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# [ON-THE-JOB PROFANITY: H](https://donnleviejrstrategies.wordpress.com/2012/08/16/on-the-job-profanity-is-your-vocabulary-choice-at-work-holding-back-your-career/)ow to Destroy Your Leadership Aspirations with Just One %$#@ Word

*Donn LeVie Jr. /Donn LeVie Jr. STRATEGIES, LLC*

If you’ve ever thought that people who stream profanity at work were real-life Southpark characters, well, it’s official (as if we needed a study to confirm it): According to a *CareerBuilder* survey of 2,000 hiring managers and 3,800 U.S. workers, 64% of employers said that they’d think less of an employee who repeatedly uses profanity and 57% would be less likely to promote that person.

The study also revealed that 51% of workers surveyed admit to using profane language in the office (understandable if you work with computers using a certain operating system), and 95% of those folks said they do so in front of co-workers while 51% admitted using foul language in conversations with their managers. But angels that we all are, we are least likely to use expletives in front of senior management and clients.

Employers found that employees who possess and display a profanity-laced vocabulary appear less professional, seem to have self-control and maturity issues, and 50% thought that such language makes an employee appear less intelligent.

The study revealed that profanity is most often heard when levels of stress or tension are elevated; but then again, there are just some people who use such language regardless of stress, frustration, or tension.

Just watch any reality TV show and count the number of BLEEPS heard (if you’ve ever watched *Wicked Tuna*, you’d think there was a truck backing up outside with all the bleeping out of profanity). Why would anyone think that using such language in front of TV cameras enhances the perception viewers have of them? Either they aren’t aware of it or they don’t care.

The *CareerBuilder* survey found that Washington, DC was the worst when it came to swearing at work (I don’t think “swearing in” counted here), and Philadelphia was the “least worst” in the Top 10 job markets in the U.S. As for age groups, the

worst was the 35 to 44 age group (sure, they have kids, college educations, and mortgages to pay for); the least worst was the 18-24 age group, with the over 55 age group right behind.

## Science Says It’s Good for You to Swear, But…What About Your Audience?

Dr. Emma Byrne’s popular book, *Swearing Is Good for You: The Amazing Science of Bad Language*, reveals that profanity offers many positive virtues, from promoting trust and teamwork in the office to increasing our tolerance to pain. Researchers claim profanity serves a linguistic purpose: To deliver intense, succinct and directed emotional expression.

The “Poverty of Vocabulary” (POV) hypothesis states that people will defer to profanity when struggling to find the right words, but even intelligent people use profanity. Legions of employees are citing Dr. Byrne’s work as giving them the “green light” to use profanity on the job (because there’s not enough gratuitous profanity in the halls and conference rooms now as it is). Recall that the *CareerBuilder* survey reported that employers thought that such language makes an employee *appear* less intelligent.

What these folks seem to be saying is that a controversial scientific theory is their authority or justification when it comes to using profanity on the job. That’s aiming pretty low it seems.

Full disclosure: I’ve used profanity when I smash my thumb with a hammer or stub my toe on a door frame, but not in public or mixed company. A higher standard guides my conduct when within the earshot of others.

As a speaking professional, that last thing I want to do is alienate an audience member, or have them tune out my message if I’ve used profanity that offended them. Several prominent professional speakers freely use profanity and vulgarity in their live presentations and in online video. Here’s what best-selling author Tony Robbins says in the Netflix documentary, *I Am Not Your Guru*, about his contrived use of profanity:

A well-deployed F-bomb has its uses. In every culture there are taboo words . . . And when you use them, you’re able to interrupt the noise in people’s heads.

Mr. Robbins has lost many fans and followers as a result of his frequent stringing together of noun-modifying F-bomb adjectives. It proves the point that when you disrespect your audience, the impact of your message (as well as your *credibility* and your *presence*) will be diminished or erased by many without giving considerable thought and care to your words. Like a fine sterling silver tea set, your character, reputation, and integrity can be tarnished without regular cleaning and polish of your vocabulary.

There’s a story that in the late 1970s Norman Mailer confronted Gore Vidal at a function after Vidal wrote a scathing review of one of Mailer’s books. Mailer’s anger got the best of him and with one punch, sent Vidal to the floor. Did Vidal let loose a string of profanity and vulgarities at Mailer? Au contraire; instead, Vidal looked up at Mailer and announced to the astonished gathering: “Once again, words have failed Norman Mailer.”

Game, set, and match, Mr. Vidal.

That verbal repartee from Vidal was more stinging to Mailer than the punch in the nose Vidal received, and Vidal appeared to have gotten the better of Mailer in the eyes of witnesses. A well-placed witty response doused in verbal fluency often has a greater effect than the careless utterance of some taboo language.

From a Presence-Driven Leadership perspective, your use of vocabulary on the job influences the perceptions others have of you.  Profanity in the office does negatively impact that perception/impression and could be a limiting factor for those C-Suite aspirations, where linguistic prowess is a prerequisite. It’s an indicator that you may lack the even-keel emotional stability that’s inherent to the power of presence.

Here are a few great quotations about the negative use of profanity (couldn’t find any good ones with the same level of sting for the positive use of profanity):

“Profanity is the weapon of the witless.” (Anonymous)

“Profanity is the effort of a feeble brain to express itself forcibly” (Spencer W. Kimball)

“Vulgarity is the garlic in the salad of taste.”  
 (Cyril Connelly, English author and critic)

“When a man uses profanity to support an argument, it indicates either that the man or the argument is weak – probably both.” (Anonymous)

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