



## **IAF Canada Monograph Series, Number 11, January 2010**

*The mission of the IAF is to promote, support, and advance the art and practice of professional facilitation through methods exchange, professional growth, practical research, collegial networking, and support services. This is accomplished through peer-to-peer networking, professional development, and annual conferences which are critical means for fulfilling the mission and reflecting our core values.*

### **The Power of Words**

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I came across an interesting article in the October 2009 edition of the Oprah Magazine. The author, Tim Jarvis, makes a case for the importance of the words we choose to convey our message. According to Jarvis, one little word can sometimes make the difference between action and inaction, between resentment and cooperation, between argument and understanding.

### **Giving Constructive Feedback**

Many clients have asked me for advice on giving constructive feedback over the years. "How do you give feedback without ruffling any feathers? I know it is important to let my staff or my colleagues know how they could improve their performance, but I shy away from it. Giving feedback is awkward, and it could get me into trouble."

Many facilitators also struggle with the same issue - how to provide feedback to the groups with which we work, or to individual members of those groups, without negating the good we are trying to do. How do we ensure that the words we use as facilitators do not get in the way of the message we are trying to convey, or create other concerns beyond the one we might be trying to address?

Here are some of my pointers.

- **Ask yourself why you want to give feedback in the first place.** The only good reason to give feedback is to help the other individual improve their performance. If you feel the need to give feedback to someone, make sure that your motivation is not personal. In other words, make sure that your desire to give feedback is not a disguise for your need to unload negative feelings.
- **Choose the right time to give feedback.** If someone has just finished a difficult presentation that went sour, giving them feedback as they exit the room will backfire. Or if a group member has, knowingly or unknowingly, verbally assaulted a colleague or discounted the work of the group as a whole, give them (and perhaps you and the group) a chance to calm down before making any approach. What we do not want is for the individual to feel attacked rather than supported. Give them some time to process what just happened and approach them when they are in a more positive frame of mind.
- **Ask first.** Don't assume that your feedback will be welcomed. The right thing to do is ask the person first if they would like to get some feedback from you. Get their permission and, only then, proceed, with care.
- **Use the "Like, Tricky and Do Diff" model.** Start by letting the other person empty his or her "cup" first. The person likely knows what they have done or said that has led you to speak with them. Let them share with you their own perspective on the situation first. Once they have emptied their cup, they will be more receptive to what you have to offer as feedback. Start by saying *what you liked* about what they did. Then move on to the "*trickys*". A "tricky" does not necessarily mean something negative. A "tricky" can be something that was unclear, or misunderstood, or something that was missing. Finish by making some suggestions for improvement by giving tips on *what could have been done differently* ("do diffs").
- **Stick to the facts.** When giving feedback, try to describe in an objective way what you saw and heard, rather than give your interpretation of what you saw and heard. It makes a huge difference. The one approach is factual and can be verified by other observers, the other personalizes the feedback and is much more difficult to defend.
- **Do it with care.** Ask yourself, "How would I feel if I was standing in his or her shoes right now?" Do unto others as you would like them to do unto you.

Jarvis' one word trick for giving constructive feedback:

**Rather than saying:** "You did a nice job, **BUT** the report needs to be finished."

**Try:** "You did a nice job **AND** the report needs to be finished."

Or,

**Rather than saying:** "You made some strong points to the group this morning, **BUT** you might want to think about using just a little more conciliatory tone to get your point across."

**Try:** "You made some strong points to the group this morning **AND** you might want to think about using just a little more conciliatory tone to get your point across."

The "but" negates the first part of the statement no matter how positive it is. When people hear the word "but" they are just waiting for the bad news.

**Help change someone's behavior**

People believe that they can motivate others to change their behaviors. That is a myth. You can't motivate someone. Motivation needs to come from the inside. I can't motivate you. You have to motivate yourself. All I can be is a "change agent", someone who tries to create the exterior conditions that could motivate a change.

According to Jarvis, one of the most common mistakes we make is to ask the other person to change for our sake: "If you really love me you will stop doing 'X', or "Can you fix this for 'my' sake please."

Jarvis' one word trick to encourage someone to change:

**Rather than saying:** "Will you stop smoking for **my** sake?"

**Try:** "Will you stop smoking for the sake of **our** kid's health?"

Or,

**Rather than saying:** "If you could please stop checking your blackberry during group work, I would appreciate it."

**Try:** "If you could please refrain from checking your blackberry during group work, it would speed up the process for you and your team as they could benefit from your ideas and your undivided attention to the task."

Your loved one or group member might resent your wanting to change his or her ways and refuse to change to prove a point. The focus on a third party removes you from the equation and appeals to their "ideal" self - the one that does the right thing for the right reasons.

### **Presenting a problem to your boss, client, or group**

There has been a lot of talk in the past few years of "speaking truth to power." Excellent concept in theory... On the one hand, we all want to do the right thing and expose the truth for what it is. Unfortunately, that is easier said than done.

Somehow, it is much easier to talk about the irregularities and unfairness in our workplace around the coffee machine with colleagues. Complaining comes naturally to most of us. Blaming others is also a typical reflex. However, it is quite another thing to actually tell the powers that be that something's got to change.

This can be equally true of facilitators. We might fear that future contracts, or even our very employment if we work internally, could be jeopardized if we speak truthfully about how we see people with power behaving in the groups we facilitate, or how we see issues being dealt with inside the organizations we serve.

Jarvis' one word trick for speaking truth to power:

**Rather than saying:** "They have issues with the sales staff."

**Try:** "We have issues with the sales staff."

Or,

**Rather than saying:** "They have difficulties leaving their position at the door when they work in a group."

**Try:** "We don't seem to do a good job as a group in managing how we relate to one another so that our positions do not get in the way of open and useful dialogue."

Replacing *they* with *we* can change your outlook and the viewpoint of others. Saying "we" suggests that we recognize that we are part of the solution to the problem.

### **Trying to make someone see your side**

Some words can be provocative. Once people hear certain words such as "stupid", "dumb", or "un-professional", they stop listening to the intent of the comment. Instead, the emotions take over, and their anger and resentment prevent them from understanding the intent of the message. Jarvis gives the example of a comment that President Obama made this summer when he was discussing the arrest of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. President

Obama said that the Cambridge police acted stupidly. That comment was inflammatory and created a lot of backlash.

Jarvis' one word trick for making people hear your message:

**Rather than saying:** "I know you wanted to surprise me, but changing our plans without warning me was **irresponsible.**"

**Try:** "I know you wanted to surprise me, but changing our plans without warning me was **not helpful.**"

Or,

**Rather than saying:** "I know you wanted to get the group's attention, but calling your colleagues incompetent was dumb."

**Try:** "I know you wanted to get the group's attention, but calling your colleagues incompetent brought the meeting to a standstill."

Rather than labeling other's actions, convey the effect of those actions.

When I started studying coaching, my teacher recommended that I read the book by Dr. Matthew Budd entitled You Are What You Say. In it, Budd reminds us that the words we use create our reality. Words are like self-fulfilling prophecies. You get what you say you will get.

Have you ever noticed that .....

- When you tell yourself you are tired, you feel even more tired and out of sorts?
- When you repeat to yourself "I can do this", you usually can?
- When you say to your teacher or course leader "I am shy", she calls on you less often to answer a question or do a presentation in front of the group so you become even shyer?
- When you say to yourself "this will be a good day", it usually is?

This month, I challenge you to pay attention to your words (often a reflection of your internal beliefs) and the impact they have on yourself, your colleagues, and your clients.

I am curious. Please let me know what you find out.