

Building a Wide and Vivid Vocabulary - Why Bother?

On each anniversary of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, we Americans get to hear, in the voice of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the opening words from a speech he delivered to Congress one day after the Japanese attack: “Yesterday, December 7, 1941--a date which will live in infamy--the United States was . . .” Clearly, it is the word “infamy” that endows that line with so much impact and firmness. What if FDR had stuck with his original draft, worded “. . . a date which will live in world history . . .” Would the opening line of that speech still be so resonant and a fixture of American history, replayed in news programs and documentaries year after year, more than six decades later? Hardly!

The above is perfect testimony to the power of a word that is forceful, vivid, and out-of-the-ordinary. As a matter of fact, whenever people ask me why it pays to have an extensive vocabulary, my first sentence is all-encapsulating: **“Because it helps make one’s life more fulfilling!”** Indeed, if you have a strong command of the language, and provided you use it imaginatively and sensibly, you will be able to generate, when the occasion demands, a verbal expression that comes across as original, fresh, interesting, and appropriately vivid (rather than sounding tired, humdrum, and banal). Whatever your message--be it an exhortation, praise for someone, or a statement of accomplishments and challenges--it will be far more likely to grab people’s attention and be indelible if you use language effectively. The result: **You will have a sharply enhanced ability to affect and sway others.**

Here’s a personal story that further substantiates my claims, especially with regard to capturing people’s attention and inciting them to action:

In 1985, I was getting irritated by a local radio station--the CBS affiliate in Houston--which was truncating CBS’s 5-minute national news bulletins broadcast at the top of every hour. After broadcasting the first 2 or 3 minutes, the station would abruptly switch to local programming. Indignant, I decided to write a letter of complaint to CBS’s corporate office in New York. Since my letter was going to look unimportant as well as unappealing (it would be on an ordinary sheet of paper, not letterhead, and produced from a dot-matrix printer which spewed out crude, inelegant characters), I realized that the fate of my missive would probably rest on the whims of the CBS office secretary who, after opening the envelope, would decide what to do with it based on his or her assessment of my first couple of lines. So, to improve the odds of the letter ultimately landing on the desk of a bigwig, I gave much thought to what my opening words ought to be, finally settling on a one-line initial paragraph printed in bold: **“In Houston, CBS’s competitive edge is being blunted!”** The next paragraph began with something to the effect of: “Did you know that your affiliate in Houston is eviscerating CBS’s hourly news bulletins?” Well, guess what! A few weeks later, I received a two-page reply, personally signed by the president of CBS Radio, including notes at the bottom indicating he had copied it to several of his fellow execs as well as to the president of the CBS affiliate radio station here in Houston. In it, the CBS Radio president expressed his frustration at the situation because of the autonomy of the affiliate station, and how it would indeed be in every party’s interest if the Houston station ceased the practice of cutting short those news

bulletins. You can imagine my pride and sense of satisfaction as I read through that long, detailed response.

So, to repeat my assertion, a superior command of the language, **provided it is used appropriately and judiciously** (i.e. you do not turn into a “verbal machine gun,” pompously spewing out obscure and incomprehensible words by the second), can make you more successful in influencing others. At key moments, it will lessen the chances of your sounding trite, and increase the probability of your striking the right chord with the listener. And that is why a wide and vivid vocabulary is an extraordinary asset, no matter what your role in life--whether you are a CEO steering a behemoth corporation; a school principal striving to enhance your academic institution’s performance; a parent admonishing your high schooler; a medical doctor exhorting your patient to do the right thing; a graphic designer impressing upon a client the nuances and merits of your design; an administrative assistant attempting to dissuade a superior from pursuing a certain course of action; a sports coach or a soccer mom at an awards ceremony, praising a team member’s contributions. . . . **Indeed, there are infinite situations in everyone’s life when using an expression that is rich, evocative, and forceful will increase the likelihood of achieving one’s purpose.**

So high is the correlation between the ability to articulate well and the ability to influence others that when hiring or promoting, top executives consistently cite strong communication skills as one of the most important attributes they look for in an employee. In fact, The Wall Street Journal once cited a study by the Illinois human resources assessment firm London House, in which **CEOs of Fortune 500 companies scored better in fluency of verbal expression and breadth of the English language than nine out of ten high-level executives and managers.**

Thus, it’s no surprise that one of the attributes that distinguishes many of those who are leaders in their fields happens to be their ability to articulate their thoughts extremely well. To name just a few of these influential voices who possess an extremely vigorous vocabulary: Lee Iacocca, Jack Welch, Carly Fiorina, and Larry Ellison among current and former corporate chiefs; Rudy Giuliani, Richard Scruggs, and Joel Klein among attorneys and prosecutors; E.O. Wilson and the late Carl Sagan among scientists; Colin Powell among top military brass; Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Condoleezza Rice among high-level presidential cabinet officials; Marin Alsop and the late Kirk Varnedoe among leading personalities in the worlds of music and art; and Bruce Hoffman among anti-terrorism experts. **Again and again, you will find them using vibrant, high-caliber words to speak forcefully when emphasizing a point or battling a critic.**

Enough generalization--let’s turn to specifics. Recall that I began by saying that a wide and vivid vocabulary *helps make one’s life more fulfilling*. Let me highlight five ways that words such as those featured in this book (and in its upcoming sequel “The Articulate Professional II”) can indeed help make your life more productive, more fun, more rewarding, and more pleasant.

1. Breaking through the “verbal clutter”; making a statement more attention-getting and penetrating by inserting just one high-impact word.

The two opening stories--the one about FDR's "infamy speech" and my letter to CBS--serve as solid evidence as to how the appropriate injection of just one strong and conspicuous word can help seize people's attention, and sometimes even incite them to action. Following is another example, this one involving the eminent Robert Gates. It too highlights how a high-caliber word, **thanks to its penetrating quality**, can add much emphasis and weight to your argument.

In 1991, while Congress was deciding whether to accept the president's nomination of Robert Gates to become the next CIA chief, an unseemly development occurred: some CIA officials who were opposed to Mr. Gates began appearing before a Congressional panel and speaking ill of him publicly. To squelch this obviously ugly situation, which would have severely harmed the functioning and esprit de corps within the premier intelligence agency, the nominee addressed the panel and urged it to desist from letting such innuendo be aired in public, even if that meant not confirming him. And then, speaking forcefully, the articulate Robert Gates said: "**These charges are pernicious!**" -- a comment which was widely reported. It worked, swaying those on the panel, and he was confirmed as director of the CIA shortly thereafter.

The next time you are in a meeting or watching a discussion on television, see for yourself how the difference in level of resonance is often quite palpable between an adjective that is fresh and robust versus one that is stale and humdrum.

Finally, **the need and capacity to inject a strong, out-of-the-ordinary word at a key moment, especially when you are trying to influence minds, is becoming more vital by the day, thanks to the verbal clutter in which everyone seems to be mired.** People are constantly trying to sneak a look at their cell phones or BlackBerries in the middle of meetings or lunch conversations; it is a manifestation of how overwhelmed and distracted everyone is by the barrage of communications coming at them from all directions.

2. Putting words in people's mouths, literally; reshaping the discussion during a meeting.

Surely you've experienced situations when, during a meeting or other forum, somebody uses a descriptor that is fresh and captures the essence of the problem or issue being discussed. Almost instantly, everyone else starts using that very word or phrase to express their thoughts, and that in turn influences the substance and direction of the rest of the discussion. Such a phenomenon occurred during a meeting I had called in 1983, while working for the computer services division of Texas Instruments (TI), and it affected me profoundly. That afternoon, I was going around the room, giving each of the field managers in attendance about 2 to 3 minutes to respond to my question "What according to you are the primary reasons behind our slumping performance index?" About fifteen minutes into that session, one of the participants said: "V.J., the main reason for the falling productivity is that many of the communications from your headquarters here in Houston to my field office in Seattle are **cryptic**. Let me show you some recent examples ..." And then it happened! As I continued going around the room, each of the other participants began his response to my question by saying: "I too agree that communications from Houston are much too **cryptic**..." As you can imagine, the discussion for much of that afternoon was

focused on these “cryptic” communications and what could be done to prevent them. What utterly amazed me about that day was the fact that even though “cryptic” was not a word that I could recall ever hearing in the corridors of TI, one person’s use of that fresh, vivid term--which seemed to accurately describe the problem at hand--**concentrated everyone else’s mind, and swayed them into using the same adjective again and again** during the rest of the meeting.

Since that meeting of 1983, I’ve observed on countless occasions somebody’s use of a fresh, precise, and robust term turning out to be very “infectious.” **Like a powerful virus**, use of the word or phrase causes others in the discussion to immediately begin to parrot it. For example, in the fall of 1995, when Colin Powell delivered a highly anticipated and nationally televised speech in which he announced he would not be a candidate for the Republican presidential nomination, he used the word “incivility” to describe the character of the political discourse in America. **For several weeks after that, “incivility” became the word of choice during TV talk shows, op-ed pieces, and letters to the editor.**

Here’s another illustration. During a “Charlie Rose” interview in 2008, Alice Waters, co-owner of Chez Panisse--one of America’s most legendary restaurants--was lamenting how some books and films were indoctrinating Americans into “not bothering with the drudgery of the kitchen” and to instead rely on take-out, and that the purpose of her new book was to “empower people by demystifying the whole process (of preparing basic but delicious meals).” Immediately the verb “demystify” was on the lips of the interviewer, and “the demystification of cooking” became the centerpiece of a few minutes of discussion.

3. Using effective synonyms; embodying the defining trait of articulate people.

First, let me point out that there is no easier technique to elevate the quality of your oral communications than the use of synonyms or synonymous terms. Among other things, synonyms help give precision and accuracy to your expression; break monotony and boredom; and ensure complete understanding by the audience. But most important, synonyms reinforce your idea or message, the added thrust and vigor helping to increase recallability.

Second, **because of their vigor and stirring quality, the words featured in this book make for wonderful and highly effective synonyms.** Note that by the term “synonym” I do not imply “dictionary synonyms,” but simply words or phrases that reinforce the thrust of a preceding word. There is further discussion on this subject, including an example of Oracle’s Larry Ellison using one of this book’s featured words as a synonym while talking about Bill Gates, in the first “Tips” example on page 13.

4. Injecting humor; endearing yourself to your audience.

This is best illustrated by some examples from the late and stunningly witty Louis Rukeyser, host of PBS’s “Wall Street Week with Louis Rukeyser”--the longest running and most successful

investment program ever on television. During on-air conversations with the show's panelists and guests, Mr. Rukeyser, whose command of the language was second to none, would often use a high-caliber word to **apply the technique of exaggeration** for creating humor. For instance, once when asking for a stock pick from a panelist whose previous recommendation had turned out to be a bit disappointing, Mr. Rukeyser said with a smile: "What do you have for us this time, after that *epochal* mistake!" To be sure, there was laughter all around. Here are a few more examples of Mr. Rukeyser using a fresh, strong, and striking word to exaggerate and thus create humor.

- referring to an upcoming economic meeting among Western leaders--a gathering that was widely expected to be boring and inconsequential: "It should be an *electrifying* meeting."
- to a guest who was a specialist on the financial services industry: "You said earlier that the question people keep asking you is which bank will be taken over next. So, let me *exasperate* you by asking that same question now."
- after a Q&A with one of the panelists who was mildly pessimistic, turning his gaze to the next one and saying: "Let's turn to the *estimable* Mary Farrell and see if her outlook is as *dolorous* as Mike's."
- introducing mutual fund manager Ron Barron: "He's not just a baron, he's at least a *marquis* of markets. He manages (several) billion dollars and his funds are top performing..."

I myself frequently use the above technique to inject humor--and thus endear myself to my audience--both during my workshops and in informal conversations.

5. Creating a favorable first impression; coming across as both interesting and intelligent in your first conversation with a new acquaintance.

You cannot escape the perhaps unfair presumption society makes about a person's level of education, depth of intellect, and status in the workplace hierarchy, based on his or her facility with words. Researchers say most people make their first impression of a person within the first couple of minutes. So, as you begin your first conversation with somebody, presumably that new acquaintance is making leaps of judgment about your background, personality, education, and status, based on how you express your thoughts and ideas.

Some prominent researchers claim to have established a high correlation between IQ and a person's command of the language, suggesting that a high IQ is a necessary condition for one to possess a prodigious vocabulary. Such a relationship does not surprise me. Over the past thirty years, three television personalities in particular have impressed me with the vibrancy of their verbal expression, and their ability to use a wide variety of words to emphasize a point. They are Louis Rukeyser, Gene Siskel, and William F. Buckley Jr., **and there's no question that each of**

them was supremely intelligent. Therefore, one corollary of the presumed correlation between IQ and a vivid vocabulary is that when you use a variety of words during a conversation, you are displaying your high level of intelligence. **Those likely to interview soon for a new job, take note.**

A caveat: **an expansive vocabulary, if used imprudently or without restraint, can create resentment and thus backfire. So, be sure to read the section ahead on “Tips.”**

The above are just some of the many ways you can use the words featured in this book to your immense advantage. There is more on my Web site, www.verbalenergy.com. Also, please consider joining me in one of the many workshops I present around the nation, exploring with participants the innumerable ways to make one’s communications more attention-getting and effective.

I close with my opening theme, that a wide and vibrant vocabulary will enable you to quickly formulate, at key moments, communications that are impactful, indelible, and persuasive. **You will unquestionably be endowed with a greater capacity to influence others.**