

THE POWER OF POSITIVE COMMUNICATIONS

By Brenda Robinson

Why is the sign that says “closed” bigger than the open sign? Why do we say, “I’m sorry – she isn’t in” before we say, “She’ll be back in an hour?” Why do we start with, “I can’t”, “We don’t”, or “We never” when people are more interested in, “We can”, “We do” and “The options are ...”

Maybe there is some truth to the idea that we are better at talking about problems than we are at talking about solutions. It could be a style of communication that has evolved over time. We often begin with, “We regret” or “Unfortunately.” When people see or hear these terms, do they expect anything positive to follow? Or, do they prepare a reaction that is negative or even angry or defensive?

What can we do to apply the power of positive communications to our workplaces, communities and homes? Here are ten tried and true tips and techniques to help us change our old habits and become positive communicators.

Tip #1: Limit your apologies

We tend to apologize first and then explain or offer the alternatives later. When we say, “I’m sorry” it taints what follows. People believe that if you’re sorry, there must be something wrong or maybe you are going to make an excuse or give them “the brush off.” Have you been in a retail setting when a sales representative said, “I’m sorry – we don’t carry those” or “I’m sorry all we have is what’s on the shelf?” Did that motivate you to look for more? Did you continue your pursuit of purchases? Not likely! You probably left the store frustrated and told your friends not to go there.

What if they had said, instead, “Let’s see what we have that is similar” or “Did you look at the new stock we just received today?” Would that make a difference? Of course! You may even buy more or spend more because you are engaged and your interest is “tweaked.” That is the power of positive communication. The time to apologize is after you have found a solution or resolution for the situation. Then you can say, “I’m glad you found something that works for you. Sorry we didn’t have exactly what you were looking for.” They will likely say, “That’s okay – I like what I found.”

One apology is always enough. Repeating the apology over and over again just emphasizes the negativity. Saying “I’m sorry” may make one person feel better – the sorry person. However, it won’t make the situation more positive for anybody.

Tip #2: Focus on “what’s next” instead of “what’s past.”

We have a tendency to talk more about the past than the present and the future. We seem to like to say, “You never” or “I told you before” or “How many times do I have to tell you?” Your mother may have told you “Don’t cry over spilled milk.” She was right! There is very little communication value in discussing what already happened or what happened in the past. Most listeners just tune out because there is nothing they can do to change the past. However, they may stay tuned in to phrases such as, “What else could we do to change ...” or “What could we do differently to improve ...”

The emphasis on the past usually generates a defensive reaction. Emphasizing the future generates positive action. What would you prefer as an outcome for your communication?

Tip #3: Focus on what can be done instead of what can't be done.

We are quick to explain what we can't do. Most people are not as interested in what can't be done as they are in what can be done. This takes positive thinking which leads to positive communication. Consider this example:

“We aren't allowed to give out home phone numbers because of confidentiality issues.”

Try instead:

“What works best is for you to give me your number and I'll have Bill call you. That way, we can keep up to our confidentiality issues.”

That would result in a much more positive feeling and response.

Tip #4: Ask instead of tell.

Asking always has a more positive tone. This is especially true when we are giving instruction and direction. People would rather be asked than told. Listen to the difference:

“Send fourteen copies to Sarah.”

“Will you send fourteen copies to Sarah?”

“Have your reports in my office by May 15th.”

“Will you please have your reports in my office by May 15th?”

Indeed, some facilities and even municipalities are having more success with signage questions than they have had with signage warnings, threats and statements. You've seen the signs:

NO SMOKING

**ABSOLUTELY
NO SMOKING**

**ABSOLUTELY NO SMOKING
VIOLATORS WILL BE
PROSECUTED**

Why do these signs not get the desired results? Some social psychologists would tell us it is the negative tone leading to non-compliance. Some people would argue that the sign is clear and easily understood. This may be true. The question is always “does it get the results?” Some new signage includes:

**DID YOU KNOW ...
YOUR DESIGNATED
SMOKING AREA IS JUST 25
STEPS AWAY?
JUST FOLLOW THE
FOOTPRINTS!**

**WILL YOU PLEASE JOIN
OTHER SMOKERS TO ENJOY
YOUR SMOKE IN THE
DESIGNATED AREA ON
LEVEL 3?**

**SMOKING IS PERMITTED
OUTSIDE ENTRANCE 4 AND
ENTRANCE 11. WILL YOU
JOIN OTHER SMOKERS
THERE?**

You can see that the tone is very different. The results are too! Once again, we get to see the power of positive communication.

Tip #5: Take time to explain “why.”

We are told that in every adult there resides a three year old child. What does a three year old child want to know more than anything else? They always ask “WHY.” Most people feel they have been treated more positively when the information includes the explanation of why. This is especially true when they are being told “they can’t” or “we won’t” or “we don’t.” The explanation of why seems to soften the message in a positive, respectful way.

When you say: “Helen isn’t taking calls right now.” The other person becomes annoyed with Helen and with you.

What about when you say: “Helen is doing interviews and has asked me to hold her calls until noon.”

Can you hear the difference? As soon as the “why” is included, the message has taken on a cooperative and collaborative tone. The acceptance and understanding go hand in hand.

This is often true in situations where organizations are trying to collect money or get payments made on time. So often we read:

“Payment must be received by October 21.”

The results are much better when the “why” is included.

“You can ensure continuation of your services by making your payment before October 21.”

Sometimes the “why” sounds too threatening to get the desired results. An example would be:

“Failure to pay will result in termination of your services.”

This may cause people to become obnoxious and angry in response. Some organizations use instead:

“You can avoid difficulties and keep your services by paying \$_____ by ____ or by making other payment arrangements.”

Or

“Will you call us by (October 21) to let us know how you will pay (\$487) by (October 25) to be certain we can continue services?”

Or

How can we work with you to make arrangements for payment of \$_____ by _____ to keep your services active?

The “why” explanation is often enhanced by the use of asking instead of telling.

Tip #6: Provide options or choices.

Try to provide options or choices when you can't give people exactly what they are asking for. Sometimes this will focus the thinking on what we can do instead of what we can't do and on what's next instead of what's past. Consider the differences:

“Your course has been cancelled.”

How about

“Your course has been rescheduled to May 21. Could we put your name on that list or would you be interested in enrolling in a different course on the date chosen?”

Here is another example

“You'll have to sign up for the program in person or online by May 15.”

How about

“There are two options to sign up for that program. You can sign up online or in person.” Could you be sure to sign up by May 15?

Two options or choices are usually enough to get people thinking. There is some thought that if people are angry or defensive, three choices will challenge the emotional reaction. It is called the “tri-choice” approach. You can either offer three options or choices or you can offer two options – three times.

Of course, you will need to prepare to state the options in slightly different words to avoid sounding repetitious. Options allow people to think that they are positively in charge of the decision making. Again, the power of positive communication.

Tip #7: Use specific words to provide clear, positive direction.

So often, we tell people “what not to do” without telling them “what they can do.” Think about all of the “no parking” signs. You know for sure where you couldn’t park. Did you know where you could park? Consider this approach:

**PARKING FOR FRED’S
RESTAURANT IS ONE
BLOCK AHEAD AND ONE
BLOCK RIGHT (104 ST & 87
AVE.)**

Sometimes our vague word choice leads people to take no action at all.

Example

“Please call as soon as possible.”

Try instead

Will you call before 4:00 PM on Tuesday?

Example

Please send me those statistics at your earliest possible convenience.

Try instead

Will you send me the statistics before March 30 to allow us to include them in the annual report?

Sometimes we can add the ‘why’ to our specifics and get even better results.

Tip # 8: Use inclusive language to support a collaborative and positive working relationship.

Avoid statements such as:

“You’ll have to ...”

“You should have ...”

“You’ll never ...”

Try instead

“Let’s work together and see if we can find a way ...”

Or

“Let’s see what we can do to make this work better ...”

Or

Let’s discuss what each of us has in mind and find a common solution”

Sometimes we have to preface our inclusive statements with openings such as:

“What would you prefer...?”

Or

“What would you think would work...?”

Or

“What do you see as options or alternatives ...?”

This technique is the core of a bargaining or negotiating approach to getting positive results. It gets everything off to a positive and proactive start. That is the power of positive communication.

Tip #9: Develop a positive vocabulary to support positive communications.

Apparently, our typical vocabulary has more negative words than positive words. Children between the ages of 6 months to 3 years hear “no” in relation to “yes” in a 80 – 20 ratio. By the time they reach age 3, they know for sure what not to do. They are often hard to entertain because they don’t know what to do. What a challenge!

There is now an understanding that certain words are trigger words which cause negative reactions and responses. There are words to avoid. There are also words that build a positive tone and are more often met with a positive response. Use this list to help you develop an understanding of words to use and words to avoid.

Words to Avoid	Words to Emphasize
× Regret	✓ Yes
× Sorry	✓ Good
× Apologize	✓ Better
× Unfortunately	✓ Best
× Can't	✓ Progress
× Won't	✓ Action
× Couldn't	✓ Solution
× Shouldn't	✓ Success
× Didn't	✓ Excellent
× Don't	✓ New
× Fail	✓ Can & Can do
× Never	✓ Will
× Reject	✓ Next step
× Neglect	✓ Option
× Deny	✓ Choice
× Decline	✓ Could
× Delay	✓ Would
× Trouble	✓ Improved
× Problem	✓ Enhanced
× Difficulty	✓ Answer
× Inconvenience	✓ Assure
× But	✓ Positive
× Unable	✓ Decision
× Claim	✓ Approach
× Complaint	✓ Alternative
× Impossible	

A good exercise is to choose certain negative words and make every effort to eliminate them from your vocabulary for one week. Then choose a few more words and work on those. Soon, you will be able to “hear” the power of positive communications in your vocabulary. It works!

Tip #10 Add some humour to your communication

A coffee shop achieved amazing results with this sign:

**UNSUPERVISED CHILDREN
WILL BE GIVEN A
CAPPACINO AND A PUPPY
TO TAKE HOME**

Parents laughingly supervised their children.

A WestJet flight attendant announced their “no smoking” policy with:

“This is a smoke free flight and smokers are invited to use the designated smoking area outside on the left wing. Hang on – it’s windy out there!”

Another flight attendant was heard to say:

“We have now reached an altitude of 30,000 feet. This is a non smoking flight and smokers will be asked to leave immediately.”

Can you think of some way to use humour to add a positive element to your communication? Let your creativity help you. Always remember, though, that humour has to be fun for all involved. Be sure it is appropriate humour. Laugh with – not at!

Use these ideas to support the power of positive communications. Become the optimist – see the positive. Become a positive communicator – it is powerful and empowering.

What is the best way to get started? Pay attention to the first eight words you say in a phone greeting, interpersonal interaction, in an email or informal communication. Make certain your first eight words are positive. Does your voice mail start with:

“I’m unable to come to the phone ...”

Or

Unfortunately I am away from my desk or on another call ...”

Maybe you should change it to:

“Thanks for calling. Will you leave your name, number and a brief message?”

Do you have templates that begin with:

We regret to inform ...

Or

Please allow me to apologize ...

Could you get off to a more positive start?

How about:

Thanks for updating us on your interest in our project.

Have you seen the email that begins with:

It has come to our attention ...

Or

It was noticed during recent inspections ...

How about:

You will be interested in the follow up to recent inspections ...

Or

Our ongoing interviews will be helpful to all of us in improving ...

Do you think the tone will get a positive reaction?

Meet the challenge – become a positive communicator.