

The Editor's Page

A friend and I got into a fascinating conversation today about problems in communicating. His point was, and I had to agree with him, that certain words are so stereotyped that you have to be careful about using them or you might convey an unintended meaning. The impact of one's past experience and culture on the use of a specific word and its stereotyped meanings is evident. Take the word "radical." Webster defines it as "of, relating to, or proceeding from a root; of or relating to the origin; marked by a considerable departure from the usual or traditional."

Depending on your orientation, this word could trigger a positive or negative reaction. If you stuck to the first two definitions, you might view it as looking at the roots or causes of a specific situation and problem, and view it positively. However, its popular use in today's society as a disruptive individual in political groups proposing extreme changes tends to stereotype it and set off a negative reaction in some people. After all, most of us resist change. You might suggest that an innovative, creative person is likely to regard it with favor, but we can't generalize like that, either.

For Extension professionals and adult educators, all of this means knowing your audience well, choosing words carefully to convey your message. Or, you may have "turned off" the very group you want to reach before you ever get to them!

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