



Words and Phrases That Have Found a Home in 2020

Description

If one were to think about the words that have been heard most often this year, words like *Covid-19*, *coronavirus*, *quarantine*, *masks*, *voting*, *election*, and so forth would surely be at the top of the list. Common phrases might be “flatten the curve,” “stay at home,” “we’re all in this together,” and (of course) “new normal.” But since this is a leadership column, I want to cover a different category of words and phrases: those that seem to resonate with organizations and communities.

“Keep the throttle down.” In most of my talks I spend time on understanding change. Years ago, Dr. Regina Herzlinger, the first woman to chair Harvard Business School, invited me to Harvard to take part in a conference on what should make up a business school’s curriculum. We came up with the usual list of subjects, and some new ones based on changes with technology, etc. The one that resonated with me was the conclusion that in order to be most effective a leader must master change management. Since then I have studied and created various change management tools and techniques.

When I am talking with leaders, many share they have not taken a course on change management. And so they may not realize pushback is a common part of change. It is expected. If one is aware that pushback is natural and has the tools to address it, they can move to the desired outcome. However, I find most places do not have a process in place to move through the pushback.

When the pushback is at its height, it’s in what I call the turbulence phase of change. If one is not expecting it, this can be scary and startling. It can cause a project or initiative to stop moving forward. If one is aware that this is a natural phase of change, while progress may still be shaky the project or initiative can be moved through to the desired outcome.

I have always been a huge admirer of U.S. Air Force officer and test pilot Chuck Yeager, who just passed away on December 7 at the age of 97. He is known for breaking the sound barrier back in 1947. In presentations I often show a clip from the movie *The Right Stuff*. There is about a four-minute clip in which Sam Shepard plays Chuck Yeager. It shows how he kept the throttle down despite heavy turbulence, which eventually led to a sonic boom, and a smoother flight. My message is that when turbulence occurs it is important to keep the throttle down. I often get messages from people with the phrase “We are keeping the throttle down.”

“What you permit you promote.” This phrase, which I heard years ago, resonates with every group I have ever spoken with. It is often spoken in the context of leaders not acting in situations that call for action. If someone is not being appropriate and the leader doesn’t take action, the behavior will likely continue. Others may even adopt that “permitted” behavior.

Years ago, I was at a hospital and an employee asked me this question: “What do you do when the

organization talks respect but does not live it?" When asked for more information the employee shared that their yearly evaluation was several weeks late and the supervisor always had an excuse for not doing it. I thought it was an isolated case and an exception. So, I found the head of Human Resources and asked if there were any late evaluations. She replied, "Late, or *late late*? She then explained that if an evaluation was done within 90 days after its due date it was not counted as late for the leader. If the evaluation was done more than 90 days after its due date, then it was late. In other words, there were no consequence for a leader being late up to 90 days.

My message to the CEO was that he had lost lots of credibility. The decision was made to send a note to all staff, including the 23 percent who had late evaluations. It included an apology and a commitment to catch up with all evaluations over the next 60 days. Processes were put in place to make this happen, including consequences (up to firing) for leaders who had late evaluations.

Of course, this is only one example. *What you permit you promote* can fit many situations.

"Capital follows talent and talent follows place." More than ever, those businesses that create a great place to work and those communities that create great places to live are the winners. Great places to work and live also are connected. The days of living until retirement in a place that a person does not like due to a job they have there are disappearing. Likewise, staying in a job where one is miserable because they like the community is also happening less and less.

For decades when people said "economic development" they meant shovel ready land and large incentives for companies to locate in a city. That approach can still work in a few places and circumstances. Overall, however, it tends to not have the promised return on investment. Today the key "want" is talent to fill the jobs. And to attract people, especially younger people, a community must be a vibrant place to live.

This phrase helps communities invest locally in the businesses that are already there. Places means a place for people work and a place for people to live.

With places to live it is safety first. If people do not feel safe little else matters. Next, is opportunity for employment and a vibrant place with restaurants, retail, arts and recreation, and a diverse housing market.

Keep the throttle down is about understanding change and not backing off an action or project that will make the workplace or community better. The definition of citizenship is working to make the community and or nation better.

What you permit you promote works both ways. If you permit employees to implement ideas and solve issues it creates that tendency in the culture. If you permit poor teamwork, sloppy work, and so forth, that is what is what will increase.

Capital follows talent and talent follows place is all about people. I often suggest to city leaders they focus on talent more than land. Talent helps build those local businesses and attracts others to the area. And to attract talent the focus must be on creating great places to work and live.

This past year before Covid shut down much of my travel, I was giving the keynote at the yearly Chamber event in Elkins, West Virginia. I went to the location of my talk and was astounded by the set-up. It was exceptional. I then was introduced to a very talented young man—a young man that could live anywhere. I asked him why he chose to live in Elkins. He said he loved the bike trails. The point is creating and supporting those treasures each community has.

In the work arena it is the same. The Pensacola Blue Wahoos posted that they have an opening for someone in the media department. In a few weeks over 200 people applied, many of whom had experience in major league baseball. A big reason they applied was the fact that despite having no baseball season this year the Wahoos did not furlough employees. It was less about baseball and much more about place.

These are just three of some common phrases that I've heard a lot about this past year. It is interesting

to see what resonates with people. The words and phrases we are drawn to are powerful reflections of our values. It seems that in tough times leaders believe in continuing to push forward, keeping our standards high, and investing in our people. To me, that's great news for 2021 and the years ahead.

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