



# DISEMPOWERMENT

## Some Keys to Eliminating Killer Phrases

Created by Daniel Hunter '01 • Date: March 22, 2001 • E-mail: hyrax@hyrax.ArsDigita.org

First some thoughts on empowerment and killer phrases:

You know that no idea is any good until someone does something with it or to it. Someone has to accept it, adopt it, run with it, put it into action. That someone, of course, is often someone other than you. Implementing great ideas requires a team effort.

So you must tell somebody about your idea. And if you've ever tried to bring up new ideas to other people, you know that although your idea could be met with thunderous applause, it may just as easily elicit derisive laughter, or perhaps a shrug.

...If the idea turns out to be unworkable, then you want failure. You want the idea to fail – fast. If it doesn't fail fast, count on it eating up precious time and resources. But assuming your idea is a good one, what is it out there that just might make it fail anyway and shoot it down before it has the slightest chance to spread its wings? In fact, what do you *know* will happen to your great idea as soon as you suggest it to [your fellow student leaders or the administration]? Somebody, somewhere, at some time, will come up, gun loaded, aim and say...

- “It's not in the budget.”
- “We don't do it that way.”
- “We've tried that before.”

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Somebody shoots down your great idea with *Killers Phrases*. And Killer Phrases might do in your great idea, before it even gets on track.

### Some Typical Killer Phrases:

- ❖ We tried that before.
- ❖ We haven't got the people.
- ❖ Have you talked to...
- ❖ That's not my decision.
- ❖ Are you familiar with the Quaker/Earlham policy on...
- ❖ You can't be adversarial and we/they.
- ❖ We don't have the time.
- ❖ Get a committee to look into that.
- ❖ I'll get back to you.
- ❖ ...silence...
- ❖ ...condescending grin...
- ❖ You need to understand our history.

— *What a Great Idea!: Keys Steps Creative People Take*, by Charles “Chic” Thompson, page 23-24.

...[E]ssential changes will require a lot of individuals taking action on many levels; but to do so requires a belief that you as an individual, and the individuals around you, can make a difference. We see... that ‘people power’ grows from a base of individual empowerment.

We may have to face this obstacle of powerlessness, in many guises, over and over again. We may say “But what can I do? I haven't got what it takes.” “I am not a real... (activist, environmentalist, political person, feminist, peace worker etc.)” As Kevin McVeigh, the former US Interhelp Coordinator, points out: ‘The denial of power is as endemic to our culture as the denial of feelings.’

It is the idea of powerlessness which is the obstacle, rather than actual powerlessness. When we find ways to disperse or overcome this belief in powerlessness... we can act in creative and life-enhancing ways.

– *In the Tiger's Mouth: An Empowerment Guide to Social Action*, by Katrina Shields, page 12-13.

Types of power:	“The denial of power is as endemic to our culture as the denial of feelings.”	“Nobody makes a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could do only a little.” – Edmund Burke, 18 <sup>th</sup> century statesman	“It is individuals who change societies, who give birth to ideas, who by <u>standing out</u> against the tides of opinion, change them.” – Doris Lessing
• Power-Over			
• Power-Within	– Kevin McVeigh		
• Power-With others			

As students, we can disable our own power by refusing to make use of our internal power and power with other people. While it is true that we do not have position power, authority or as much institutional experience (i.e. institutional history), we do have a massive amount of power. If we so choose, we can assert our power often (but not always) with fewer consequences than those who are more institutionally affiliated (i.e. faculty/staff).

Another important aspect is that students need not always engage and think in adversarial dynamics. Beyond direct action techniques, we can book up meetings with committees or our high officials and talk with them. We can tell them what we want. We can keep asking questions until we find the information we are looking for or help them draft the documents we would like to see. Or we can find out their constraints and help alleviate them. Remain flexible. If one thing does not work do not claim powerlessness, just assume we have not found the right venue yet. One nonviolence trainer describes nonviolence as “nothing but sustained creativity.” Powerfulness is creative and dynamic. It involves asserting our voices over others (emphasizing power-from within) and, at other times, it may involve a dramatic cooperative attitude wherein we co-create the vision we desire with the stakeholders and decision-makers.

Here are common killer phrases we use to disable ourselves as activists.

❖ *We don't have the money.*

I have heard this killer phrase especially among student organizations when trying to pull off some specific educational event. If one is creative, we can *make* it happen. For example, a dynamic, effective organization called the Student Direct Action Coalition (SDAC) operated for years while refusing SOC funding. Instead, it networked all its events or did them without money. Professors, who also know a lot, will speak for free; or one can find resources within students – many of whom make excellent trainers or musicians, etc. Once SDAC did receive funding, its conversations shifted from “what do we want to do” to “what will we do with our money.” Money exists all over Earlham: President’s discretionary, other organizations, SOC, Student Development offices, department money, fundraising or doing events that do not cost.

❖ *We are being silenced.*

It is probably true you do not feel heard. However, the fact is that if you *want* to be heard you have to be willing to speak up. The reality of consequences does exist for speaking up. However, what is the purpose of asserting your silence? Without diagnostic information, it is not useful to others but is reveling in one’s powerlessness. It is your choice to stay silent or choose to speak out and deal with what comes after that.

❖ *We are not being heard.*

If you are not being heard, it is your choice if you continue to speak or not. A powerful stance would be one that would continue to search for ways to be heard – sometimes increasing one’s tactic to a higher level of direct action (which includes keeping lines of communication open) or increasing efforts at trying to communicate with other people (or both).

In some cases, I have heard students say the administration is not hearing them. In some cases, they have never spoken to the administration! In others, they only spoke once to administrators and did not feel heard. To make powerful choices we must continue and re-continue to assert our voices. Set up an appointment and write a thoughtful memo. Initiate contact so that you can begin to see where they are coming from and why they have not immediately come to change things to your desire. They have numerous things to balance. As you gain an understanding of these, you can help brainstorm ways to solve the balance.

❖ *The [committee, faculty, administrators, system, etc] won't give us information.*

Again, we have a choice about our level of engagement. If a convener of a committee does not reply to our e-mail, send a voice mail. If they do not respond to the voice mail, catch them in their office. Be aggressive. One tactic that has worked with high success has been between a friend and me. I would go in with a long list of demands. I would be highly assertive and generally receive very little. Then my friend, who most people did not connect with me, would go in and suavely ask for a certain piece of information. Most of the time he got it.

Another tactic that has been used has been if they do not have the information, I would research the information and create the document. 9 out of 10 times it would be beneficial for students *and* the people I was trying to get information from. It is useful to also include *how* one created the document and found the information. This is another emphasis of power-within.

❖ *The [committee, faculty, administrators, system, etc] won't do what we're asking them to do.*

A powerful stance might recognize this reality and then add that one has a choice to trust the people making the decision, find out their constraints, or increase the level of conflict. Nonviolent theory and conflict resolution is superb in analyzing these situations. If “they” won’t do something, find a way to assert it in a stronger way, figure out what the strains are that hold the decision from being made – or just make it happen!

One example of what I call *dilemma demonstrations* occurred several years ago. Shell, the gas company, is involved in Nigeria and having seriously negative effects on the local people and the environment. Earlham indirectly supports the Shell company by having gasoline cards in the Earlham vans and cars. After pressuring people to change the policy for a while with little response, students simply cut up the gas cards. A valid punishment of cleaning out the vans for several hours was inflicted because the cutting of Shell cards had consequences for housekeepers who, among other things, felt very violated by the act. As Mahatma Gandhi suggested in his acts of civil disobedience, we should readily accept the consequence. And the Shell gas cards were removed from cars.

Another example of “just making it happen” involves a more cooperative approach (afterall, it is those in positional power that ultimately have to keep many of these programs going). Regarding a specific initiative, I brought up the idea to Jeff Rickey. After presenting the idea briefly, he changed the subject for a long time. Eventually I brought the idea back to the conversation and gave him some space to play around with the idea. Suddenly he found some ways where it could be extremely positive for him in his position. We then began brainstorming how we could make it work where we both we get the value we were looking for along we how we could sell the ideas to others. In addition to the conversation, I did extra research for him (remember, he tends to be very busy) and drafted some talking points for him.

## **POWERFUL REFLECTIONS**

Because we do not immediately see what we want, we do not need to fall into feelings of powerlessness and claiming that we were generically stopped by the administration. Instead, we need to stay engaged and expect change to be difficult to initiate.

Even though it is difficult, we should not always remain in a confrontational mode. Understanding other’s constraints and consequences is part of our power with others. As we strategize, let’s be able to strategize from numerous positions. We need to understand and use how social change happens in institutions.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.earlham.edu/~snydemo/political.htm> and [http://www.earlham.edu/~snydemo/change\\_cheat\\_sheets.htm](http://www.earlham.edu/~snydemo/change_cheat_sheets.htm).