

## THINKING AND COMMUNICATING WITH CLARITY AND PRECISION

by

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*“Watch your thoughts, they become words.  
Watch your words; they become actions.  
Watch your actions; they become habits.  
Watch your habits; they become character.  
Watch your character; it becomes your destiny.”  
Frank Outlaw*

Do you ever hear your friends, siblings or adults in your life using vague and imprecise language? They describe objects or events with words like “*weird*,” “*nice*,” or “*OK*” rather than telling you more clearly what they were thinking. You might want to know what was “*weird*” about the movie or why the party was “*nice*”. They may call specific objects using such non-descriptive words as “*stuff*,” “*junk*” and “*things*.” The problem is that you do not know exactly what the person is referring to—what is the “*stuff*”? Do you find yourself saying “*those guys*” will be at the football game rather than giving specific names or groups? You refer to people as “*those guys*” rather than using their specific names or groups. Perhaps you try to convince your parents that you should go by saying “*everyone will be there*” rather than telling them who, specifically, you mean.

Language and thinking are closely entwined. Like either side of a coin, they are inseparable. Your words represent your mind. When you use fuzzy language, it is a reflection of fuzzy thinking. Intelligent people strive to communicate precisely and accurately by defining terms, using correct names and universal labels and analogies. They strive to avoid overgeneralizations such as “*everybody does it*” or deletions such as “*this cereal is better*.” (Better than what?) Instead they voluntarily support their statements with

explanations, comparisons, quantification, data and evidence. Interestingly, the reverse is also true: When you strive to use precise language, it has a corresponding effect on your thinking. Your mind and your internal thinking maps become more precise, organized and focused.

So how can you become more skillful in thinking and communicating with clarity and precision? A few strategies include:

**Mental rehearsal.** Inside your head, practice what you are going to say before you say it. Engage your own internal dialogue. The questions you ask and the answers you provide yourself help to clarify and direct your skills and competencies as speaker and listener.

**Slow down when you are emotional.** When you get angry or exasperated, your rational brain closes down and your emotional brain takes over. You are often tempted to respond impulsively when you lose your cool. Take a deep breath. Count to ten. Give yourself a chance to think before you say something.

**Listen to others.** Become a spectator of other's language as well as your own. Listen to the words they choose. Seek to understand. When you hear:

- Vague nouns and pronouns such as in "they" or "students." Press for specificity by asking, who specifically?
- Vague verbs, such as "understand" or "improve." Ask what these terms mean.
- Comparators, such as "better" or "larger." The issue is, better than what or larger than what. You must ask to get clarity.
- Generalizations, such as "Everybody?" or "All the time?" Check to see if it really is everybody (even your neighbor?) or *all* the time—each and every time?

**Choose to be silent.** Not only is it important to monitor your own thoughts and language, it is also important to know when to be silent. Do not worry that there are periods of silence in your conversation. Silence allows others and yourself to think, to reflect and to compose your thoughts and words. As Pythagoras said: "Silence is better than unmeaning words."