

A Manner of Speaking

by Bonnie Neugebauer

The presenter was enthusiastic, well-prepared, and competently working her way through her presentation. Her engaging personality and positive attitude added life to her stories and examples. About 45 minutes into the workshop, one of the participants interrupted, "You know, this is just great. This is what I really need to know!"

Even though the presenter had been doing just fine, the comment changed her. There was an added sparkle to her words, a renewed enthusiasm for her subject. She didn't have to wonder if she was connecting — she knew.

And, if there were directors in the audience who were *sitting on the fence* about the subject, they, too, would have been changed by the comment. Any doubts or negative thoughts were challenged. Without a doubt, everyone in that room focused more clearly, listened more intently, and left with more information than if the woman had not spoken.

The power of one positive comment transformed an afternoon for 40 people.

When I attend the National Black Child Development Conference workshops, I enjoy the hum of approving comments that fuel the workshop experience. It's a response that we Scandinavians are not taught, but I find it comforting and reassuring. Perhaps, one day, I will even find my voice to join in.

The sound of approving voices creates an environment that brings speaker and audience together.

On the other hand, my husband, Roger, was giving a three hour workshop for directors.

About 15 minutes into his material, a woman blurted out: "That's the worst idea I ever heard in my whole life!" I wasn't there, but I heard second hand — at length and in self-deprecating detail — that the next 2 hours and 45 minutes were some of the most difficult moments Roger ever experienced. One comment defeated him before he really got rolling.

Words shape the way we perceive our world; the timing of words can intensify their power.

I heard a story, source now forgotten, about a little boy who was upset after a day at school. When his mother asked what had happened, he reluctantly showed her his spelling paper. "I got so many words wrong," he cried, looking at all the red marks. "But look at all these words you got right!" his mother comforted. "I am proud to be the mother of a child who can spell so many words!"

An awesome skill to use words at the right moment to energize the person in control, to shape the expectations of a group of people, to change one child's perception of himself.

The words teachers and directors use each day shape what will happen in their program for the children, for the parents, and for themselves. "Wow, what a beautiful day." "What else can go wrong?" "Now what does she want?" "I enjoy watching you draw; each time you work a little bit, I see you pause and think about what you are going to do next." "I'll never get this mess cleaned up."

If we think about words constructing the reality that we must live in, perhaps we will choose them more carefully, time them more wisely, and know when to hire a skill.

