

DEVELOPMENT

Ten Tongue Fu! Tips

Train your tongue to deflect, disarm, and defuse.

By Sam Horn

Want to know what to say when you don't know what to say? If so, you're in the right place. These Tongue Fu! tips will help you communicate more constructively with co-workers, clients, supervisors, and suppliers.

What is Tongue Fu!, you ask? It's best defined by an incident that took place while I was flying to New York for a media tour. I needed to double-

check a quote, so I pulled out my copy of *Tongue Fu!: How to Deflect, Disarm, and Defuse Any Verbal Conflict* from my purse. A woman across the aisle from me glanced at the title, grabbed the book out of my hands, and pronounced, "That looks interesting. Tell me what it's about!"

"Well," I answered, tongue planted firmly in cheek, "it's about how to han-

dle difficult people without becoming difficult ourselves.” She chuckled, and we had an enjoyable conversation.

The following tips are designed to help you respond proactively to challenging people in the moment, instead of your having brain freeze and thinking of the perfect response on the way home.

Tongue Fu! Tip 1. When people complain, don't explain; take the AAA train: Agree, apologize, and act instead of explaining why something wasn't done. That can sound as if you're making excuses, and it might make some people angrier. The better way: “You're right, Mrs. Smith, we were supposed to send

ourselves on our quality service” would only create a yes-we-do, no-you-don't debate. Instead, ask, “What makes you think that?” The client may harrumph, “I've left three messages and no one's called back.” Now you know what's really bothering him, and you can give him the attention he wants and deserves.

Tongue Fu! Tip 3. Stop blaming—by using a hand gesture. No, not that one! If people are arguing and you try to talk over them, what usually happens? They talk louder, and the voice of reason is drowned out in the commotion. Putting up your hand like a police officer stopping traffic will make people pause for a

pull out paper and pen. Suggest, “Start at the beginning and write what happened.”

Now, they have to think back and relate events in chronological order. That moves them from an emotional frame of mind to an objective one. They're now reporting instead of ranting and raving, and they have to slow down to write. Once they slow down, they'll calm down. Taking notes motivates most people to clean up their language because they don't want documentation of their temper tantrum or verbal abuse.

Tongue Fu! Tip 5. Fast-forward through frustration with the empathy phrase. Next time you're feeling irritated with someone, ask how you would feel if the situation were happening to you. Exasperation can be a byproduct of seeing things from one point of view: our own.

A trainer once told me, “I used to get annoyed when I'd go to all the effort to organize a requested program and employees would gripe about having to attend on their day off. When I put myself in their shoes, I understood. If I worked six days a week and had to come in on my only free day, I might be unhappy, too. That gave me the incentive to be more compassionate.”

Tongue Fu! Tip 6. When it seems that there's nothing you can do, let them know you care. A front desk manager at a hotel in Hawaii asked me, “What can we say when people grumble about the rain? There's nothing we can do about the weather.” I told her, “The words *there's nothing I can do* come across as apathetic. Guests will feel you don't give a darn, and they'll get louder and angrier in an effort to make you give a darn.

“Use the words *I wish, I hope, or there is something* to let them know you're doing your best to help. Say, ‘I wish I could bring out the sunshine for you. I know you were looking forward to some beach time’ or ‘I hope it clears up soon. In case it doesn't, here's a list of rainy-day activi-

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that brochure to you last week, and I'm sorry you didn't receive it yet. If I could please have your name and address again, I'll personally put that brochure in an envelope and make sure it goes out today.” *Voila!* Complaint over.

Tongue Fu! Tip 2. Has someone accused you of something you didn't do? Don't defend or deny it. Instead, put the conversational ball back in their court with, “What do you mean?” Asking the person to explain herself will cause her to reveal the real issue, and you can address that instead of reacting to the attack.

Imagine an upset client exclaims, “You don't care about your customers.” Responding, “That's not true. We pride

moment, which gives you a chance to get your verbal foot in the door. Then say these magic words: “We're here to find solutions, not fault.” Remind them that John F. Kennedy said, “Our task is not to fix the blame for the past; it's to fix the course for the future.” If the conversation starts deteriorating into a gripe session again, make a T with your hands and call time-out, saying “Calling each other names won't help. Instead, let's figure out how we can keep this from happening again.”

Tongue Fu! Tip 4. Are people swearing at each other? Hold them accountable. Physically (gently) separate them, tell them they'll each get their turn, and then

ties so you can make the most of your visit even if the sun doesn't cooperate." We can't always give people what they want. But we can at least give them our concern.

Tongue Fu! Tip 7. Has someone made a mistake? Be a coach, not a critic. If something's gone wrong and we tell workers what they should've done, they'll resent us—even when we're right. A seminar participant clarified: "They'll resent us, especially if we're right." Why? People can't undo the past. If they're being criticized for something they can't change, they'll channel their discomfort into antagonism.

My favorite boss used to tell me, "We can't motivate people to do better by making them feel bad." Telling people what they should've done makes them feel bad and doesn't show them how to do better. From now on when people make a mistake, coach their behavior with the words *next time* or *in the future*. Now, you're shaping their performance instead of shaming it, and they're learning instead of losing face.

Tongue Fu! Tip 8. Develop a repertoire of Fun Fu! remarks. Erma Bombeck (bless her soul) said, "If we can laugh at it, we can live with it." Are you sensitive about something? Perhaps you're losing your hair or you've put on a few pounds. You have a choice: You can continue to give people the power to push your buttons, or you can come up with clever, non-combative comebacks and keep your wit and wits about you.

Want an example? I ran into a very tall man in an airport. The people in front of me were laughing and pointing at him. I thought, how rude! until he got closer and I saw his T-shirt. It read: "No, I'm not a basketball player!" On the back of his shirt were the words, "Are you a jockey?" He told me he used to dread going out of the house because everyone made smart-aleck remarks. He finally decided if he couldn't beat 'em, he might as well join 'em.

The tall man said, "I have a drawer full of these shirts at home. My favorite says, 'I'm 6'13 and the weather up here is fine.' Ever since I started wearing these shirts, I've had fun with my height instead of being frustrated by it." I'd call him a Fun Fu! black belt.

Tongue Fu! Tip 9. Involved in a disagreement? Get off your "but." Linguist William Safire was once asked, "Is sloppy communication due to ignorance or apathy?" Safire answered with a twinkle in his eye, "I don't know and I don't care." I think we care about how we communicate. What we may not know is that many of us use a relationship-destroying word that sets us up as adversaries and perpetuates conflict. That word is *but*. How do you feel when someone says, "I hear what you're saying, but we tried that before; it didn't work"?

Now, imagine if that person replaced that destructive word *but* with the constructive word *and*: "I hear what you're saying, and we tried that before and it didn't work out. Do you have any suggestions on how we could handle it differently this time?" Do you hear how the word *and* lets people know you're listening? It moves conversations forward instead of anchoring them in a right-or-wrong dispute.

Tongue Fu! Tip 10. Turn *nos* into *yes*. Imagine a staff member asks, "Can I have my paycheck early? I'm going to Las Vegas this weekend," and you answer, "Sorry, you can't because it hasn't been approved by payroll." That's the truth; however, the employee may get upset because you're rejecting his request. The words *can't because* are like a verbal door slamming in his face.

Want good news? You can often approve requests with the words, *Sure, as soon as*, or *yes, right after*. Reword your reply to, "Sure you can have your paycheck, as soon as it's approved by payroll. Why don't we give them a call, explain the circumstances, and see if there's any way they can speed things up."

One manager said, "I can't wait to use this idea at home. My kids see me as a big meanie because they're constantly asking for permission and I'm always telling them no. Next time they ask if they can go outside and play with their friends, instead of telling them, 'No you can't because you haven't finished your homework,' I'm going to say, 'Sure you can, right after you finish your homework.' Instead of seeing me as the one who's keeping them from what they want, this makes them responsible for getting what they want. It changes the whole dynamic of our relationship."

Bravo! That's the purpose of these Tongue Fu! tips. Our goal is to create a diplomatic group dynamic in which everyone has an incentive to get along. Are you thinking, I can see that these would work, but (oops) *and* I'm afraid I'll go back to the office all fired up and, two weeks later, everything will be back to the same old, same old? That's why it's important to post these tips on your computer, office bulletin board, or refrigerator. You've heard the phrase, *Out of sight, out of mind*? Keep these ideas in sight and in mind so you'll see them throughout the day and be reminded to use them. Everyone at work, including you, will benefit.

Sam Horn, creator of the trademarked Tongue Fu! concept, shares these communication techniques at conventions and with corporations around the United States. For information on Tongue Fu! training in your area, visit www.samhorn.com.

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