

Change Your Language, Change Your Life

Frank's executive coach suggests that he strengthen his language by telling the truth. The coach notices Frank repeatedly prefaces his choices for action with "I have to." Frank says: "I have to visit my sick relative," "I have to go to work to pay my mortgage," "I have to go to my niece's wedding in Boise." Frank, who has a reputation for being conscientious, seems to be attempting to drive himself to action by issuing these imaginary edicts to himself.

We think and say we have to do certain things when truthfully they are choices. You and I actually don't have to pay the mortgage, nor visit sick relatives, nor go to Boise. These are totally our choices. We may choose these actions because we have some sense of the consequences of not doing them, which may or may not be correct, and we make the choice to do them.

We use a pretend language that conjures up a taskmaster out there when in fact it is we who have imposed this particular action upon ourselves. We are not the victims we make ourselves out to be in with our language. The significance this makes for us can affect every aspect of our being. It's the difference between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. When we move ourselves toward feeling internally motivated, we free up a whole lot of energy.

My older son, Hoby, who was a corporate attorney said he had a powerful experience with an older, successful partner in his firm. Hoby asked the partner why he chose to continue working. The partner said that he was driving down the street one day on his way to meet some clients. He was saying to himself, "I have to go see these clients, I'm tired, I don't feel like it, but I have to." Then he said to himself, "No, I don't, I'm going home."

He turned his car around and headed home. Once he turned himself around, he realized he really could go home if he wanted to. His clients might be angry, he might be disappointed with himself, but he could go home. It was a freeing feeling. As realized he could go home, he also realized that he actually did want to talk to his clients and he did enjoy his work. While he was saying he had to go and forcing himself, he wasn't able to feel that desire. He turned the car around again. The experience stuck with him forever.

You and I might decide differently that we actually don't enjoy our work and might move toward crafting it differently or finding another one, but we are always at choice. The language that tells the truth, that we always have choices, is the one that keeps us strong.

Coaches believe that language can create emotional states, impact productivity, and even affect health. Our bodies stand taller, our eyes shine brighter when we understand our personal power of choice. Physician Matthew Budd, author of *You Are What You Say*, who has spent his life treating people at Harvard's wellness program, believes that language is central to awareness, health, and generating life. He writes that language affects mood and emotion which are whole-body phenomena that alter the body's physiology, chemistry, and ability to act.

Once the realization sunk in for Frank that he actually did have choices, that his language could switch his motivation, his mood, and his energy, he changed his words. He no longer says he has to do anything. Whatever he does, he knows he chooses to do. Frank says he's choosing to visit his sick cousin because he might be able to cheer her up, he's choosing to work because he wants to pay his mortgage, he wants to go to Boise for his niece's wedding because he wants to support his brother. He believes that he is much happier, more productive, healthier, and attractive to others now that he tells the truth with his language. He believes changing his language has changed his life.

We can begin to change our language by increasing our awareness. Notice typically weak words that imply we are victims like: should, ought, need, must, have to. If these words are being used in a disempowering way could they be replaced by words like choose or want? If you changed your language would your motivation and energy be increased?

Experiment with using new language; notice any shifts in energy, mood, and action. Find the language that seems to imply you are a victim and routinely stifles your energy and substitute language that brings you strength, courage, and zest.

How might you move up to the good life by changing your language?