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Words Have Power

By Matt Rawlins ©

John is walking down a large city street and notices someone sitting on the steps that lead up to an apartment complex. John looks over and stares for a brief moment at the person sitting there. “Bum,” he mumbles to himself and quickly walks on.

Does it matter what word he chooses to identify the person on the steps?

Yes, it makes a huge difference. Imagine if he used another word:

Fool... Prostitute... Transient... Con... Saint... Friend... Thief...

Each word, or ‘name’, that is used defines how someone sees that person and thus affects how they choose to relate to them. The names are not reality, but they are an interpretation of it.

Let me give a personal example of this. When I was in the first grade I took an IQ test. The test results said that I was borderline mentally retarded. (I am sure there are more politically correct words to use, but you get my point.) As a child I could have easily believed the results and accepted that as a way to identify myself. All it would have taken is a few more mistakes, problems or failures, and the name would have stuck. I would have believed that I was stupid. Instead, my father (who had his Ph.D. in education) learned of this test and went to see the teacher. He told the teacher that the test was incorrect and that his son was not stupid. I watched him do this and decided that he was right. I forgot about that ‘stupid’ test. Later in my life I discovered that I had a real love of learning and finally went on to get my Ph.D. My father gave me another way to identify myself rather than using the word stupid. It is amazing to think that a label given to me at such a young age could have set a direction for my life had my father not intervened.

Just as a name can impact how we see ourselves, so the language we use will help define how we see the world. It is important to know that you can change the words you use to describe our world and learn new things it.

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Imagine a person standing at the edge of a desert. All he can see is sand around him. It seems to go for miles. He has no idea of the creative power of language or his own capacity to rename the world. He accepts it is sand and decides to live with it as he imagines there is nothing he can do about it. Now, picture another person standing on the edge of this desert. He looks at it and thinks, what can we do with this resource? He plays with the sand and experiments with it. He uses fire on it and realizes that if treated in the right way, it becomes glass. A new way to relate to sand is found and a new industry is born. Many years later another man sees the sand and experiments with it in a different way and creates silicon. A new use for sand is found and our relationship changes yet again. For these last two people, by not limiting themselves to one description of sand or it's use, they give it a new name and a new industry is born.

New products are born because somebody looked at the world in a new way and gave themselves freedom to question it. By experimenting with the object's properties, they found that it was not limited to its initial definition or name. The key is to understand the potential within ourselves and through our language to look at the world in different ways. Language forms our perception, and our perception defines how we see the world.

This is not to say that there is no reality or that we can create our own reality. But it's important to know that much of what we encounter is our perception of reality. The very process of using language is the process of discovering what something is and how we can relate it in new ways. In order to keep growing, we must question both the way that we choose to name other people, as well as the way that these names impact our outlook on the world.

As a manager or a leader you can rename a 'problem' an 'opportunity' and this simple shift will change the focus on and how you deal with it. The language you use is just as much a part of the problem as the problem itself. A willingness to question the words used in a situation is the beginning of changing your perception and seeing the world in a new way.

Seeing the world in a new way is the ongoing work of leadership. Checking assumptions, exposing bias, renaming the world you are dealing with and teaching others to do the same is one of the primary ways of keeping on the cutting edge and being successful in the long-term.