

## CHATTERBOXES

I have no patience for the idle chit-chat so prevalent in prison. I don't care if you think I'm rude; I think you're rude for wasting my time with useless babble. Studies in leadership reveal communication patterns among business, military, and civic leaders. The vast majority speak using precise language in concise passages. In meetings, the highest ranking leaders use the least amount of speaking time. They're not desperate to talk just to feel like they matter. They're not trying to win a popularity contest. They would rather be respected by a few than known as a loud-mouth or know-it-all. They instinctively understand that the less they say the less there is opportunity for misunderstanding or for them to mis-speak.

What we say and how we say it is extremely powerful not only to others but to ourselves. Our brain is like a computer which we program through our thoughts, words, and actions. The way we communicate reveals a lot about how we think, feel, and function; which is why it is so important to be conscious of our choices. Have you ever known someone who is relatively quiet, but seems to demand attention when they do speak versus the blabbermouth who always has an opinion and whom everyone eventually tunes out? Only one of these is using language correctly; the goal of talking should be in service of our highest goals.

Talking should not be reactive or worse, automatic. It should be pensive and meaningful. For example, we shouldn't greet people with, what's up? how are you doing? (unless we truly want to know and engage in a conversation). We should be stating a truth: good morning; good to see you (again, only if you mean it -- more on the importance of meaning what you say later). We should avoid starting meaningless conversations that will only steal time away from doing something of value. To some, it may seem anti-social or even impolite, but the reality is the majority of our interactions in prison are useless and pointless. We will waste years of our life in these types of cordial conversations if we allow ourselves. We must train ourselves and those around us to be more conscientious.

Most of my "friends" already know I don't engage in the mindless back-and-forth of what some may call, "social etiquette." I always tell a new celly: for me, the cell is a peaceful sanctuary. My goal is to create enough mutual respect for "comfortable silence." Of course, I'm not a Buddhist monk either, I believe in wishing someone a good morning, God bless you (if you sneeze), have a nice visit, et cetera. Also, I know I must make time for housekeeping issues: hey, they're calling you at the bubble, I need to use the restroom, I'm going to clean up today e.g.. But, we must be careful not to let these segway into anything more--remember, be precise and concise. For lack of a better word, I've trained my friends that when they come knocking on my door there better be a good reason. When I open the door I expect them to state their needs and move on. What others take as just down time--reading, writing, or even watching TV is precious to me and I want to focus on it and enjoy it. It's borderline insulting to be interrupted simply because someone else is bored. Get a hobby. Read a book. Or better yet, find someone else, like you, who has nothing better to do.

Caveat: We can all avoid stealing time from others by simply asking: are you busy? do you have a minute to chat? My favorite is when someone will preface the conversation with: I hate to bother you. It demonstrates respect for another's time. Coincidentally, I always make time for those who treat me with this respect.



I'm sure by now I've come across as a curmudgeon (or a bug, as we, inmates, like to say) like Ebenezer Scrooge. Don't misunderstand, I agree social etiquette has its place in our culture. We are social creatures who crave social, mental, physical, and emotional interactions -- we need them. The key is balance. I socialize. For example, you may see me playing Scrabble in the afternoons in the dayroom, or catch me walking the yard carrying on with a friend or two, and walking to and from chow joking and gossiping with the best of them. I have allocated those specific times to create a healthy balance; but it's not just about how much you say and when. What you say is also crucial.

Psychoanalysts refer to it as "conscious language" and have been studying it for years. There is surprising power in certain key words and declarations. Did you know, for example, you'll feel hungrier when you keep telling everyone how hungry you are? Because, the reality is, you're really only telling yourself. Conscious language experts suggest that within the neurocircuitry of our body-mind, the words "I am" function as a declaration, predisposing us to create the realities we are speaking. We must be very thoughtful in what we say as it can influence our mental-emotional states.

In the same respect, we must always be mindful not to create cognitive dissonance or lie to ourselves. If you're a dwarf and you look in the mirror and say to yourself, I'm tall. You know you're not tall. Your mind knows you're a dwarf, therefore, you risk short-circuiting your brain to the point it no longer believes you. That is not only counter-productive, but dangerous to your psyche.

At first, speaking concisely and precisely can make it hard to say anything at all. Keep at it. As you begin to choose your language and conversations more consciously, you'll find that you're not the only one who benefits. By expressing yourself with more accuracy, specificity, and awareness, you'll enjoy more honest conversations and more productive collaborations. You might even inspire friends to follow suit.

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Permission to use enclosed accompanying art "Chatterboxes" also granted.

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