

Wendy Leebov's  
**HEARTBEAT**

On the Quality Patient Experience  
Volume 5, Issue 2  
March 2013

Editor's Note

The article below is taken from the online newsletter, "Heartbeat." The original can be found on line at <http://www.quality-patient-experience.com/support-files/wendy-leebov-heartbeat-51.pdf>. Permission to reprint/adapt has been given by the author. The newsletter is published by the Leebov Golde Group at [www.quality-patient-experience.com](http://www.quality-patient-experience.com). For more information on the newsletter, group, or any of the Leebov Golde Group publications and educational events, contact: [wleebov@quality-patient-experience.com](mailto:wleebov@quality-patient-experience.com).

Wendy's Soapbox

The **POW**-er of Words

By Wendy Leebov

I just came across an impressive study that reminded me of the dramatic power of words. The study reveals the difference in patient outcomes when a primary care physician asks, "Is there **anything** else concerning you?" versus "Is there **something** else concerning you?" Patients hear "anything else" as an attempt to close the encounter, while they hear "something else" as a door-opener to an unmet concern. The researchers found that the use of the word "some" instead of "any" eliminates more than three-quarters of all cases of unmet concerns! (Heritage, Robinson et al., Reducing Patients' Unmet Concerns in Primary Care: The Difference One Word Can Make, *J Gen Intern Med*. 2007 October; 22(10): 1429-1433.)

This reminder of the power of words sent me to my files to locate my notes from a patient focus group I conducted a few years ago when I first became obsessed with defining the **language** of caring. I wanted to learn from patients and families about

the words we use as healthcare professionals and their impact on patient and family feelings and behavior. I invited examples of words that create a negative impact --- that are discouraging, insulting, annoying or otherwise trigger resistance or disengagement. I also pumped for words we use that make patients and families feel good, motivated, cared about, cooperative and special.

**Words and Phrases with a Negative Impact** (I call these "Killer Words.")

<b>You say...</b>	<b>The patient or customer hears...</b>
"As soon as possible"	"When I get around to it."
"Hopefully..."	"Who really knows?"
"I'll try."	"Not sure I can do it. No promises here."
"To be honest..."	"I was lying up until now."
"I can't do that."	"I won't do that."
"It's our policy." "That's against our policy."	"That's the way it is. Like it or lump it."
"It's over there."	"I'm too important to show you the way."
"You have to...." "You must..."	"I'm in charge here. I make the rules and you follow them."
"The truth is..."	"I probably shouldn't tell you this."
"Calm down."	"You're out of control and you're the problem here."
"That's not my department. You'll have to speak with someone else."	"It's not my problem and I won't help."
"If you had read our policy..." "If you had read the directions..." "You should have..."	"Dummy."
"Like I said..."	"You're irritating me and wasting my time."
"You can't..."	"I set the rules here. You don't."
"What's your problem?"	"Ugh, another demanding person!"
"Yes, but..."	"No."

**Words and Phrases with a Positive Impact** (I call these "Healing Words" because they are mood-altering; they lift the spirits of the person you're serving.)

<b>You say...</b>	<b>The patient or customer hears...</b>
"I can certainly help you."	"I'm here for you, for sure."
"I'll gladly arrange that."	"You can count on me to come through for you."
"Delighted"	"You're not a bother at all. I'm here for you."
"Absolutely"	"You can count on me."
"My pleasure"	"It's a joy to help you."
"I'm happy to..."	"I love my job."
"I'm really sorry..."	"I sincerely regret that you had an unfortunate experience."
"Yes"	"It's clear. You can count on it."
"What I can do is..."	"I really want to help somehow."
"I'm asking you to..."	"I'd appreciate it if you would..."
"How may I help you?"	"Just say the word. I'm here to help."
"Thank you so much."	"I appreciate you."
"I appreciate this."	"I don't take you for granted."

**What is your ratio of positive to negative words?**

Ask a coworker to audit YOUR words using this worksheet \*\*\* and see how often you use positive, healing words, not negative or lackluster words, to elevate other people's spirits, reduce their anxiety, and earn their trust and cooperation.

Every one of us has some degree of control over our effect on others. By choosing words that typically have a positive impact and using these words in a genuine, not forced or scripted way, we will more often than not create the impact we want. Good words work wonders.

(\*\*\*Editor's Note: Worksheet appears on the following page.)

## WORD HUNT



Dear Coworker,  
You see and hear how I communicate. Please help me communicate better by making me aware of the words I use that, in your view, have a POSITIVE vs. NEGATIVE impact.

**Words with Positive Impact**

**Words with Negative Impact**

©2013; Leebov Golde Group

[www.quality-patient-experience.com](http://www.quality-patient-experience.com)

215-413-1969