



Thinking Before You Speak Means Rarely Having to Say I'm Sorry

By Gay Alberts Ruby

At an office party, Deborah notices a co-worker she hasn't seen lately, and a woman she assumes is his wife. She greets them by saying, "How are you... and this must be your wife I've heard so much about." He replies, "I'm divorced now. This is my girlfriend."

Walking out of the office one afternoon, Jake says to Mark, "Wow, I'm really excited about the raise they announced today. I'll make \$2000 more this year." Mark replies, "I only got \$1200."

Etiquette expert Letitia Baldrige tells the story of "the mother of a friend of mine who found out that her unmarried daughter was pregnant when she overheard an executive colleague of her daughter's discussing it between the 107th and 48th floors of New York's World Trade Center."

In each of these true-life situations, the people involved didn't think before they spoke. Their insensitivity caused embarrassment and hurt feelings. To help you "think before you speak," two techniques I teach are:

1. Using neutrally phrased questions and comments
2. Applying the "two out of three" rule before speaking

Neutral phrases include "Let me think about what you've just said," "I can appreciate and respect your point of view," and "You caught me by surprise... I need some time."

While Deborah wanted to be friendly with her co-worker, she shouldn't have assumed the woman was his wife since she wasn't sure. It would have been safer to have used neutral phrases, such as "How are you? Hasn't the time flown by?"

Similarly, if Jake wasn't positive that Mark had received the same size raise he had, he also should have used neutral phrases, "I'm really excited about the raises that were announced. Weren't you surprised?"

The "two out of three" rule consists of rehearsing the comment you're thinking of saying, while asking these three questions: (1) Is it true? (2) Is it kind? (3) Is it necessary? After answering these questions, you only say the comment if you answer "yes" to two out of the three.

Before beginning the discussion on the elevator, the colleague should have asked herself those three questions. She would have realized that although it was TRUE that the woman was pregnant, because she was not married it might not have been KIND and therefore not NECESSARY to mention it.

I challenge *you* to "think before you speak"!



At the time this article was printed, Gay Alberts Ruby – The Communication Coach – worked with individuals and businesses on media relations and communication skills. Her business has since closed.