



TTI SUCCESS INSIGHTS®

Words that **DON'T WORK**

A Pilot Study Examining Verbal Barriers

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Introduction

Communication is at the core of all that we do as human beings. While verbal interaction may seem to come naturally, it is a rich and complex process. Communication requires us to be aware of and tuned into thousands of data points from nonverbal cues to gestures, and even — subtle verbal cues.

While most people can relate to being repelled by various topics of discussion — are there certain words that stop communication from occurring? Words that, when used, cause our minds to close, our mouths to shut and our brains to mentally pack up shop?

New findings from a pilot study conducted by Target Training International's Center for Applied Cognitive Research suggests the way we communicate with one another and the words we choose are vitally important. In fact, what seems to be critical is avoiding the wrong words: words that seem to fit the discussion from our point of view, may actually result in negative reactions when interpreted by others.

Every person has a set of words, based on their dominant behavioral style, that when heard may evoke a precognitive negative reaction in the brain. Immediately upon hearing that word and before a person can even process their thoughts, their brain has initiated a stress reaction and possible avoidance.

When a word that doesn't work is uttered, it can shut down communication before it's started, create unnecessary barriers and steadily erode otherwise functional relationships.



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We originally began studying and compiling these sets of evocative words three decades ago as part of our research into behavioral styles, which is largely based on the research of William Moulton Marston. Identifying behavioral styles was only one aspect of our work. Helping individuals both appreciate and communicate with people who shared their style and those who have a different style has always been a critical focus of our work. Success in communicating between the styles is crucial for building relationships, forming critical alliances and establishing positive rapport.

Based on our early research of each style, we identified sets of words that would spur negative reactions in people of different behavioral styles. These words were included in our assessment reports and support materials as words best avoided for each type. Since then, the words have been featured in our Success Insights® wheels and taught as best practices for communicating clearly and effectively.

As an extension of our neurological validation research, we decided to examine our list of behavioral words and see if we could correlate brain responses. Our original intent was to examine words that do work, but the data showed words that don't work evoked even stronger responses. Through our research, we observed negative responses to word sets in each of the four primary behavioral styles of Dominance, Influence, Steadiness and Compliance (DISC).

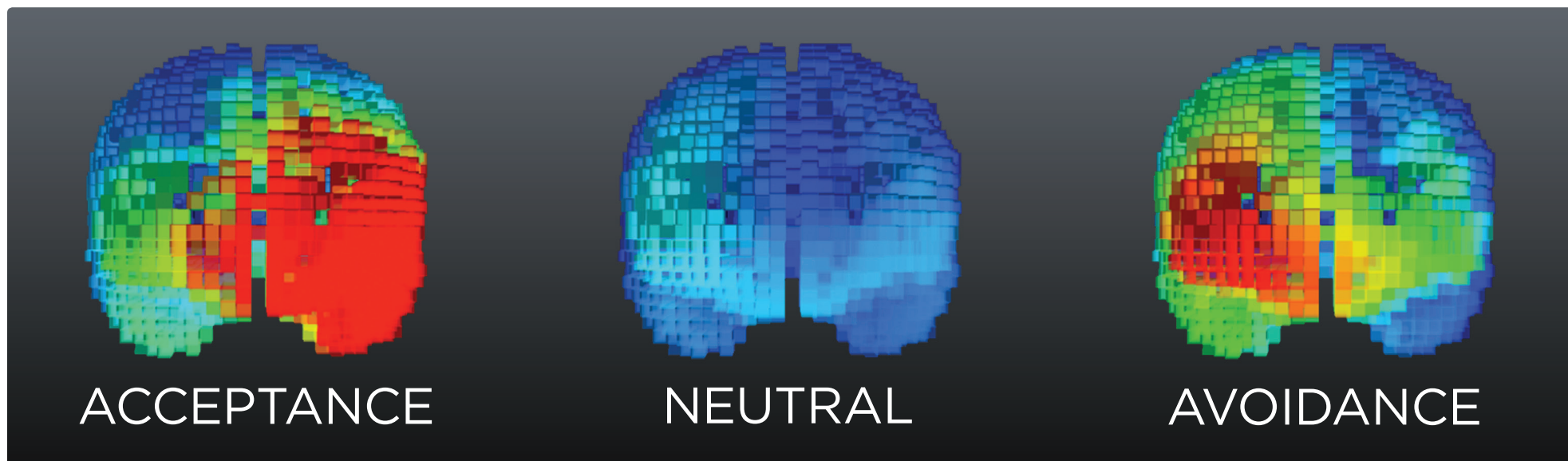
DISC Behavioral Styles Defined

D - Dominance	<i>Dominance really speaks to how we respond to problems or challenges.</i>
I - Influence	<i>Influence refers to how we influence and relate to people and contacts.</i>
S - Steadiness	<i>Steadiness is how you respond to pace and consistency.</i>
C - Compliance	<i>Compliance is how we respond to procedures and constraints.</i>

Methodology

Study participants included individuals from each DISC primary behavioral style. Participants underwent an EEG brain scan in our Center for Applied Cognitive Research lab, while observing key behavioral terms. Prior to the initiation of the EEG scan, the subjects' primary behavioral style was noted. During the brain scan, each subject was exposed to words previously established as words that elicit a negative reaction in a person of a certain primary style.

Observations of gamma brain activity in the frontal cortex were classified as depicting acceptance, avoidance, or a neutral symmetry. Gamma is the primary focus of our measurements as it provides an immediate emotional response to a stimulus, even before a conscious thought has formed.



The brain images pictured above are of a person's brain facing you. The red indicates an emotional response to the stimulus presented.

ACCEPTANCE is observed by an increase in gamma activity in the left frontal lobe, as opposed to the right lobe. Thus indicating how a subject feels about the stimuli (in this case, a word or short phrase) they are observing.

NEUTRAL symmetry refers to gamma activity that is more balanced between the lobes, thus not depicting any preference toward the word or phrase.

AVOIDANCE is observed by an increase in gamma activation in the right frontal lobe, as opposed to the left.

In summary, where avoidance to a word was observed, there was a greater amount of gamma activation in the right prefrontal lobe as opposed to the left (see reference list for detailed protocol).

Findings

Sample words and phrases that don't work by behavioral style:

D	I
"Frequent Interruptions"	"The Same for Everyone"
"Follow Directions"	"Sophisticated"
"In My Opinion"	"Requires Study"
S	C
"Substantial Change"	"Clever"
"Innovative"	"Educated Guess"
"Play to win"	"Experimental"

Analyzing the data through the lens of DISC, it was observed that those with primary styles of Dominance and Compliance demonstrated significantly more avoidance than those with the Influence and Steadiness behavioral styles.

Subjects with a primary **DOMINANCE** style had the most favorable responses to their own terms, but were more critical than all other styles on all other words. Dominance behavioral style also had the most intense bursts of activation and avoidance.

Subjects with an **INFLUENCE** behavioral style had the most varied and inconsistent responses. Overall, they were the most forgiving by not having many strong negative reactions.

Subjects with a **STEADINESS** behavioral style demonstrated the least amount of avoidance and very little change in activation. Overall, they were most critical of some Steadiness words and some Dominance words.

Subjects with a **COMPLIANCE** behavioral style had the most avoidance of all groups, even to their own descriptive terms.



Analysis

The words we select matter more to effective communication than previously understood.

Certain words can cause a sudden negative response in conversation, but work at a neurological level to alter brain patterns and obstruct communication. Given the intensity and duration of these reactions, these trigger words have the potential to build or break a relationship. Trigger words can set the tone for the conversation and for the outcome of conversations.

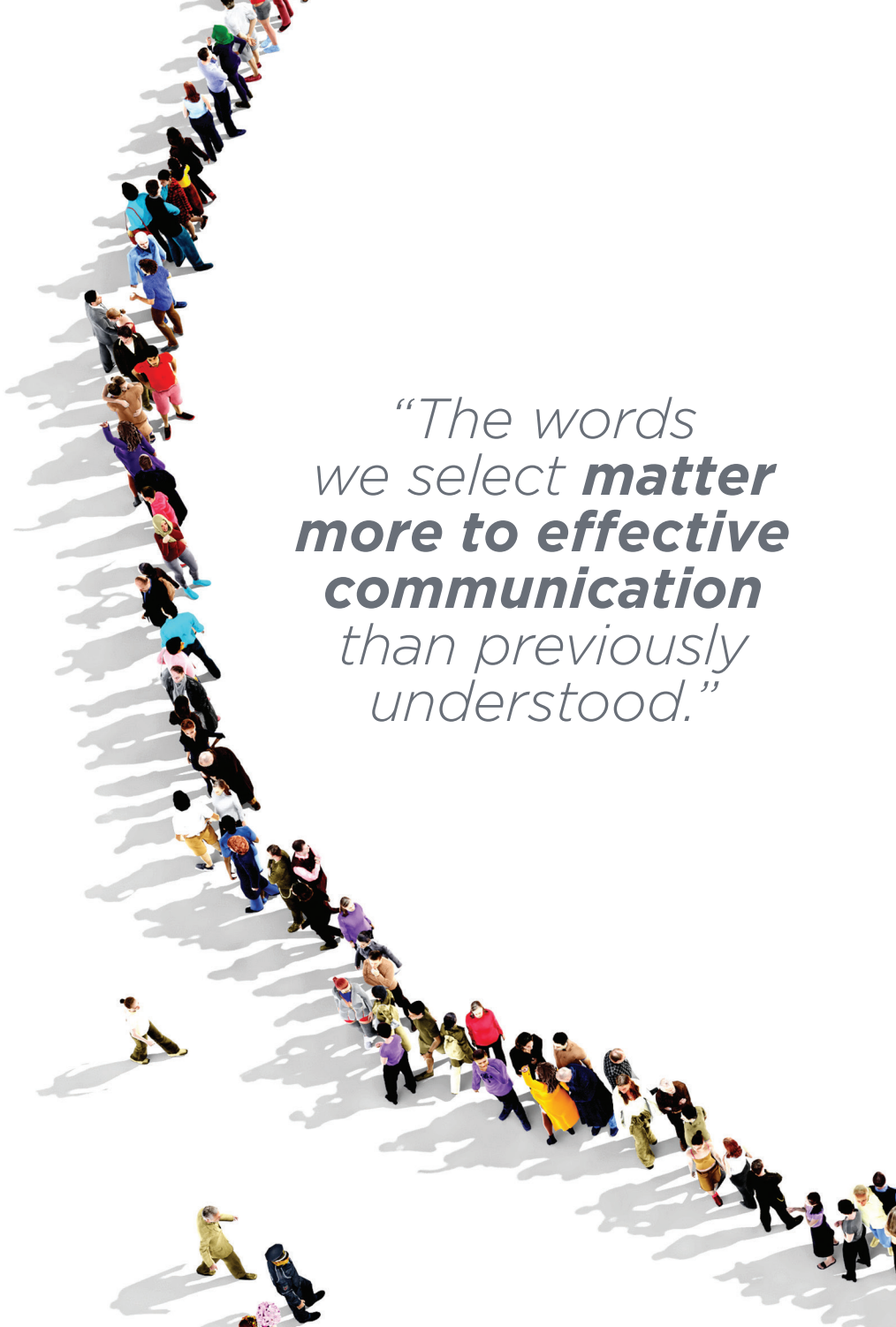
Given the intensity and speed the brain reacts to these words, conversations may never move past the initial reactions. **First impressions become lasting impressions.** Progress can never be made in communication nor common ground established if trigger words are used repeatedly in conversations.

Since those with a primary Compliance style reacted most negatively to the greatest number of words, they may indeed be the most difficult style to persuade or connect with. Communicating with a C style will require careful attention to the words you use to build connection.

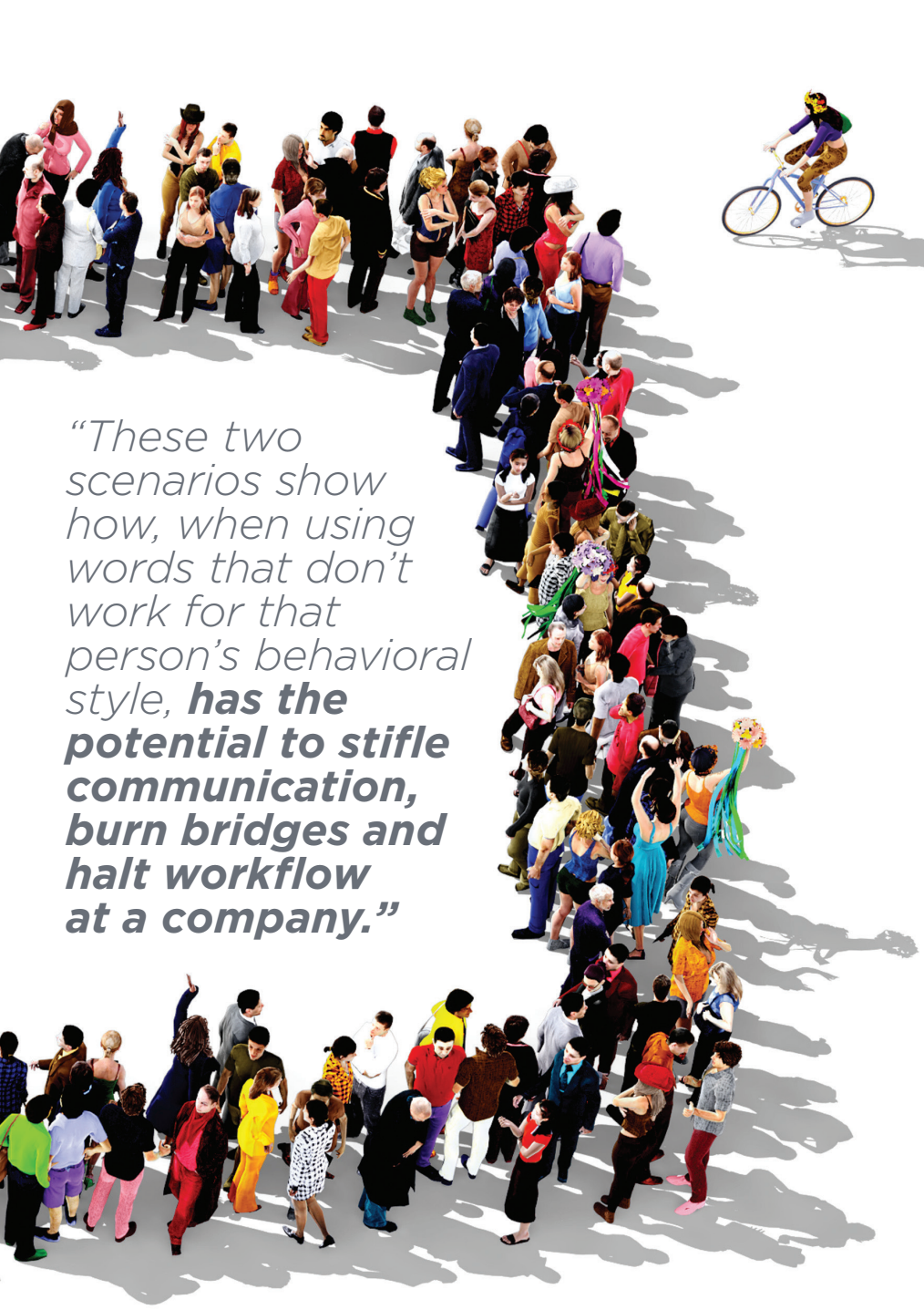
In addition, those with a primary Dominance style reacted most intensely, and they may be most easily upset and most difficult to negotiate with — once a trigger word has been used. Communicating with a D style therefore requires a tendency to use their own words and Influencing words to keep from spurring negative reactions.

In cases when both a Dominance style and a Compliance style are hearing and using trigger words with one another, communication will provide exceedingly difficult to navigate and may create a communication gridlock or repeated dysfunction marked by hostile feelings and avoidance.

From a neurological perspective, when a trigger word is used, the brain releases cortisol, which sends us into a stress reaction, limiting higher level cognitive abilities and increasing the desire to fight or flee.



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How To Use Words That Don't Work

Knowing what you know now about words that don't work, apply it to the following scenarios:

SCENARIO 1: A high D, John, walks into a room promptly at the start of the meeting. He is less aware of the predominant behavior style in the room — high Cs — and more concerned about getting answers about new financials that point to a potentially troubling downturn. John knows he's speaking to a room full of financial experts (high Cs), so he knows they have the insight and expertise to tell him how to fix the issue. John starts the meeting with pointing to a data set and overgeneralizing the complex graphs. "Why is our company on the verge of a downturn in this preliminary data?" John asks. The room is silent for a moment and then one of the high Cs speaks up. "We don't have nearly enough data to conclude that we're facing a downturn, let alone give you an answer as to why" she says. John says, "I don't care. Give me an educated guess. I need to know now." John was shocked by more silence and a week later, he still didn't have the answer he was seeking.

SCENARIO 2: An energetic high I, Debbie, approaches a quiet high S, Sam, for help kicking off a brand new project. Debbie knows the project is a game changer for her organization and one that will involve all teams to collaborate. She says to Sam, "I'm so excited to initiate this project. Will you help me? Together, we can show the boss how innovative our minds are and how we can initiate substantial change." Debbie is shocked when Sam doesn't say yes; rather he needs time to think it over. A day later, Sam approaches Debbie and says he doesn't want to help her.

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So how best can we navigate these triggers to improve communication and, thus, relationships using the results of this pilot study as a guide?

Here are four ways to use the findings from our pilot study on Words That Don't Work in your own organization:

- 1. First, identify and understand your own primary DISC style and the trigger words associated with your style, as well as the three other styles.** While it may be difficult to find common ground, especially between two varying behavioral styles that are not likely to see eye-to-eye, use neutral words instead.
- 2. Second, prior to engaging in important discussions, take time to consider the style of the person or people with whom you are engaging.** Actively work to remove words from your speech that will challenge or disrupt the communication process. If in a situation where multiple behavioral styles are in the room, come up with ground rules to ensure each style is comfortable with the dialogue and direction. If a group leader or a facilitator is guiding the meeting, ensure that person is using neutral words.
- 3. Employing emotional intelligence (EQ) will help to identify when words are being intentionally used to polarize.** With emotional intelligence as your guide and an awareness of these strong words, action can be taken to correct the situation — including a direct conversation with the individual abusing their knowledge of words that don't work.
- 4. Another factor to consider with words that don't work: an individual's driving forces can heighten or lessen reactions when they are presented with a word that doesn't work for their behavioral style.** For example, a high S typically has an aversion to the phrase “play to win”; however, if that high S has a strong commanding driver (one driving force of 12 Driving Forces™ that indicates a person is driven by status, recognition and control over personal freedom), he or she wouldn't have a negative reaction the same way as a strong collaborative driver (a person driven by playing a supporting role with little need for individual recognition, as defined in 12 Driving Forces).

Bottom Line

Solid self-awareness, coupled with an awareness of those around you, are the foundation for excellent communication that moves dialogue. When these factors aren't considered, relationships are at stake. By being mindful of words that don't work barriers, you can bridge communication gaps instead of deepening them.

METHODOLOGY REFERENCE LIST

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