

THE LAST WORD

I'll clean up my language: I swear...

by Frank Adoranti

Legal Director, Ingram Micro, Australia & New Zealand.



Today, what we euphemistically refer to as the ‘f-word’, is becoming a commonplace utterance in the corporate workplace and in many people’s ordinary speech. Sometimes, it is called ‘the four letter word’ – although, this can often lead to confusion, especially where there might be a different (and perhaps equally offensive) meaning attached to a four letter word such as ‘work’ or ‘love’.

At many workplaces, sprinkling ordinary conversation with such spicy words is tolerated as shop talk. Vulgarity used to be the exclusive province of the foundry or dockyard, whereas it is now a prolific practice in white collar circles. In the senior executive ranks, the frequent use of the f-word is often brandished as a sign of machismo and dynamism.

Consider Henry, a senior executive of a medium sized service company.

At work, Henry uses foul and abusive language as a matter of course when dealing with colleagues and subordinates. When this bespectacled church-going family man mixes it with the boys from the executive suite, every second word emanating from him begins with an ‘f’ and ends in ‘uck’ – and that word isn’t ‘firetruck’.

However, when Henry’s PA complains about his language, Henry’s reaction ranges from initial shock: “Do I really speak

that way?” to genuine surprise that she is offended.

“Do you ever speak that way in front of your wife?” she asks him.

Henry’s language is far more moderate at home. When he is with his wife, he can often be heard fawning: “yes dear”, “of course sunshine”, “anything you want petal”.

Everyday, as he leaves home, Henry hugs his children and tenderly pecks his wife on the cheek. But by the time he gets to his car, he has begun to quiver. Five metres from his house the car comes to a grinding halt. The traffic is banked for three kilometres, making this normally 15 minute trip a three quarters of an hour-long standoff. Henry’s blood pressure begins to rise. Occupants of cars around him start to blow their horns. Henry’s car is no longer just a means of transport, it is a mobile battering ram. His mission: to cause maximum mayhem on the road.

As he carves up the other traffic on his way to work, he completes his routine “motivational” phone calls chewing-out each of his subordinates.

While parking his car at the company parking lot, his complexion begins to change colour. By the time he bursts into his office and surveys the piles of reports and sees his appointment calendar for the day, his shirt begins to tear, steam

pours from his ears and his transformation into a terrorist-in-a-suit is complete: the foul language naturally spews forth.

But is Henry really two different people: his 'normal' persona, known and loved by his family, and the 'work' persona, renown for terrorising employees and colleagues alike?

This transformation from ordinary person to abusive executive seems to happen unconsciously, once Henry sets foot outside his house. How does such a metamorphosis occur without us even being aware? Is it a defence mechanism to the superhuman stresses of work in the 21st century? Do these additional pressures entitle us to snap and lose all control under the right kind of provocation?

For some, it helps to justify such behaviour by giving it a new-sounding name – for example, road rage, office rage, going-to-annihilate-someone-`cos-the-phone-is-ringing rage.

Today the f-word is often used to emphasise or underscore a particular point or feeling. We have become conditioned to hearing it often, and in so many different ways. It's frequently used in movies like *The Insider* or *Wall Street* and every action film ever made from *Die Hard* to *The Terminator*.

As the lyrics of Cole Porter song *Anything Goes*, from the 1934 musical of the same name, says:

“Good authors, too, who once knew better words

Now only use four-letter words

Writing prose

Anything goes”

Given that it can almost now be read or heard at every school and on every street corner, is it still offensive? Is the 'f-word' the new 'bloody'? Remembering that less than thirty years ago, the utterer of the word 'bloody' risked a parent's retribution of the forced mouthwash, involving copious quantities of Palmolive. Nowadays, the word is standard issue for many from prime ministers to princes.

But doesn't the interpretation of what is offensive really depend upon the perception of the listener?

And what about freedom of speech? Can't I say whatever I want? Isn't it a free country?

Perhaps.

In the litigation capital of the world, a Californian court ruled that crude language and sex talk by writers of the television show *'Friends'*, did not of itself constitute sexual harassment of an assistant working for them. This was because such talk was not aimed or directed at the assistant or anyone else specifically. One of the judges in that case pronounced that Californian state law did not “outlaw sexually coarse and vulgar language or conduct that merely offends”.

Then there is the legendary story of the person, charged with using offensive language to a police officer. The charge

was dismissed, in very short order, once the magistrate reviewed the police fact sheet, where the offender's words to the arresting officer were recorded as being: “No, I will not **** off!”

In the USA, free speech is actually a Constitutional right, guaranteed by the First Amendment. There's no such right for Australians, since there is no express provision in our Constitution guaranteeing freedom of speech or expression. The laws we do have serve only to curtail such perceived freedoms, rather than preserving or enshrining them. Witness our laws dealing with terrorism, sedition, vilification, classification of films & publications and defamation. This is before we even consider the mooted proposals regarding mandatory filtering and blocking by internet service providers.

In the 19th century, English physician Thomas Bowdler, published an expurgated edition of Shakespeare's works, suitable for women and children. The criticism generated by his exercise subsequently gave rise to the term 'Bowdlerise', as a reference to unwarranted and heavy-handed censorship. Is it, therefore, necessary to begin Bowdlerising everything we read or hear? Do we need to protect the more sensitive souls from the experienced exponents of colourful language?

Some claim that one way our workplaces could instantly become more pleasant places, would be if we were to all pause for reflection, prior to embarking on that next tirade of decibel-enriched F-words.

On the other hand, there will always be those for whom only the f-word will do...

LAST WORD

Experience is that marvellous thing that enables you to recognise a mistake when you make it again.

FRANKLIN P. JONES
(1853 – 1935)

