



## Culture Change: The Power of Words

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At our recent Creative Health Care Management company retreat, a member of a client organization, St. Mary's Health Center in Jefferson City, MO, shared a practice that the health system has in place: nonviolent language. The organization's culture does not accept violent language, among members of the organization or from anyone who interacts with the organization. For example, speakers coming in to present are asked to use nonviolent language.

The client's explanation had a powerful impact on me. I began to be aware of the effect that our language choices have on our culture. I listened intently to words used in various settings: execute, targets, bulleted reports, and fired were just a few of the words I gathered that displayed a violent aspect. I reflected on those words, thinking, "Here I am in health care, a place where people come for healing and compassion, and the air is filled with violent words." I wondered how it must feel to work in or be a patient at St. Mary's, and whether the culture feels a bit more compassionate and caring. I expect that it does.

As leaders in health care, we all need to pay attention to the words we are using in our daily lives. In a foreword to the book *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*, by Marshall Rosenberg (Encinitas, CA: Puddle Dancer Press, 2003), Arun Gandhi shares the following insight: "Nonviolence means allowing the positive within you to emerge. Be dominated by love, centered and selfish, greedy, hateful, prejudiced, suspicious and aggressive attitudes that dominate our thinking. We often hear people say: This world is ruthless, and if you want to survive you must become ruthless too. I humbly disagree with this contention. If we change ourselves we change our world and changing ourselves begins with changing our language and methods of communication." (p. xiv-xv.)

Reflecting on these insights helped me to see that the words I use every day can contribute to a world that is either more compassionate or more ruthless. I would ask that all of us become aware of the words we use in our daily lives. Consciously using words such as zestful,

stimulated, inquisitive, inspired, encouraged and expansive when describing situations certainly may have a positive impact on the conversations that take place in your organization.

I would like to share a personal story about the power of words. Last year I realized that, having raised two lovely sons, ages 19 and 16, I had never written them a thank you note highlighting how grateful I am as a mom to have such awesome children. So at Thanksgiving, I gave them each a hand-written thank you note. To this day, my sons still have their notes; one has his prominently on his dresser. This is a good reminder that words do have an impact at home as well as at work. I encourage all of us to become aware of the language that is in our world, and to take action in choosing the words we use on a daily basis so that they reflect nonviolent communication.