

LEADERSHIP

1.9K SHARES

THE ONE WORD THAT'S UNDERMINING EVERYTHING ELSE YOU SAY

"IT ACTS LIKE A MENTAL ERASER AND IT OFTEN BURIES WHATEVER YOU'VE SAID BEFORE IT."

BY GWEN MORAN

Many of us pay a great deal of attention to being effective communicators. Still, one little word, firmly planted in the middle of many sentences, could be negating what we say and turning people off to our messages: But.

"It acts like a mental eraser and it often buries whatever you've said before it," says Colleyville, Texas communications consultant Dianna Booher, author of *What More Can I Say: Why Communication Fails and What to Do About It*. "It makes communication spiral down instead of spin up."

Karin Hurt, founder of Baltimore, Maryland leadership consulting firm Let's Grow Leaders relays the recent experience of one of her coaching clients. The woman was interviewing for a series of executive positions due to a corporate restructuring. One of the interviewers told her, "You're the most prepared of any candidate. You're extremely smart and qualified, but we're worried about your poise," Hurt says.

Despite the liberal praise that had been delivered before the "but," the woman was frustrated and convinced she wouldn't get the job. The interviewer threw a hand grenade into her self-confidence with one three-letter word. If she'd been more adept and truly wanted the woman as a potential hire, she might have put the criticism before the "but," and the praise after it, making it more memorable, she says.

WHAT YOU'RE REALLY SAYING

On UrbanDictionary.com, the top-rated definition for "but" is "to delay the inevitable," says Hurt. She believes that's a fair assessment. Hurt says that the pervasive use of the "compliment sandwich" to deliver criticism—say something positive, then deliver the bad news, then end on a positive note—has made us slightly tone deaf to how the contrarian contraction affects our communication.

The tiny b-word also indicates, "I don't agree with you." When you respond to someone's idea or statement by starting off with "but," you're essentially saying, "This is why you're wrong," Hurt says. That can make the communication instantly adversarial, she says.

FINDING A BETTER WAY TO SAY IT

A couple of tweaks to a "but" response can greatly improve communication, Hurt says. For example, let's say your team had decided on a direction for your new project and at your next meeting, someone pipes in with a concern. If you respond by saying, "But, I thought we were in agreement here," you're ignoring the concern and instantly putting the person on the defensive.

Hurt references the "yes, and" rule of improv for a better way of responding. She advises responding to the concern instead by replacing "but" with "and," which adds to the conversation and invites further discussion without negating what anyone has said. So, you might respond, "I hear that you're really concerned, and I'm a little confused because I thought we were all in agreement." The other person's point is acknowledged and you haven't made the exchange adversarial.

"If you never used 'but' again, you'd be just fine," she says. "It's a conjunction used to marry two completely separate ideas. Why do that?"

Correction: An earlier version of this story attributed the coaching client anecdote to Dianna Booher. It was relayed by Karin Hurt.