Choose Your Words Deliberately

Idea In Short

Treat words as deliverables. Put the main point up front, cut your daily word count by a fifth, replace filler with silence and never let casual culture excuse imprecise thinking. Clients pay for your best work, and sloppy language advertises sloppy analysis.

Words Are Not Free

Eloquence has many parts: content, structure, conviction, tone, pacing, empathy and word choice. The last one gets forgotten most often, and modern life makes it worse. We are bombarded with words constantly, most of them advertising or loose pseudo-news, endless streams of forwards and likes carrying limited and unfocused meaning.1 The result is word inflation, plenty of noise and little signal. Plato diagnosed it long before social feeds: "Wise men speak because they have something to say; fools because they have to say something." Against that backdrop, well-chosen words stand out. A hallway conversation where something is incredibly well said, loaded with a point of view and a sharp example, becomes a small joy worth repeating to others. Oliver Wendell Holmes set the standard: "Speak clearly, if at all; carve every word before you let it fall."

Precision Is Not Optional

A piece of feedback worth passing on: be more precise with your words, because you cannot expect others to interpret what you are saying. The casual culture of modern business tempts people toward looseness, and less formal should never be misinterpreted as imprecise. A manager can happily accept a lax dress code while refusing lax thinking and lax communication, because clients are paying serious money for the best work. Mark Twain understood the stakes: "A man's character may be learned from the adjectives he habitually uses in conversation." The words you reach for reveal how carefully you thought before reaching.

Front-Load, Then Say Less

Two disciplines carry most of the improvement. First, be direct. Senior managers pass down the same advice generation after generation: put your main point up front in the sentence rather than saving it. The same rule governs executive presentations, where nobody should wait for the punchline. Get the point out quickly, then spend the remaining words illustrating, persuading, providing context and gaining agreement. Second, say less. A worthwhile personal experiment: can you cut your daily word count by 20 to 40 percent and still land every point? Almost certainly yes. Calvin Coolidge, famously spare with speech, put the upside plainly: "I have noticed that nothing I have said never did me harm."

Silence Beats Filler

Filler words, the ums, ahs and trailing so-anyways, add nothing and subtract credibility. The fix is simply to replace them with nothing. Pause, get some oxygen to the brain, slow down, process, then speak. One hundred thoughtful words beat a thousand rambling ones every time. Conviction closes the same loop from the other side. We often over-speak because we are unsure and hedging, wrapping the point in modifiers, considerations, nuances and examples in an effort to make it seem less wrong. Jim Rohn's formula explains why hedging fails: "Effective communication is 20% about what you know, and 80% about how you feel about what you know." Understand something well and simply, then just say it.

Mean What You Say

Lewis Carroll dramatized sloppy speech in the tea party exchange where Alice insists that meaning what she says and saying what she means are the same thing, and the Hatter corrects her sharply, since seeing what you eat is hardly eating what you see.2 The scene endures because businesses reenact it daily, with speakers gesturing at meanings they never quite state. The antidote is vivid specificity. So much consulting talk is boring, all feature and no benefit, leaving listeners asking what is in it for them. Use words that motivate. Anton Chekhov gave writers the enduring instruction: "Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me a glint of light on a piece of broken glass."

Respect the Clock

Good word choice is ultimately an act of respect for other people's time. Cut the

presentation in half. Cancel the meeting nobody needs. Send the report ahead and request feedback by email. Put data into a table instead of a dense essay, and make it easy to find and understand. Winston Churchill skewered the alternative: "This report, by its very length, defends itself from the risk of being read." Brevity is not a style preference. It is the difference between being read and being filed.

A Week of Word Discipline

The principles condense into a five-day experiment any professional can run. On Monday, open every email with the main point as the first sentence and count how many replies arrive faster. On Tuesday, cut a fifth of the words from everything you write before sending, and notice that nothing important disappears. On Wednesday, replace every filler word in meetings with a breath, tracking the urge rather than fighting it. On Thursday, state one recommendation without a single hedge and observe how the room treats unqualified conviction. On Friday, review the week's writing for adjectives that carried no evidence, the ones Twain warned about. Five days rarely fixes a habit, and it reliably reveals which habits need fixing, which is where deliberate practice begins.

Practice Like It Matters

Nobody is perfect at this, and everyone's weaknesses differ, so treat speech as a craft under deliberate practice. Record your own presentations with a voice recorder and hunt the filler words, weak explanations and confidence gaps, because hearing yourself is the fastest teacher available.3 Stay open to feedback and keep the practice fun. Finally, hang out with people who speak well. Curiously, some of the best word choosers speak English as a second language, because people who actually studied a language grasp words differently, reaching for uncommon but more powerful phrases instead of commonplace casual talk. Their example proves the larger point: word choice is a learnable skill, and the professionals who learn it get remembered.

- 1Rhetoric
- 2Alice's Adventures In Wonderland
- 3Toastmasters International

Summary

Eloquence runs on precision, directness, brevity and conviction. Pause instead of filling, paint pictures instead of listing features and respect the listener's time ruthlessly. Record yourself, edit mercilessly and keep company with people who speak well. Words are the consultant's primary product.