The Challenge of the Accidental Manager

A Harris poll concludes that up to 85% of people in management positions have never had management training. My informal surveys at management seminars tell me this figure is conservative. People are promoted into management positions daily … and often are expected to manage without training or guidance. They make it up as they go along, using trial and error, without any understanding of what is required to get results from others.

The situation is made even more challenging by the fact that the workplace is more diverse than ever. There are a wide variety of cultures and personalities and there is a new generation of workers entering the workforce that is different from any before it. For this generation, respect is not given automatically: it needs to be earned. This generation is outspoken and can be difficult to manage, … but not impossible. Management skills are more important than ever.

Those essential management skills need to be developed in a manager’s “free time.” The term “free time” gets laughter when
I use it in management seminars. The responsibility of management is often added to an work overload that requires the new manager to do more with less. This leaves little or no time for new managers to study the skills necessary for success.

This book gives the accidental (and intentional) managers and supervisors immediate benefits by providing words to use in hundreds of management situations. It is an essential reference that will allow you to manage more effectively by providing Perfect Phrases for almost every situation you are likely to face. They are quick and easy—and they work.

**Why Perfect Phrases? The Importance of Planning Your Words**

Perfect Phrases are another name for “PowerPhrases”, a communication style I have been speaking and writing about for years. I have learned from years of management training and teaching PowerPhrases that if people do not know the words to say in a situation, they will usually not say anything at all. I frequently receive letters from managers who subscribe to my newsletter who tolerate inappropriate behavior from their subordinates. They ask me for the words to speak in situations they should have addressed years ago. When they find the words, they become willing to take action.

Other managers use aggressive words that create resistance, shut down communication and backfire. Employees may respond to aggression in the short-term, but it does not lead to maximum productivity and can cause passive-aggressive responses.

I have learned from teaching PowerPhrases around the world that most people alternate between passive and aggressive communication in sensitive situations. Most people do not know how to stay assertive—clear, direct and respectful. Passive communication is ineffective. Aggressive communication creates resistance. Assertive communication gets results. Perfect Phrases are assertive phrases. They are valuable for managers to discover what effective, assertive wording is.

**The Value of Scripting**

Unless you are a management communication natural, it is valuable to plan your words in advance. Whenever a situation is challenging, tension tends to create a fight-or-flight style of thinking that produces a passive-aggressive mindset. It is difficult to think of options when you are triggered, but it is easier to recall phrases you planned in advance.

Many people resist using scripted phrases for fear of sounding phony. If this manner of speaking is not natural to you, you may sound unnatural at first. However, a “phony” assertive is more effective than a “genuine” passive or aggressive. Also, often the phrases are so appropriate that they can seem natural. These are the phrases you would choose yourself if only you had thought of them.

Perfect Phrases work. They communicate the goals of the organization and create a climate of clarity and trust. Clarity and trust is essential between you as a manager and the people you supervise. They help you hold your people accountable without blame. Language can be your most valuable management tool. Employees need the motivation, inspiration and clear direction of Perfect Phrases.
How to Use This Book

One purpose of this book is for you to outgrow it. Here’s how. This book is designed as a quick reference for every situation you face. Review relevant sections before you communicate. Adapt the phrases to your need and personal style. Repeat your phrases several times before you speak. After the conversation, review what you said, and determine how you could have spoken more effectively.

If you are looking for a practical crash management course, read *Perfect Phrases for Managers and Supervisors* from cover to cover. As you discover the Perfect Phrases, you will not only learn powerful phrases, you will also learn what to do. This book gives you an overview of your management responsibilities and how Perfect PowerPhrases work for each of them.

If you have been managing for years, use this book as a review to make sure you are communicating effectively, as a tool to upgrade your skills and as a reference to help you in specific situations. Turn directly to the chapter that covers your current issue. If your specific issue is not covered in this book, please e-mail us at info@speakstrong.com or adapt phrases for a similar situation in the book to your own. If you have a favorite phrase that you find useful, please pass it on to us so I can share it with my newsletter subscribers (*A PowerPhrases a Week*, www.speakstrong.com.)

— Meryl Runion,
President, SpeakStrong Inc.
Chapter 4  
Perfect Phrases to Foster an Open Communication Culture  

Communication is two-way by definition. For communication to occur, it is essential that employees feel safe to speak freely. Yet how often does that happen? Only 6% of employees report feeling safe questioning instructions and directives. As a result, bad ideas go unchallenged and good ideas often never get heard. Employees have difficulty saying no to projects that overload their schedule. When employees do not feel safe speaking freely, they often hesitate to question directions when needed and make up what they don’t understand.

Whether the people you supervise feel safe speaking up or asking questions depends largely on you. There are many ways to discourage disclosure without realizing it. Ridiculing an idea, becoming defensive if criticism is directed against you, and retaliating against someone who was forthright with you sends a message throughout the team that it is not safe to speak. There is a price to be paid for a dynamic of silence.

This chapter is based on the following five SpeakStrong and Center for Responsible Communication principles:

1. Open communication is essential for health personally, professionally and politically
2. When any communication is suppressed it is unhealthy for all involved and is likely to come back and cost everyone.
3. We need to elevate the level of discourse personally, professionally and politically.
4. We have a right to be informed about things that affect us.
5. When we don’t speak up we are complicit with lies, poor decisions and deception.

The benefits of an open communication culture are manifold. Employees feel safe, and as a manager you can feel safe as well, knowing that you will not be faced with unpleasant surprises. Problems can be addressed before they become major issues. You will have the benefit of ideas from people who have a different perspective than you do. It will create buy-in among employees.

Choose your Perfect Phrases with care to ensure that your words inspire disclosure rather than suppression.

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Perfect Phrases to Ensure That You Are Kept in the Loop

■ If you ever wonder if you should tell me something or not or cc me on something or not, go ahead and do it.
■ Please inform me of any changes regarding __________.
  The following is a list of areas I do not need to be informed of: __________.
■ Is there anything going on I might want to know?
■ I trust your expertise in your own areas. I need to be updated to stay in the loop myself.
■ I want to check in with you, not check up on you.
■ I am committed to letting you know anything that affects you. Please be certain to let me know anything that affects me as the supervisor, and the group as a whole.
■ Please give us an update of your progress by __________.
■ Is the project running on schedule?
■ Is everything within budget?
■ Are the quality specifications being met?
■ What can I do to support your work?
■ I was not informed about __________. In the future, please update me about events such as these.
■ My boss said you came directly to him with this issue. I am concerned that you went over my head, but I’m more concerned about our relationship. What made you think you couldn’t come to me first?

Perfect Phrases to Encourage Feedback

■ Let's find the best way to get this done.
■ If you did have an objection to this initiative, what would it be?
■ Please tell me what you like about this [plan/procedure/idea/etc.]. What would make you like it more?
■ What do you believe could conceivably go wrong with this in the worst possible scenario?
■ What do you think of this? You don’t have to be right.
■ Do you see a better way of doing this?
■ What do I, we, or you need to know to make this endeavor successful?
■ What have I overlooked?
Perfect Phrases to Encourage Questions on Policies and Directives

- Please ask three questions about my instructions. If we are making any assumptions, I’d like to find out now.
- I want to make sure my instructions are clear. What is your understanding of what I just said?
- What did I leave out?
- What would you like reviewed?
- What will your first step be?
- What questions do you have?
- What ideas do you have about _________? I feel like I’m missing something. Is there something you want to tell me?
- Please take a moment and summarize our discussion so far.
- What main points stand out in what we said?
- Let’s see if I communicated well. What did you hear me say?
- I want to make sure we are headed in the same direction. Where do you plan to start?

Perfect Phrases to Get a Quiet Employee to Open Up

- I’ve noticed your interest in _________. I’m interested as well.
- I’ve noticed your interest in _________. Tell me about it.
- I find there are some employees that share everything that happens and others who stay pretty reserved. I know it’s tough to speak when others are so outspoken. I invite you to open up to me.
- I used to hold back from talking to my boss because I didn’t know if it was safe. I want you to feel safe talking to me, and I invite you to test me.
- If you won’t talk to me, I won’t be able to support or manage you.
- We can’t do this alone. Your input is crucial.
- I can’t work with unspoken issues between us. I need to clear the air.
- This is not personal. This affects our ability to do our jobs. I need to know where you stand on this.
- I often find the quietest employees are quiet because they are so thoughtful, and the ones who speak the least are the ones who have the most to say. What’s on your mind?
- There is a saying, “Still waters run deep.” I’m guessing that’s the case with you. I think you have some deep thoughts on what’s going on. How can I get you to open up?
Perfect Phrases that Encourage Employees to Communicate Directly and Effectively with Each Other

- Who do you think needs to be informed of changes regarding __________?
- Let’s make a list of all the stakeholders in this [issue/project/initiative] so you can update them about developments.
- What information do you think would be necessary to share?
- Have you spoken with [employee with whom they have an issue] about this?
- I expect you and [employee with whom they have an issue] to communicate. If you need my help I’m happy to support you. However, I won’t do it for you.
- I understand there is some gossip happening here. I will not tolerate that. I expect you to speak about people in the same way you would if they were there, and to bring all issues to the person involved.
- I expect you to tell someone attempting to gossip with you to bring the issues directly to the person involved.

Perfect Phrases that Encourage Employees to Admit Mistakes

Employees who are afraid to admit mistakes can be very costly. Check your reactions when employees tell you about problems and mistakes, because if you are discouraging truthfulness about errors, it could result in some very costly surprises.

- Mistakes are learning experiences. Let me tell you about a mistake I made.
- When you make a mistake, I want to hear about it immediately. I also will want to hear what you learned, and what you will do in the future to keep from making that mistake again.
- Mistakes are inevitable and acceptable. Hiding mistakes is not.
- I believe most people come to work wanting to do their best. When a member of my team makes a mistake it is usually because I haven’t given him or her proper training, support, direction or encouragement. Please tell me when you make a mistake so I can help us both do our jobs better.
- I will never yell at anyone who makes a mistake.
- I want you to make mistakes. When you make mistakes it tells me you’re thinking, you’re making decisions and you’re taking risks.
- I want you to make mistakes. I don’t want poor performance.
THE RIGHT PHRASE FOR EVERY SITUATION...EVERY TIME

What you say and how you say it sets the tone for every business interaction, whether you’re dealing with a troublesome employee, a competitive coworker, or a demanding boss. *Perfect Phrases for Managers and Supervisors* is a practical crash course in communication skills for the workplace, written by a leading consultant in the field. Filled with sample scripts for almost every scenario and hundreds of effective phrases, it gives you all the tools you need to establish your role as a leader and achieve your goals with your coworkers’ support. Learn how to:

- Set a tone of mutual trust and respect
- Deal with difficult employees and delicate problems
- Discipline workers or terminate employment
- Present new ideas, procedures, or policies

Your effectiveness in the workplace depends on how you talk to others. This essential all-purpose guide provides the perfect words and phrases that get the job done.

Meryl Runion is the president and CEO of SpeakStrong, Inc., and director of The Center for Responsible Communication, both leading communication consulting firms. She is a popular speaker and the author of *How to Use PowerPhrases.*