

Tip of the Month October 2006: 'Don't think of Fish'

Consider how often you use negative ideas to express yourself - "Don't run", "Stop Smoking", "Don't be so negative". These statements make our point consciously, but how are these innocent messages being received at the unconscious level?

Try this little experiment: [Don't think of fish.](#)

What happened? I bet you thought about fish! You had to think of fish and then use your own personal strategy to somehow negate the thought. In other words, every time you use a negative your brain is first registering the exact opposite of what you mean.

I was in the gym earlier this week and witnessed the following incident. The gym manager saw someone running on the treadmill with a shoelace undone. He went over and alerted the runner to the problem. Returning his attention to me the manager said that it was always a problem knowing what to say in such situations. He invariably said, "Don't look down" (so that the runner didn't trip or lose momentum) "your shoelace is undone". However the runner always looked down immediately!

Knowing what you now know of course the runner's response was predictable as, by the time most people have processed the "don't", they have already processed the "look down". It would have been better to say something in the positive such as "Can you come slowly to a halt, keep looking up and then you need to tie your shoelace".

What happens when you tell a child not to touch something? Yes, they immediately touch it! If you want children or adults to do something it's much more effective to tell them what you want them to do in the positive.

The same rules apply to yourself. Have you ever thought, "I don't want to fail," "I don't want to be in this job all my life," "I must not miss this deadline"? Think about it - by the time your brain has got to the "don't" or "must not," your whole body has already received the message: fail, stay in the job, miss the deadline.

So if you want to think positively, the key question to ask yourself is, "If I don't want "X", what do I want instead?"

Answering this question precisely gives your brain something to work toward. The more you can specify what you will see, hear and feel when you have what you want the more the brain is given a map to create new solutions and guide it to its outcomes.

Next time you find yourself thinking, "I don't want to appear nervous at that meeting," ask yourself, "what would I be doing instead?" You might answer "I will have steady hands, breathe easily, feel relaxed in my stomach, make eye contact, have a clear voice, be humorous, etc." The more detailed, and more specific you are, the better.

Why not have a go over the next few weeks?

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