talking about them, your season, and the group in general, will always influence your thoughts and actions about them. How are you speaking about the upcoming season? Are you declaring that it will be your best ever or are you limiting your results by the words you speak?

Don't forget that this applies equally to your thoughts. What are you really thinking about your new group of students? What you think will determine what you say and what you say will generate momentum toward an end result that matches what you have said. Are you ready for that? Is it what you really desire?

Our words are significant and have power. Learn to harness this power to work for, not against you. Select words that create a visual of the desired outcome. Endeavor to choose each word as if it had the ability to take you one step closer to that desired outcome; because it does.

Want better results? Watch what you say.