

IGNORANCE OR SINCERITY?

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Grammar consultants are in great demand these days by employers who fear that the inability of their employees to speak and write grammatically gives their businesses a black eye. In addition to including English lessons in their employee training programs, some administrators go so far as to correct subordinates as they go about their work.

The senior vice president of a marketing and crisis-communications company in Florida interrupted an employee at a staff meeting to correct her failure to make subject and verb agree. She'd said, "There's new people you should meet." The v-p said he "cringes" every time he hears people use "is" when the subject calls for "are." The usage the Florida vice-president objected to was lack of subject/verb agreement in an expletive sentence.

Although still an accepted target of revision in written English, this error is so common in spoken English that I thought everyone had given up on it in conversation. What the staff member said: "There's new people you should meet."

What she should have said: "There are new people you should meet." Or, she could have avoided an expletive sentence altogether and said something like, "I'd like to introduce some new people." Not all employers are bothered by nonstandard usage. The v-p of a software company in Seattle values "sincerity and clarity" more than "the king's grammar." According to this businessman, "Those who can be sincere, and still text and Twitter and communicate on Facebook are the ones who are going to succeed."

According to Tammy Erickson, a columnist for the Wall Street Journal, younger speakers aren't necessarily ignorant of correct usage; they just don't think it matters as much as "sincerity in communication." So, when a young employee says, "Me and my colleagues want to meet with she and Mr. Singh about the new design," is he merely being sincere? Or is he kissing his chances for promotion good-bye? Erickson says that younger speakers don't see correct speech as an emblem of intelligence or education. I suppose that's not a problem if they go to work for someone like the man in Seattle, but I suspect that the attitude of the v-p in Florida is going to prevail in the work place for a long time yet.

Youthful job seekers may not regard correct speech as an emblem of education or intelligence, but they'd be wise to look upon it as a mark of professionalism. Every occupation has professional standards. One of the skills required of any white collar worker is—or should be—the ability to speak and write a standard form of English. As long as English remains a medium of global communication, native speakers who can't be bothered to master a standard form of it for professional purposes are inflicting an unnecessary economic disadvantage on themselves.