

THE MOST DANGEROUS WORKPLACE WEAPON

By Robert J. Tamasy

Sadly, recent years have been marred by horrendous acts of violence in the workplace. Experts have struggled to pinpoint causes and solutions for such incidents. But there is a very different form of violent behavior that receives virtually no attention, but every day causes great damage.

I refer to the devastation and grievous injuries caused by the misuse and abuse of a "weapon" we all possess: the tongue.

Most of us have observed situations where a supervisor berated a subordinate in an angry, inappropriate manner. Colleagues having a discussion that spiraled into a disagreement and then a series of harsh, disparaging comments toward one another. A customer verbally attacking a retail store clerk for some perceived wrong, oblivious to the fact the worker was doing everything possible to remedy the situation.

Thanks to technology, the danger of sharp tongues has expanded into the virtual realm. In haste, people craft mean-spirited emails and text messages, or leave voicemails expressing their ire. We find ourselves inclined to share a piece of our minds we can ill afford to lose, via various social media outlets.

This problem, of course, is hardly new. Long before anyone ever envisioned the Internet, when no one had heard of texting and tweeting, U.S. President Harry Truman recognized the jeopardy created by communicating before time could cool heated emotions. He established a personal rule that any letter written in anger must remain at his desk for 24 hours before it could be mailed. Only after this "cooling off period," if his thoughts had not changed, would he proceed to mail a letter. It is said by the end of his life, Truman had accumulated enough un-mailed angry letters to fill a large desk drawer.

But even President Truman was responding to a problem that had already existed for thousands of years. The Bible addresses this in numerous passages, notably the book of James. It states, *"...the tongue is a small part of the body but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue is also a fire...no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.... With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness"* (James 3:5-9).

I admit to having been a perpetrator myself. For many years, whenever anger boiled up I would spew words to voice my displeasure. This might have relieved my frustration, but it caused great harm to my hearers. Then I learned some important lessons for handling this dangerous weapon we call the tongue:

Think before speaking. We often feel totally justified in what we are thinking, but expressing those thoughts aloud can cause much more harm than good. *"When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise"* (Proverbs 10:19).

Seek to build up, not to tear down. In anger we can use words to attack others, but it is much more productive to use words to build them up and offer encouragement. *"Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen"* (Ephesians 4:29).

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Reflection/Discussion Questions

1. Can you recall any moments when someone verbally abused another person? How did situations like that make you feel?
2. Has misuse of the tongue or abuse of others with words ever been a problem you have struggled with? If so, how have you handled that – how are you handling it now?
3. How would you respond to another person that habitually abuses people verbally? Do you think it is even your place to get involved? Explain your answer.
4. The verse from the book of Ephesians urges us to use speech in positive ways, to help people rather than to inflict hurt. Can you think of a time when someone did this for you? Can you think of a recent occasion when you had an opportunity to say something positive and constructive to another person? If so, what were these experiences like for you?

If you would like to look at or discuss other portions from the Bible that relate to this topic, consider the following brief sampling of passages:

Proverbs 4:24, 10:20-21, 11:12, 12:14,23, 13:3, 16:23-24, 20:19, 22:11