**Choose Your Words Wisely**

Whether we address management, a civic organization or a Girl Scout Troop, our words are important. I was a 22-year old PR newbie when my boss suffered a severe illness that sent her to bed for weeks. Suddenly my big break came as sole editor of the school’s magazine and only PR practioner in the office. Gathering the editorial content for our publications was easy; I was associate editor of my college magazine. Learning to work with a graphic designer was another thing.

Doing PR for one of the preeminent seminaries in the US was a dream come true for me. It was an incubator of intellectual thought and on the cutting edge of allowing women to study there and go on to be ordained ministers or faculty members as prestigious institutions around the country. An upcoming conference was to feature a woman as the school’s first-ever keynote speaker.

Our graphic designer and I worked tirelessly on all the promotional materials for the conference, including a significant spread in the magazine. The female speaker would be prominently featured among the speakers. I took it to the President and Provost for final approval. That’s when I said it. To the President and Provost. Both ordained ministers and among the most respected authors and theologians in the nation. I pointed to the layout and said, “Look, the woman’s on top for once.”

You could hear a feather drop. Dr. Hubbard turned red and said he had to get something in the adjoining office. At first it sounded like he was wheezing. Then giggling followed, signaling my realization that I had uttered quite the sexual innuendo, at a seminary no less.

Dr. Hubbard returned. He could not make eye contact with Dr. Barker or me.

“Go with it,” he instructed in an unusually throaty voice. “Thanks for sharing it with us.”

I slinked out the door but not before I overheard Dr. Barker say, “David, just make sure she doesn’t give the presentation to the Board of Trustees.”

Then they exploded in laughter.

That was 1978. The words would not be as risqué today. But it does illustrate the importance of three things we all must remember every time we address a group:

1. Practice your presentation with someone. If I had rehearsed with a trusted friend or colleague before this important meeting, they would have pointed out my poor choice of words. My usual flair for editing was clouded by my exuberance to impress.
2. Read your presentation notes for double meanings, double entendres and puns. Look for lines like, “the poorly run fishing company had a net loss” or “being in debt draws a lot of interest from bankers.”
3. Know your culture. When you do spot a questionable line, consider how it will go over with the culture of the institution. You don’t want to sound like Donald Trump when the company just terminated an overly outspoken CEO.

Here’s the ultimate lesson on words from Hannibal Lecter:

“I do wish we could chat longer, but I’m having an old friend over for dinner.”