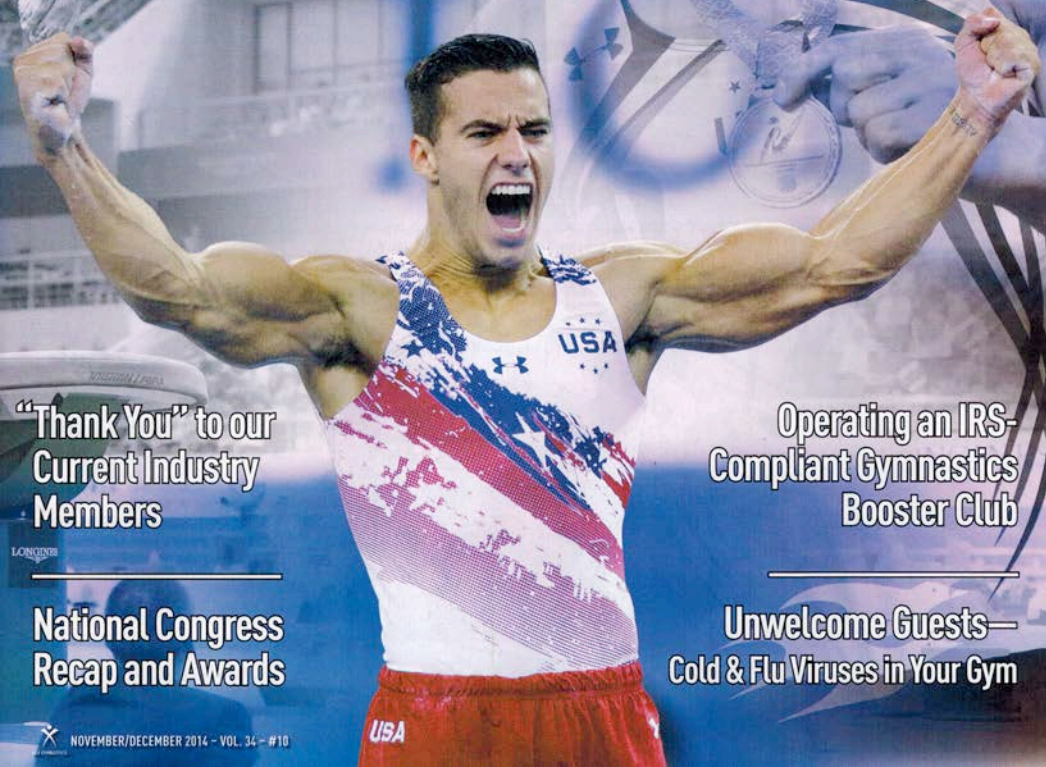


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Magic **WORDS**

Using the Power of Language to Create Positive Potential in Your Athletes

BY LAURA FULLER, M.A., C.H.T.

You may have experienced a situation like this before: It is before a competition. One athlete says she is excited and another says she is *anxious*.

The interesting thing is that they are likely feeling very similar sensations: a pounding heart, a rush of adrenaline and butterflies in the stomach. However, the words they use to name the sensation create very different results. The athlete who names it *excitement* instantly calls forward positive feeling states and memories of exhilaration and success. She interprets the energy filling her body as preparation for an excellent performance. The athlete who calls it anxiety might begin thinking about what could go wrong. She might compare herself to others and could easily be taken over by nerves and fear.

The words they choose matter. While, in the athlete's experience, it seems that these words simply describe what they are feeling, the words they choose also play a role in creating these feelings. The language of the gymnast and the coach in such a moment, as well as the words used throughout training, play a significant role in success, learning, and ability to rise up in difficult situations.

The scenario above is an example of the power of language through **Labeling** — the way we habitually label sensations and experiences

affects how we react and learn. The solution is *not* simply to tell someone who feels anxious in every cell of her being that she actually is excited — that's a lie. However, this example makes clear that, just like a muscle, the nervous system is trained over time through experiences and words. If you consider the number of words you say to your athletes even in a single workout, it is obvious that an artful shift in language could have powerful effects. The following are tools to help you use the power of language for the benefit of your gymnasts — from preschoolers to your highest competitors.

DON'T THINK OF A PINK ELEPHANT

Most coaches learn a basic concept of magic words when they are asked to teach without using the word "don't." The reason for this is in the way that the subconscious takes in language and how the nervous system responds. One way to understand this is that the mind only processes positive concepts, not negations. That is, in order to think of "not" something, you first have to think of that something,

and thinking of that something is very powerful.

Here's a classic non-gymnastics example: *Don't think of a pink elephant. Whatever you do, don't imagine a pink elephant. Don't even consider how you might imagine a pink elephant, if you were to.* Did you think of a pink elephant? The same is true for not thinking about falling. The core concept of the sentence is *falling*, and all the energy of the body goes in the direction of falling. Where your focus goes, your energy flows. There may be times when it is helpful to say what not to do, or giving a funny example of what not to do can make gymnasts aware of a habit (like joking about monster hands, or warning preschoolers not to let the ground bonk them

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in the head). However, in general, it's better to keep the language in the positive. This doesn't mean positive in the sense of "good job," but in the sense of talking more specifically about what you do want and less about what you don't.

TRANSFORMATIONAL LANGUAGE

What you say:

"Don't bend your knees."

=

What the subconscious hears:

"Bend your knees."

You could go through any sentence a coach says and cross out the "don'ts", "nots", and "stops" and see what you have left.

Most coaches have learned, at least to some degree, to keep the energy flowing in the direction of what is wanted. However, when I first learned the concept of avoiding "don'ts," I had the feeling that there must be more to this magic. Could there be a way to use this mental trick to your advantage? Could there be a way to use the way the brain transforms the words we say for positive effects? That's where transformational language comes

in. Imagine this scenario and possible responses: The gymnast says, "It's hard." The coach may actually choose a combination of these (FIG. 1), meeting the gymnast where they are and then expanding into possibility: "You are right, it is hard. I'm not going to tell you that it is easy. But you'll probably find that, each day, it gets easier in some in way." The idea of **hard** is accepted, and the possibility of **ease** is strengthened.

ENTER THROUGH THE DOOR OF AGREEMENT

A core concept in the scenario above is that, in order to influence the subconscious mind and nervous system, we must enter through the door of agreement. For them to hear you and accept a new possibility, you must meet them where they are. This is missing anytime you get into a power struggle or are trying to tell them what they should feel. Like telling a gymnast she shouldn't be scared when she is or (the way too common) saying to a crying child, "You're fine!" Sometimes, these *pull-it-together* strategies work, but sometimes, the battle continues. Beginning to transform these situations could be as simple as making

sure that your first statement is one of agreement and understanding. "I can see how afraid you are. I remember when I was afraid of that, too." You can then go on to offer other possibilities. But sometimes, all a feeling needs is to be seen.

LANGUAGE AS REINFORCEMENT VS. LANGUAGE AS SUGGESTION

This distinction is the heart of transformational language. Most people have learned to use words as reinforcement. That means language comes after the behavior, either rewarding or punishing. Seeing language as suggestion means seeing the language as coming first and shaping the behavior and experience. This is what I mean by using language to create a possibility. Your vocabulary and choices to describe helpful ways that someone could experience is far more powerful than reinforcement. With reinforcement, people often get stuck in a negative trap. This is the old paradigm of the carrot on a stick, and it actually doesn't work very well.

BREAKING THE CYCLE — A PRESCHOOL MAGIC TRICK

Language meant as reinforcement (a response to the behavior at hand) is also a suggestion (a cue shaping the future). Repeated suggestions even start to become identity. You see this when a correction becomes almost a part of someone's name. It could be a preschooler who falls into the role of the troublemaker or an athlete who is very aware of her common corrections and weaknesses. "Sit down, Timmy. Sit down, Timmy. Timmy! Sit down!" There is the tool of ignoring it, or of

FIG. 1

THE COACH'S RESPONSE

Answer 1: "You're right, it is **hard!**"

Answer 2: "Come on, it's **easy!**"

Answer 3: (playfully) "I'm not gonna tell you it's **easy!**"

RESULT OF LANGUAGE

(reinforces to the nervous system the feeling "it's hard," though may build connection as the gymnast feels heard and understood)

(though this does bring in the possibility of "easy" it contradicts experience and so the subconscious will **reject** it as not relevant. It also breaks connection between student and coach by denying their feelings)

(builds connection by validating their experience. Also, introduces the sensation "easy" as a possibility for the nervous system)

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reinforcing the desired behavior of others: "I love the way Ella and Brandon are sitting on the mat." But what could be said to create a new possibility and start shaping the behavior rather than just rewarding or punishing the past? Here's an example. I once had a preschooler who would run laps around my class while screaming bloody murder. I would ask him to join me a few times, then would ignore it for a while to allow him to take some of it in until eventually another teacher would take him somewhere else to work alone. One day, while he was darting around, I said, "Good job, Timmy!" Can you imagine his shock? It was enough to interrupt his pattern to the point that he could hear me. So I continued, "That's right. You're starting to get it, and that's really good." He stood and watched me for a bit and stayed slowed down enough to observe the rest of the class. I said later, "Maybe not today, but someday soon, you might want to give some of this a try." This strange moment became the turning point to him eventually becoming a positive leader in the class. That exact intervention probably wouldn't work for anyone older than a preschooler. They'd reject it as a lie. But, it can be applied by looking for an empowering interpretation for what they are doing: "I see that you are learning by observing today, and that is OK." Or by starting to notice changes in the desired direction even before they notice themselves: "I notice that your jump is getting more powerful," for example.

THE POWER OF "OR"

Here's one last little magic trick that you can try as you start to change your language. Similar to "don't" and "can't," there is a level of processing in the brain that doesn't understand the word "or." "Or" turns into "And"

and the nervous system accepts BOTH and ALL possibilities given. This is why "or" threats tend to backfire. "Do you want to listen or do you want to have a time out?" The subconscious answers — BOTH! When you appear to be giving someone options, what you are actually giving them is possibilities. "You might become aware of the solidness of the beam underneath your feet or the strength of your legs. You might find your focus through your breath or through your eyes." To a child who is afraid: "I don't know what will start

how this individual processes information — "I think the slide looked cool." All the while, their nervous system is taking in all of the positive options you offered.

INNER MONOLOGUE

Ultimately, outer language becomes our inner monologue. The critic and coach in our head came from somewhere, though usually we accept these voices without question. What you say to your gymnasts will ultimately be absorbed into their inner voice. Over



to make you feel safe first: it might be the texture of the bar in your hands, the strength your arms have, saying your anchor word in your mind, or knowing that I am here holding you." To a child who doesn't want to do anything: "If you sit and watch, you might eventually find that something starts looking interesting to you. It might be the trampoline, the music, the going upside-down, the tunnel, the other silly monkeys or something else." In all of these cases, if given time to absorb it, they will probably give you one answer to the "or" that is stronger for them than the other options. This gives them freedom and individuality and also lets you know more about

time, this is what will set them up for moments like the one described at the beginning of this article: are they anxious or are they excited? Does pressure make them want to step up or want to collapse? In working with this, you will also notice that you sometimes crash into existing negative or defensive voices. You have the opportunity to gently heal this over time. It is also helpful to teach your students the power of interpretation and language focus as a mental tool. This can take the form of generating anchor words or theater games, where you play with feeling different nervous system states and emotions while in a calm moment.

