

## ***Words Create Worlds®***

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Last week, I had the opportunity to attend a free webinar. While I found the webinar helpful, and the presenter engaging, there was one word that the presenter used that did not resonate well with me. This particular word still bothers me even after having a week to reflect on it. As an employee, a graduate student in a management program, a labor union activist and later as a Human Resources Manager, I always found this word troublesome. The word I am referring to is “subordinate”. As an HR manager and union leader, I often encountered the word in contract negotiations, company handbooks, professional development articles, renowned publications, and conversations with executive leadership.

For the past several years I have had the opportunity to teach a 4-day Appreciative Inquiry Facilitator Training® (AIFT), offered by the Center for Appreciative Inquiry. Over the course of that time, I have learned how powerful language is. Language “can be inclusive, exclusive, demeaning, respectful, hostile, rewarding, judging, caring and oppositional. It can incite and unite.” As a result I am mindful of the words I use in my daily life – including electronically (e.g. email, text message, tweets), which can be easily overlooked.

It is because of my daily conscious effort to use only appreciative language that I believe I was caught off guard when I had heard the webinar presenter use the word “subordinate”. Up until that point, I had not heard the word “subordinate” being used in conversation for quite some time – let alone being used in an educational setting. Am I alone in this assumption? When you hear the word “subordinate”, what words, images and feelings come to your mind?

To me, for example, variations of the word ‘subordinate’ - such as insubordination - were a cause for discipline or termination of employment. I realize that is how I perceive that word.

According to Dictionary.com, the word subordinate means:

### ***sub-or-di-nate/sə'bōrdn-it/***

Adjective: Lower in rank or position: "his subordinate officers".

Noun: A person under the authority or control of another within an organization.

Verb: Treat or regard as of lesser importance than something else.

Synonyms: *adjective.* dependent - inferior - subaltern - dependant - subject

*noun.* inferior - subaltern

*verb.* subject - subdue - subjugate

Before you cringe, I know the internet is not always the best source for information. The question I would like to post to you is, when working in a 21<sup>st</sup> organization, is the word ‘subordinate’ still appropriate? If so, when and why?