



## CHAPTER 15

# Saying What Needs to Be Said

**S**top. Right. There. Just as you are about to open your mouth. A barely audible voice—not loud enough for you to hear, but clear enough for you to feel, inside your own mind—is urging you on. You want to take action this very minute. You feel that you really *must* speak up. However, before you rush headlong into saying anything, there are some things for you to think about. If you want a productive discussion, think first about what you want to say and how you can say it.

## Know Yourself First

Before you begin a conversation, give thought to your own needs and motivations, and possibly your own stumbling blocks. As a manager, everything you say carries added weight. A key to effective conflict management is analyzing your own situation and tendencies as objectively as possible. Ask yourself the hard questions and try to look at yourself from someone else's view.

Here are some questions to ask:

- ▶ What do I want or need in this situation? How does this concern fit into my short-term or long-term goals? How does it relate to the values that are most important to the organization?
- ▶ How important is this relationship to me or to the work we are doing?
- ▶ Consider the situation as it exists today. What about the situation bothers me the most? What is likely to happen if I take no action?
- ▶ What information do I need? What don't I know that I should know before I raise my concerns?
- ▶ If we fail to work this out, what are my options?
- ▶ How did I arrive at my viewpoint? What did I observe? How much of my concern is based on verifiable fact? How much is based on assumptions?
- ▶ What do I fear? What is the worst that could happen if I do nothing? What is the worst that could happen if I take action now?
- ▶ What is the effect of my behavior on others? Am I open to feedback or hearing divergent views?
- ▶ Am I overreacting? Are any of my hot buttons getting pushed?
- ▶ What is my typical approach to conflict? Is it appropriate in this situation?

.....

Randy knew he needed to talk to Kristin about the sarcastic remark she made in the staff meeting this morning. After all the work he had done to get that project approved, he needed every member of the team to fully support this effort. Randy knew he was taking a risk, but if this project worked out well, the rewards would be worth it for the whole team and the company.

Instead of raising his concern with Kristin at the meeting, he asked her to come by his office after lunch. He wanted a chance to settle himself and be clear about his intentions before he talked this through with her. First, he wanted to consider her remark and understand why he reacted so strongly.

For one thing, he needed to demonstrate to the team that he was in charge. A negative remark by an influential team member like Kristin could undermine his authority. He needed team members to respect and support his decision making. On the other hand, he also wanted to foster an open, collaborative workplace, so he didn't want to shut down employee comments and concerns.

What did he fear? he wondered. He feared losing face and losing control of the group or the project. He felt that he must take action to nip negative attitudes in the bud. But he also feared alienating Kristin by coming down too hard on her or embarrassing her. She was a valuable member of the team he could count on to give 110% most of the time.

Randy realized any negative comment about this pet project was a trigger for him. He had a lot invested here—in the time and energy he put into getting it off the ground. He knew it would be easy to get defensive, and he didn't want his staff to see that kind of reaction from him.

Feeling more in control of his own emotional reactions, he decided to begin the conversation with Kristin by asking her about her remark and her opinion of the project. With more information from her, he could then decide how best to respond.

.....

## Frame the Situation Accurately

How you view a conflict situation has a big impact on what you do. If you are not viewing the conflict with a mind-set that is accurate, a discussion about it can easily spiral out of control

.....

**T**erry was frustrated by the crew in technical support. He'd had several run-ins with them over the last few months, and now he was certain they were out to get him. As he prepared to give a presentation to his boss and his boss's boss, he stated flatly to me, "Failure is not an option." The stakes were high and the pressure was on. Tech support would also be there to review the

plan. If there was a way to make his system fail, they would do it.

Five minutes into the presentation he got into an argument with the head of tech support. Fearing another confrontation, his boss stopped the meeting at once. Terry couldn't believe that he'd been sabotaged again.

Terry had a hard time understanding the role his own mind-set had played in this disastrous meeting. Since he was convinced that he was in an "us against them" situation, he was defensive and adversarial. Certainly, there were issues to resolve with tech support, but his attitude precluded any possibility of constructive conversation.

.....

As you are entering a difficult conversation:

- ▶ Ask yourself how *you* can view the situation differently. For instance, had Terry considered asking tech support for their advice and opinions earlier, the tense confrontation might never have happened.
- ▶ View differences as a source of learning. In this example, because the security system had been breached six months before, tech support was on a strict campaign to improve security. With a different approach, Terry might have learned more about the challenges they were facing and how those challenges impacted the work they were doing together.

*If you have learned how to disagree without being disagreeable, then you have discovered the secret of getting along—whether it be business, family relations, or life itself.*

—BERNARD MELTZER

- ▶ Test your assumptions. We often make assumptions about others' motives and intentions. These suppositions can lead us to make erroneous statements that inflame the situation rather than bring clarity to the subject. When his own computer and software would not function properly, for example, Terry's immediate assumption was, "They are out to get me, as usual." Thinking through his assumptions, he might have

realized that the tech support team was far too busy trying to keep their own management happy to put any energy into “How can we get Terry this time?”

Terry began his discussion with the tech support staff by making several assumptions. The conversation would have gone in a different direction if he had first asked a few questions to understand their perspective. “Can you help me understand why my system isn’t working?” “Would you help me understand what your concerns are?”

*We may convince others by  
our arguments, but  
we can only persuade them  
by their own.*

—JOSEPH JOUBERT

▶ Take responsibility for dealing with the conflict—then share your concern as a problem to solve. Entering the meeting with the attitude, “We have a problem to solve. Let’s see how we can work together on this,” could have taken the discussion down a different track. Rather than a hostile and adversarial exchange of accusations, there might have been an opportunity to learn from each other and find some mutually acceptable solution.

#### A STATEMENT BASED ON ASSUMPTIONS:<sup>1</sup>

- ▶ Is made any time—before, during, or after observation.
- ▶ Goes beyond the observation.
- ▶ Is unlimited in number in any situation.
- ▶ Represents some degree of possibility.
- ▶ Is open to disagreement.

#### A STATEMENT BASED ON FACT:

- ▶ Is made after the experience.
- ▶ Is confined to what one observes.
- ▶ Is limited in number.
- ▶ Is as close to certainty as anyone can get.
- ▶ Is a way to agreement.

**Consider This**

- ✓ Think of a time when you felt strongly about a situation. Write down what happened.
- ✓ Read through your description of the event. Underline any word, phrase, or idea that may be an assumption or a judgment.
- ✓ Circle those that are observable facts.
- ✓ Describe the event again, using only observable facts.

## Speak to Be Heard

Once you are clear about your own intentions and expectations, how do you communicate your interests and concerns effectively? How do you say what needs to be said in a way that others can hear?

Your purpose is to engage others in an exchange of ideas that is not confrontational. You want to raise issues in ways that do not make others defensive, so that you can focus on finding workable solutions.

### Speak for Yourself, From Your Own Experience

Talk about what has happened and how it has affected your own work or the work of the office. For example, when Randy spoke with Kristin about her comments in the staff meeting, he said, “I want to talk with you about the comment you made in the staff meeting. I am concerned about how important the project is, and I need everyone’s support going forward.” Notice what he did *not* say. He didn’t say, “That comment you made this morning was unacceptable,” which would be a judgment, and likely to put Kristin on the defensive.

As a manager, sometimes another person will bring concerns about members of your staff to you. Proceed cautiously here. If the issue has no bearing on the productivity of the office, it is generally not your concern. Suggest that the person talk directly with the staff member.

If you determine that the complaint does have an impact on the workplace, you may need to take action yourself. Begin with direct observation of the negative behavior yourself, if at all possible. If this is not possible, gather as much information—specific and observable—as you can from reliable sources before addressing the concern. When you

raise the issue with the employee, discuss the impact of the behavior on the workplace rather than discussing the concerns of the person who brought the issue to your attention.

In an earlier chapter, there was April, who was keeping close tabs on Sam's comings and goings. She was eager to report to her boss Hank any time that Sam was late or unaccounted for. Hank reminded April that Sam was his responsibility to supervise, not April's. If or when Hank decided to raise any concerns about Sam's performance to Sam, Hank assured April, he would talk with Sam, based on his own observations and concerns, not on what April had reported to him.

On the other hand, there is the situation Kelly was in. She heard complaints from several people on the team about how loudly Cherie talked on the phone. After listening herself, gathering her own information, Kelly called Cherie into her office. "I have noticed how your voice carries across the cubicles. I am concerned that your conversations may be distracting to others, keeping them from being as productive as they could be."

## Be Specific

Describe the precise events that you observed and their effect on you or on the productivity of the office. Rather than saying, "You don't respond to my calls," be as specific as possible: "On Tuesday I left a message on your voice mail and did not receive a call back." What you *know* is that you called on Tuesday and left a message. What you don't know for certain is whether that message was ever received.

## Demonstrate Respect for the Other Party

This is important, whatever issue you are discussing with an employee—or anyone else. Can you remember a time when someone talked down to you? Insulted you? Spoke disrespectfully to you? I have posed these questions to many groups that I have worked with. It is the only unanimous survey I have ever run. In response, everyone raises their hands. Probably everyone except the queen has been talked to in these ways at one time or another.

What do you do when someone talks this way to you? I know how I

react. When someone talks disrespectfully to me, I do not hear anything else that the person is saying. I am busy inside my own head with two tasks: building a wall so you don't hit me again, and figuring out how I can regain the ground I deserve as soon as he stops talking, or sooner, if I can interrupt him. I think it is a reaction many of us have, and it contains an important truth. If you want to keep their ears open to the importance of the message you are delivering, talk to anyone/everyone respectfully.

Sometimes in a difficult discussion, I have had an (almost) overwhelming desire to let someone know exactly where he or she fit in the world. Maybe you have had this experience as well. It is easy for me to get a condescending tone in my voice, or to be disrespectful nonverbally—for instance, rolling my eyes. When I have delivered the message through my words or my attitude, “You are not as smart as you think you are,” or “Let me tell you a thing or two”—and I can remember a few times when I have been pretty articulate about it, clear, direct, to the point, if I do say so myself—I have never gotten the positive response I wanted: “Thanks so much. I never realized what a jerk I am. This is really helpful information that will change my behavior from this day forward.” Rather, the person has done exactly what I do in this situation: close his or her ears to any of my words. The person may see my lips continue to move, but nothing is going in. She or he is (rightly so) in defensive mode. The important points I may have wanted to make, the key concerns I have been trying to raise, are lost in the nonconversation.

So, I have to start with *respect* in order to keep the person's ears open to what I am trying to say—respect for who the person is and what he or she knows and where the person has been. I have to hold on to this thought—sometimes I have to reach pretty deep to find it. What can I respect about this person? I can respect the individual's very humanity: the courage it may have taken to show up at all, the road he or she has traveled that has been so hard, or so different from mine, or so much like mine.

This demonstration of respect comes through in my body language and in my tone of voice, sometimes even more than in the words themselves. The 7-38-55 Rule mentioned in the last chapter comes into play as you are speaking, as well as when you are listening. Disrespect can be

demonstrated in that 7 percent, the words you use—name calling or labeling are obvious. Remarks that belittle others or their efforts, or statements like “you people,” are also heard as disrespectful.

Disrespect can be loud in your tone of voice (38 percent), even if you are not speaking loudly. It can be easy to “take a tone” that connotes disrespect and turns off the listener to any other part of your message. Your body language when you are speaking (55 percent) can also convey a message of disrespect. A tilt of your head can be seen literally as “he talks down to me.” Rolling your eyes or lifting your eyebrows can say to a person, “I don’t respect you.”

Much of this communication, nonverbal or in voice tone, is unconscious. To deliver a message that clearly demonstrates respect for another, begin by aligning your attitudes about the other. When you can develop this sense of respect for the humanity of others, your words, your tone of voice, and your nonverbal communication will demonstrate congruity with your intentions.

## Learn Your Own Communication Style and Patterns

You may not be aware of your own communication style and its effect on others. A woman I once worked with consistently used a tone of voice that was demeaning to others. When she yelled, I cringed. Even though I knew and I reminded myself every time I spoke with her, “It’s just the way she is,” I continued to take her tone of voice personally. I had a very difficult time listening to her without feeling the full force of her negative attitude.

Other people have a habit of ending sentences on an up note so that each statement sounds like a question. This pattern communicates uncertainty on the part of the speaker. Listening to this voice pattern, others may easily dismiss the speaker as well as the message because of the way it is delivered.

### Consider This

- Ask someone whom you trust how effectively you communicate.
- Create a video of yourself interacting in a meeting, then watch and reflect on your own style.

- ☑ What does your tone of voice communicate?
- ☑ What does your nonverbal behavior communicate?

## More Powerful Persuasion

When you want to persuade someone to consider your point of view, talking to them in terms that make sense to them can help them hear and understand your message. If they really understand what you are saying, they are more likely to agree. Maybe you have taken a personality inventory somewhere along the way: DiSC, Myers-Briggs, SDI, and the InQ<sup>2</sup> are a few of the more popular ones. From these questionnaires, it is easy to see that how people think and what they respond to varies from person to person. The more you understand these differences, the more effective you can be in your ability to persuade and convince others.

.....

The head of operations and the director of sales were locked in an argument. The company had budgeted money for a large piece of equipment and given decision-making responsibility to the engineer in charge of operations. The director of sales was eager to get the equipment up and running so that he could push more sales. Weeks passed. The head of operations gathered information, consulted manufacturers' representatives, and created charts of the data he collected on competing models. He wanted to consider all of the possible options before making a decision. This was a sizable investment for the company, and the equipment needed to be right for future product development. The director of sales was increasingly impatient, "Just make a decision and move on. If it's the wrong decision we can fix it later."

.....

What stood in the way as they attempted to communicate were the different approaches that each of them had to getting the job done. The

engineer was oriented to data analysis, the head of sales had lots of energy for getting the job done as quickly as possible. By setting up a schedule for decision making and respecting the engineer's methods, the sales head would know what to expect and could support and encourage the engineer to make a decision more confidently.

In this example, the engineer was very good at focusing on the details, gathering data and considering alternatives before making a decision. To persuade someone like him, make certain that you have done your homework, that you have gathered the data and organized it accurately. Arguments over whose data is most accurate are likely to go nowhere. When you disagree you may be able to change this person's mind by considering the theory that each of you began with (in this case, the engineer's theory was that the equipment decision needed to last for ten years). Shifting that theory may provide new avenues for agreement.

Some people, like the head of sales, are focused on getting the task done. They are very good at taking action and moving on. To persuade them, take a marketing stance, that is, look for ways to sell your ideas with energy and enthusiasm. Give them the bottom line, your recommendations, or an executive summary with bullet points. And be confident about what you are saying; your confidence can be quite convincing.

Another person might be much more concerned about relationships and values. She might be the one in the office with a bowl of candy to welcome visitors, or motivational quotes affixed to the wall around her computer. In a meeting, this person is often concerned with how the decisions are being made, that everyone's voice is heard, and that the process is fair.

To persuade and convince someone like this, you might identify values that are important and talk about them. For example, I worked between two people in mediation to find common ground. One was an environmentalist who made decisions based on values and principles, the other, a developer who was much more concerned about the bottom-line viability of the project. In a private conversation, the developer talked to me about the need for more affordable housing in the county. I encouraged him to discuss these values in the mediation room, rather

than the financial costs that had been his first focus. This values-based dialogue became the bridge across which the two could reach agreement.

Others enjoy the process itself and are in no hurry to make a decision, they want to look at any problem from as many directions as possible, or to play devil's advocate, before reaching a decision. To persuade people with these tendencies, give them time to look at all of the different angles and possibilities. If you appreciate the person's creative energy, he or she can bring good ideas to the solution-seeking process.

As you are working with people, listen to the language they use, the questions they raise, the information they deem important. The more you understand their approaches to processing information, the more effective you can be in translating your thoughts into terms that make sense to them. The more capable you are of doing that, the more persuasive you will be.

## What to Avoid When You Are Talking

Sometimes what you don't say can be more important than what you do say. To keep their ears open to the message you really want to deliver, here are a few words to avoid.

1. *Accusations.* Making accusations is a good way to create an argument. State observable behaviors and verifiable facts. Ask for explanations. Listen for a constructive response.
2. *Generalizations.* "Everybody knows" is far too broad to be true, isn't it? "You always..." or "you never..." is likely to get an unhelpful response: "I am not always late. I came in on time a week ago Tuesday."
3. *Overkill or "proof by reiterative assertion."* Saying the same thing over and over and over again is really not as persuasive as it feels. Say what needs to be said, and confirm that the message has been received. Refrain from repeating yourself.

## JUST DON'T GO THERE:

- ▶ you always...
- ▶ you never...
- ▶ why don't you...?
- ▶ you're wrong...
- ▶ what you need is...
- ▶ you're stupid...
- ▶ everybody knows that!...
- ▶ you'd better not...
- ▶ you ought to...
- ▶ why did you...?
- ▶ don't you know...?
- ▶ you should...
- ▶ if only you did it my way...
- ▶ if only you were more like me...

4. *Labels or name calling.* This is in the category of disrespect. When you use labels or call people names, they will not hear anything else that you are saying. Rather, they will jump into defensiveness or counterattack.
5. *Sarcasm.* "So, this is your idea of a great report?" "Where did you learn to type, grammar school?" It's disrespectful, and will move the listener off of the message into defensiveness.
6. *Moralizing or pontificating.* Delivering messages about the right thing to do falls into the category of disrespect. Adults in the workplace should know right from wrong. Pontificating from your soap box does not persuade or convince, it only causes people to tune you out.
7. *Assigning motives.* "I know you did this because you wanted me to look bad." Considering the action any other person takes, you are often able to imagine four or five different reasons a person might have done what they did. Stick with observable, verifiable facts. Those are the realities you can discuss rationally.

In summary, there are a few principles to hold as you engage an employee in any dialogue. Consider carefully the message you want to communicate. Speak it clearly and simply, focusing on observable behaviors and their consequences to the workplace. And demonstrate respect for the person you are talking to.

### RAISING AN ISSUE

- ▶ Complain *only* to the person you are concerned about.
- ▶ Make your complaint as soon as possible.
- ▶ Criticize specific *behaviors* rather than inferring motives, intentions, attitudes, etc.
- ▶ Make only one complaint at a time.
- ▶ Complain only about those things the other can change.
- ▶ Communicate in a conversational tone.
- ▶ Allow the other person to respond, without becoming defensive.

### AVOID

- ▶ Raising your voice
- ▶ Comparisons with other people
- ▶ Criticisms in front of other people
- ▶ Repeating points you have made
- ▶ Sarcasm
- ▶ Exaggerations, overgeneralizations
- ▶ Becoming defensive

### MANAGE YOUR EXPECTATIONS

- ▶ Don't expect an immediate apology, confession, or even an acknowledgment that the message was received.
- ▶ You have communicated successfully if you have planted a seed of awareness in the other's mind.

## Note

1. These websites have more information about a few popular personality inventories: DiSC: [www.discprofile.com](http://www.discprofile.com), Myers Briggs Type Indicator: [www.myersbriggs.org](http://www.myersbriggs.org), SDI or Strength Deployment Inventory: [www.personalstrengths.com](http://www.personalstrengths.com), InQ or Inquiry Mode Questionnaire: [www.yourthinkingprofile.com](http://www.yourthinkingprofile.com) (websites accessed December 1, 2010).