

Working Together with I-messages



By Linda Adams, President, Gordon Training International

In the last column, I discussed the importance of empathic listening when another person—team member, friend, child—signals that they have a problem that's interfering with their ability to do productive work or has blocked them from moving forward effectively. What if the situation is reversed and you are the one with the problem? Now you need to know how to help yourself. When someone's behavior is causing you a problem, how can you influence that person to change without causing them to lose face or feel resentment toward you?

For example, your team member has been late for several important meetings. Your co-worker has volunteered to do some tasks, but hasn't followed through. Another manager is causing your organization to miss a very important deadline. We could say that these and many other behaviors cause you a problem because they interfere with your getting your needs met, i.e., getting your job done in these cases.

These situations require an entirely different skill than when you are attempting to help another with their problem—then you're a counselor, a listener, you want to help the other person. When you have the problem, you're a sender, an influencer, you want to help yourself. This means you'll want to be assertive, self-disclosing, giving the other person information that will help them better understand your problem with their behavior.

Assertive skills are distinctly different from listening skills and they can be much more difficult for people to use. That's because almost all of us are reluctant to tell other people that their behavior is creating a problem for us—nobody likes to hear that. We run the risk that they will feel hurt, get angry or not like us. For

some leaders, this risk is so great that they simply do not confront their team members.

But there's a huge price to pay for such silence—the problem does not get dealt with and solved, the other person is left in the dark and the leader builds up resentment. And the relationship stays or becomes inauthentic.

Fear of Confrontation

Almost all of us have had bad experiences of being confronted throughout our lives beginning with our parents and teachers. Most often, the way we were confronted caused us to feel upset and resistant. In our courses, we refer to this kind of confrontation as a You-message because it places blame on the other person—“You're late”, “You're inconsiderate”, “You should be more responsible”, “Here's what you need to do”. Not only do these You-messages fail to influence the other person to change the behavior that's creating a problem for you, they have the added effect of damaging the relationship.

Since it is you who have the problem, it's essential that you take ownership of it—it's you who are worried, upset, frustrated or concerned. Now your posture is one of being assertive, self-disclosing, open, honest, and direct with your team members and others in your life. Now is the time for an I-message*—“I'm disappointed”, “I'm concerned”, “I am so frustrated”.

The “feeling” part of the I-message is essential, but it's not enough. It's also very important to let the other person know the behavior that is creating the problem and then to tell them the tangible and concrete effect that behavior has on you.

I-message Examples

1. To your team member:

“I get very upset (*feeling*) when inquiries from potential clients aren't being answered within the time frame we agreed on (*non-blameful description of the specific unacceptable behavior*) because I'm afraid we'll lose some business and also create a bad impression of our organization (*tangible effect*).”

2. To your co-worker:

“When I get interrupted during my presentation (*non-blameful description of the specific unacceptable behavior*), I feel frustrated (*feeling*) because it breaks my concentration and I might forget something (*tangible effect*).”

3. To your teenager:

“When the gas tank was left almost empty (*non-blameful description of the specific unacceptable behavior*), I was upset (*feeling*) because I had to stop and get gas and that made me late for work (*tangible effect*).”

4. And here’s an actual one that I received earlier in the week from a co-worker:

“It’s August 23 and I don’t see any sign of the August Working Together newsletter article being worked on and I’m concerned that the newsletter won’t get sent out on time to our clients who find it valuable and useful. It’s also an effective marketing piece for us.”

Needless to say, this message got my attention and prompted me to meet the deadline that we had previously agreed on.

A simple way to remember the three parts is “Where’s the BEF?” (Behavior, Effect, Feeling). Note that the order doesn’t matter, but it is important to include all three parts. Usually it’s not enough to describe the other person’s behavior and tell them you’re upset about it; they need to know why.

Learning to talk to other people using I-messages is not easy because it requires a shift in the way we normally think and talk and also because it takes courage. The payoff in developing the courage to approach others with I-messages is that being transparently real with team members, spouses, children and others can be the beginning of an authentic relationship—one in which both learn to be open and honest with each other.

**The three-part I-message was created by Thomas Gordon.*