

Reclaiming the missing positive

Last month, retired U.S. soccer champion Abby Wambach visited Bristol Myers Squibb for our People Week keynote event. She told us that her speaking career began shortly after she retired, when she was asked to give a commencement speech at Barnard College.

She then gave all of us some homework: go write your own commencement speech, even if you'll never give it. Why? Because writing a commencement speech will crystallize for you what you believe, what you know, and how you came to believe and know those things.

I've written a few things on this blog that could loosely qualify as a commencement speech (see [here](#) and [here](#)). So instead of another, I wanted to riff on an idea I recently heard at my daughter's high school commencement – with a lesson on leadership and a call to action at the end.

Cam Lynch spoke at the Wellesley High School graduation (link to his speech [here](#), local media coverage [here](#)). He challenged his fellow graduating seniors to “Be Chalant.” The core message: kids try to be too cool, nonchalant. He asked the audience matter-of-factly, “Why?” He highlighted Ted Lasso as a role model and leader – a character whose personality is the opposite of “nonchalant.” With his folksy, “Aw, shucks” Midwestern demeanor, Ted Lasso is the epitome of being chalant – except, as Cam pointed out, chalant isn't actually a word. But in his speech, he made it one.

"Being chalant means you actually care. You show up when it counts. You say what you were thinking instead of deciding it's weird. You cheer too loudly, wave back with genuine enthusiasm, and call just because you want to check in."

As a leader, this really resonated with me. Acting too cool is, well, not cool. It doesn't inspire, and it doesn't make people feel supported. Being a true leader means caring deeply about your teams – about motivating them to be their very best. Whether it's Ted Lasso or the head of a Research organization, there is value in being chalant.

Thank you, Cam, for this inspiring message!

What Are Orphaned Negatives?

The term nonchalant is what is called an “[unpaired word](#).” Turns out, there are a lot of them: inept, unruly, disheveled, disgruntled, overwhelmed, uncouth.

Do you notice a pattern?

These unpaired words, unfortunately, have a negative connotation. Somewhere in the evolution of the English language, the antonym – the positive version of the word – was lost. They are “[orphaned negatives](#).”

In the spirit of Abby Wambach's call to action, I'm going to use Cam's graduation speech as a jumping-off point to share my own spin on how we should "reclaim the missing positive," in leadership and in life.

Leadership Lesson: Reclaim the Missing Positive

Like me, you might wonder why some of these positive words disappeared. Some existed historically but fell out of use (e.g., "ruly," "kempt" were real words). Some negative prefixes (un-, dis-, in-) were borrowed from Latin/French and the root never stood alone in English.

More interesting, however, are the orphaned negatives that may reflect a deeper pattern: language reflects culture. When we stop using a word, it may signal we've stopped valuing the concept. What does it say about us that we kept "ruthless" but dropped "ruthful" –which means "to lead our lives with compassion and mercy."

Ruthless leaders claim others' good ideas as their own; ruthless leaders encourage a burned-out team to take time off and prioritize their wellbeing.

This has practical implications for leadership.

When I hear someone say "I am overwhelmed," I often ask the person what it would take to prioritize time so that an individual feels in control. This serves as a reminder that the feeling of being overwhelmed is common, but that "being whelmed" is something that each of us can influence. Leaders who show indifference to being overwhelmed reinforce that being busy at work signifies importance. This is a power move, and it poisons a work culture.

Showing others how to be whelmed is leadership in action. Being whelmed is not a weakness, and many times it's within our control. Sometimes being overwhelmed reflects a genuine problem – too much work, too few resources, or circumstances no individual should have to carry alone. A good leader names that honestly rather than papering over it. But where there is agency, the goal is to help people find it.

Another leadership lesson is to ask your team: "What's the 'missing positive' in our team's culture right now?" Then together, your team can "reclaim the missing positive," which provides permission to care out loud, to be enthusiastic, to be ept, couth, and grunted without irony. To channel Cam Lynch: show you care, loudly and without apology.

In research, we have "missing positives" too – not in language, but in biology. For years, scientists studied what went wrong in a disease and overlooked the protective mechanisms that were quietly present all along. Reclaiming those hidden positives is, in many ways, what drug discovery is.

The science behind immuno-oncology is a perfect example — for decades, the focus was on attacking tumors directly. The breakthrough came when we asked a different question: what if the body's own immune system already had the answer, and we just needed to reclaim it?

The same instinct applies to leadership. But the missing positives don't stop at the office door.

When Combobulated Became a Dinner Word

My family has had fun with the idea of reclaiming the missing positives. The initial word that came to mind for me was “hapful” – the missing positive of “hapless” – as it conjures being lucky in life and being grateful for it. Our family has a lot to be grateful for. We are very lucky. We are “hapful.”

Another fun one is being “combobulated,” the missing positive of “discombobulated.” I told my kids when I was ready to go to dinner, “OK, I am combobulated – let’s go!” (I will leave it to you to imagine their response.)

At work, we reclaim chalant and whelmed. At home, we reclaim hapful and combobulated. The words between work and home may be different, but the invitation is the same: stop performing indifference and start showing up as your authentic self.

The Coinage Challenge

Language is a mirror. If we reclaim the words, maybe we reclaim the behaviors.

Here's a challenge to try with your team at work: the "Coinage Challenge.” Can you coin your own missing positives in language at work? What's one “disgruntled” feeling at work that you could balance with “gruntled?” Can this simple action turn a negative into a positive? Maybe you are disgruntled with a process, but you are feeling gruntled with your team and the scientific problem you’re trying to solve.

The Coinage Challenge works around the family dinner table, too. Instead of talking about your “disappointment” with something, bring up something you are “appointed” with and use that to frame the conversation.

To be clear: reclaiming the positive is not about pretending the negative doesn't exist. It's about refusing to let the negative be the only thing you see.

Be The Word

Abby Wambach encouraged us to write a commencement speech. I did something a little different – I drew inspiration from a commencement speech at my daughter’s graduation and applied it to my own experiences as a biopharma leader. But to Abby’s point, doing so forced me to think hard about what I believe and what I know, and here is what I will say:

I believe words matter. I know that when we show up as our authentic selves, great things can happen. And I know that when we inspire people to be their best selves, this has ripple effects throughout an organization. Ultimately, when we all reclaim the positive, we elevate the work we do. At BMS, I have seen what happens when a team starts showing up fully. It changes the

science. And that changes outcomes for patients who are waiting for us to discover new and better treatments.

My closing call to action: "Be the Word." Pick your word. Which missing positive are you going to reclaim? Have fun with it – but take it seriously, too.

Don't lose sight of the behaviors these words represent. Be chalant. Be hapful. Be ruthful. The English language may have lost these words – but as leaders at work and loving family members at home, you don't have to.

Examples of The Coinage Challenge:

Orphaned Negative	The "Reclaimed" Positive	What It Looks Like in Life/Work
Nonchalant	Chalant	Showing you care, loudly and without apology
Disgruntled	Gruntled	Genuinely satisfied — and saying so
Disheveled	Sheveled	Put-together, intentional, present
Inept	Ept	Competent and owning it without false modesty
Unruly	Ruly	Disciplined and structured, without rigidity
Uncouth	Couth	Gracious, polished — and proud of it
Ruthless	Ruthful	Compassionate and merciful — a strength, not a weakness
Feckless	Feckful	Resourceful, effective, full of initiative
Hapless	Hapful	Lucky — and grateful for it
Unkempt	Kempt	Tended to, cared for — yourself and others

Note: see also this lighthearted New Yorker article from 1994 on a similar topic: "[Linguistic humor, How I met my wife.](#)"