



Trigger Words in the Language of Leadership

-Mark Haeussler, CEO

Trigger words are those that convey a strong emotional message in the listener. Used well, they can elevate a logical conversation into the emotional realm that will increase the level of engagement. A sentence such as, "I have spoken with the customer complaint area, and they have *illuminated* me on the issues from their perspectives..." can engage others with a certain emotional experience; people conclude that you really listened and considered their input.

Done poorly, trigger words can send someone down a negative spiral that may require substantial effort to shift. In this context, being triggered means being upset to the point of losing some or much of our leadership effectiveness.; being off-center. When negatively triggered, people have to listen through a fog of strong emotions as they attempt to listen to content. Guess which matters most, words or emotions. We've all been triggered - we know the answer.

Occasionally we trigger those who follow us on purpose, such as when there is apathy displayed about a significant breakdown; do so with great care. In addition, a key responsibility in leadership is increasing our own ability to not get triggered by others *and* to decrease the likelihood of triggering others, unless done so with great intent. What are your own trigger words?

Generally, no one performs at their best when they are triggered, as a series of unfavorable chemical reactions cascade into the brain. Negative trigger words slip into our conversations because we are thoughtless. Even as a self-aware leader, my experience as a volunteer medic might produce a different reaction to something described as a "heart-stopping idea" than what is intended. Impact matters more than in intent; it is the *impact* of the words that matters, not the intent of the person speaking them. The best advice: Use trigger words intentfully. Below are examples of trigger phrases to avoid; consider where you or others might go, emotionally, hearing these:

- Oh my god, just shoot me.
- What were you thinking?
- Why are you so upset?
- Can you try not to...?
- You're not listening...
- No offense, but...
- Just get over it.
- Unfortunately...
- I'm sorry *if*...
- And even the misplaced sigh.

