

The Power of Neutral Language

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Have you ever had to give a performance review to someone who wasn't performing well? Or deliver bad news in a business setting? I've got a handy tip that will really help you do so in a professional and non-inflammatory way. A boss taught me this years ago, and it literally changed my professional life. I call it The Power of Neutral Language.

It's a simple idea, but it does take a little practice:

Don't use pronouns.

Refresher: A pronoun is a word that refers either to the participants in the discussion (e.g., *I, you*) or to someone or something mentioned elsewhere in the discourse (e.g., *he, she, they, this*).

That's all there is to it. Watch what happens in these examples:

Before: You really aren't cutting it. You're going to have to improve in the area of productivity, or your job is in jeopardy. I think you really need to work on your time management skills.

After: In this position, it's necessary to have truly excellent time management skills. In order to get best results, some things that can be done to improve time management are....

Debrief: In the first sentence, the person who hears this is likely to feel personally attacked and become immediately defensive. In some cases, the employee won't even hear what actually needs improvement.... The employee will just get upset. The use of the pronoun "I" turns a statement into an opinion. Stepping away from facts and into opinion can also cause your message to be taken personally. Notice how this statement makes the other person wrong. Statements like these have a tendency to shut people down to new possibilities. In the reframed statement, removing the pronouns forces you to focus on the business need AND the benefits of making a change. The second statement depersonalizes the situation and allows the employee to hear the improvement that is needed in a nonthreatening way. Notice that you are not making the person wrong in this rephrase. This neutral approach can increase the odds that the employee will make the changes you need.

Consider: This technique is useful only if you genuinely want the employee to succeed and make a change.

Now you try!

Before: You are really helping other people too much and spending too much time on other people's projects. If you want to get ahead here, you have to stop that.

After: _____

Now try one that is a real issue in your work. First, write out how you would typically open the discussion:

Before: _____

And now try it without using pronouns:

After: _____

What did you notice?

This technique also works when you have to deliver bad news. For example:

Before: Um, **we** aren't going to be able to deliver **your** web site when **we** said **we** would. The developers can't figure out what the problem is with this one bug **we** have.

After: Unfortunately, the website won't be ready on the promised date bug-free. There are a couple options that are possible to discuss. The first is that the website is delivered clean except for that one bug while the issue is corrected. The second would be to push back the date.

Debrief: Notice how the language in the second sentence inspires confidence and calm. Some of that comes from not using the pronouns, which forces you to focus on the business issues. I also want to highlight a few other things I did in the reframe: In the first sentence, the speaker's hesitation immediately telegraphs that the person delivering the news feels bad, and this "vibe" can amp up the emotional response of the person on the other end, sometimes allowing them to get angry and vent at you. I highly recommend sticking to just the facts, and offering no apology. Notice too, that in the first version, the person delivering the news apparently doesn't even know what the exact problem is. This ignorance of the issue certainly does not inspire confidence on the receiving end! The revised statement offers some reasonable options and puts the choice into the client's hands, immediately engaging the client in problem resolution, instead of haranguing you about the problem itself. So you can see how neutral language paired with "just the facts" delivery can propel you toward collaborative problem-solving faster.

Consider: Use this when you have to deliver news that you are fearful of delivering. Be sure you develop some realistic options to provide. If the person does get hot under the collar, stay calm and get off the phone as quickly as possible. The one place you may want to use a pronoun is in an apology or an action step, which is appropriate in this circumstance. "I am so sorry for the

inconvenience this has caused on your end, and I assure you we will work with you to minimize the impact of this delay,” or “I will be happy to go back to the team and brainstorm some additional ideas to present to you based on my new understanding of the impact the delay has on your end.”

Now you try!

Before: Your project manager, Steve, who we know you liked working with, is leaving the company. We’re going to give you a new project manager, Andrew, but it will take a few weeks to get him up to speed, so your project is going to be late.

After: _____

Now try one that is a real issue in your work. First, write out how you would typically deliver the news:

Before: _____

And now try it without using pronouns and include some options for the person receiving the news:

After: _____

What did you notice?

Try it out in your work! It takes a little practice and thought before you pick up that phone or have that critical meeting, but it makes a tremendous difference in how your message lands. When you take responsibility for how your message lands, you will immediately find yourself to be more impactful!

Drop me a note at coachamym@gmail.com and tell me how implementing The Power of Neutral Language impacted your leadership!