

ESCAPING VICTIM MUD—THE POWER OF YOUR WORDS

As a tool for rising out of the mud of victimhood, we can use an imaginary “ladder of powerful speaking.” On this ladder are six rungs running from bottom to top: *obligation*, *possibility*, *preference*, *passion*, *plan*, and *promise*. Each rung represents a certain type of speaking, from the least powerful (obligation) to the most powerful (promise).

At any point, we “stand” on a rung of the ladder of powerful speaking. That is, our speaking exists on one of these six levels. Moving “up” the ladder—speaking less about obligation and more about our promises—is a way to take responsibility and get more of what we want in life.

Listen for obligation

Obligation is the bottom rung of the ladder. When people say the following phrases, they’re probably speaking out of obligation: *I should, I have to, I must, someone better, they made me, someone should, I had to, I couldn’t help it, I ought to*. On this rung there’s little freedom or opportunity to create the future. People who speak this way often perceive themselves as victims at the mercy of their circumstances.

Speak about possibility

The next step up the ladder of powerful speaking is *possibility*. When you use phrases such as *I might, I’ll consider, I could, maybe I will, or I hope*, you make a small but significant step out of the mud of obligation.

Opening up possibilities is far more energizing and exciting than feeling obligated. Obligation puts other people or external circumstances in charge of our lives.

Possibility, like all the rungs above it, puts you back in charge. When you speak at this level, you create an opening for new goals and new results in your life.

While possibility is more freeing than obligation, some cautions are appropriate. First, we can be careful not to fill up our speaking—and therefore our lives—only with possibilities. A person who is always talking about what he *might* accomplish some day may never get around to actually *doing* anything.

The second caution concerns hope. Many wonderful and inspiring stories revolve around people’s hopes and dreams. However, when hope takes the place of planning, promising, or taking action, it becomes a deceptive, seductive narcotic.

Speak your preference

I prefer to and *I want to* are common expressions at the next level of powerful speaking—*preference*. Often it makes sense to move from declaring a goal as possible to declaring a clear preference for doing it.

Again, we can be cautious about overusing this rung of the ladder. People might constantly say that they prefer to do something but never get around to doing it.

Speak your passion

The next rung of the ladder, *passion*, is about energy. At this level, your words have more punch and your speaking is more animated. When people hear passion in your voice, they realize that you’re enthusiastic about a goal you’ve created. *I’d love to, I’m excited about, and I can’t wait to* are phrases that signal passion. When you are more passionate about a goal, you’re more likely to take action to achieve it.

There is a catch. Enthusiasm is no substitute for action. Not much is likely to happen until we translate our energy into plans and promises, the next rungs on the ladder.

Speak your plan

You can bring your passion one step closer to reality by speaking about a *plan*. A plan, especially if it is written down, helps ensure that you'll back up your passions with action. A plan gives purpose and direction to your passions. Effective plans lay out the specific steps you'll take to achieve a goal.

Speak your promise

To reach the top of the ladder, you can make a *promise*. When you are absolutely committed to a goal, you can say: *I will, I do, I promise to achieve this*. Promises are plans backed by iron-clad commitment.

When it comes to promising, most of us do not even come close to our potentials. We are capable of far more than we've ever imagined. With promises we can free ourselves of the artificial barriers we've used to limit our participation in the world. One path to a rich, rewarding life is to make promises that stretch us to meet our potentials.

Choose your rung

If you look to your daily experience, you'll find examples of the ladder of powerful speaking.

Imagine going in to a bank to borrow money and saying, "Well, I know I probably *should* repay this loan." Your banker's going to get nervous. If you say, "Well, I *might* repay you," your banker will still get nervous. And if you say, "I *prefer* to repay the loan," or "I really *want* to repay it," you're probably still not going to get that loan. What the banker wants is a plan and a promise that you will repay the loan.

Or try using the language of obligation in your marriage. "Well, I know I really *should* be faithful" is not the language of romantic commitment. Neither is "I *ought* to be faithful," "I *might* be faithful," "I'd *like* to be faithful," or even "I really *want* to be faithful." None of that language brings much confidence in a marriage vow. Marriage is about promise and commitment: "I *will* be faithful."

Whenever we speak, we have the option of moving up the ladder of powerful speaking all the way to promising. At the same time, it's perfectly OK *not* to move up the ladder. It would be foolish to promise everything. As we listen to ourselves speak, we can pay attention to which rung of the ladder we're "standing" on. We can then move up the ladder for the purpose we choose, at the time we choose.

