ENHANCING DIFFERENTIATION BY SPEAKING WITH SPECIFICITY

The first skill in living with more of an Inside → Out, or “differentiated,” perspective is to be able to identify and separate our internal experiences (what we think, feel, and want) of the world from the actual external events (and people) in the world.

Once we are aware of the various facets of our internal experience, the next skill is to speak in ways that make those distinctions clear. Our interactions with others become much smoother — less “gummed up” — to the extent we can speak in terms of our own experience, and avoid speaking unacknowledged judgments about others.

Our reluctance to speak up in certain situations, such as in a potential conflict or during an opportunity to give feedback, often arises from our fear of the other person’s reaction. Will he get defensive? Will she hear me? Will I be able to keep the conversation (read: “myself”) under control?

Such interactions are much more successful if we can speak with specificity about the subject at hand. Speaking with specificity involves separating our observations from our inferences or judgments about those observations.

The speaking skills to do this can be divided into:

*External Observations*

*Behavior (or Results) Description*

*Internal Observations*

*Feelings Description*

*Ownership or “I” Language*

*Both Internal and External*

*Specific to What, When and Whom was involved*
Why specificity matters in the workplace

The costs of unspecific language, which confuses judgments and feelings as “facts”, are high in the workplace. Lack of specificity in reports, assessments, goals, instructions, requirements, raising of concerns, etc. leads to multiple- or mis-interpretations. These, in turn, cause delays, rework, decreased morale, hurt feelings, and thwarted communication channels.

Furthermore, this lack of clarity is often at the root of conflict. Even worse for the long-term health of the organization, such language often blinds us from pursuing real solutions to the problems we see, because we’re caught up in a “blame game” of “who’s at fault.” For example, consider what your initial reaction would be hearing the following comments.

Scenario A examples

1. Sandy: “The printers in my department never work. I am sick of having to walk to the next department to get my reports!”
2. Stewart: “Can’t you see I’m overloaded? What do the rest of you do with your time, anyway?”
3. Tony: “What is with those guys in QA (quality assurance)? They must live in their own world — without deadlines!”

Now consider how the following specifically worded statements would impact you. In which scenario would the real solution more quickly be found?

Scenario B examples

1. “The printers in my department are frequently off line, or printing garbage. I’m frustrated by having to print on another department’s machines to get my work done.”

   [The real situation: A chain reaction because of printer traffic overload in yet another department, whose workers are using Sandy’s department’s printers. Solution: more or faster printers for that third department.]

2. “I know that project is important, but I just don’t see how I can get to it in time today. Perhaps you could take something off of my plate.”

   [The real situation: Work from multiple sources comes to Stewart on the same day of the week, whereas your workload on that day is relatively light.]

3. “I am concerned that our project is getting delayed because of the time QA is taking to evaluate our documentation.”

   [The real situation: QA received the documentation with “ASAP” as the due date — just like all of the other documents they got last week. QA has no information by which to quantify, let alone prioritize, actual timeliness requirements.]
SPEAKING WITH SPECIFICITY SKILLS

A. Behavior Description by John Wallen

The Problem: If you and another person are to improve the way you get along together, you must be able to convey what each does that affects the other. This is not easy. Most of us do not describe behavior clearly enough for others to know what actions we have in mind. Instead, we usually state what we infer about his motivations, attitudes and personality traits; often we are not even aware we are inferring rather than describing. Because we are so used to inferring, we may not even know what the other did that led us to our inferences.

The skill of behavior description then, depends upon accurate observation which, in turn, depends upon being aware of when you are describing and when you are Inferring.

The Skill: A statement must pass two tests to be a behavior description:

1. A behavior description reports specific, observable actions rather than inferences about the person’s motives, feelings, attitudes or personality traits. It states what was observed. It does not infer about why.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior Descriptions</th>
<th>Inferences</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>* Fran walked out of the meeting 30 minutes before it was finished.</td>
<td>* Fran was annoyed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>* Bob's eyes filled with tears.</td>
<td>* Fran had an appointment elsewhere.</td>
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<tr>
<td>* Becky did not say anything when Bill asked her a question.</td>
<td>* Bob had a cold.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>* Bob felt sorry for himself.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>* Becky did not hear Bill.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>* Becky resented Bill's question.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>* Becky was embarrassed.</td>
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2. A behavior description is non-evaluative. It does not say or imply an event or action was good or bad, right or wrong. Evaluative statements (such as name-calling, accusations, and judgments) usually express what the speaker is feeling and convey little about what behavior he observed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior Descriptions</th>
<th>Evaluative Statements</th>
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<tr>
<td>* Jim talked more than others on this topic. Several times he cut off others before they finished.</td>
<td>* Jim is rude.</td>
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<td>* &quot;Bob, you've taken the opposite of most statements Harry has made today.&quot;</td>
<td>* Jim wants to hog the center of attention.</td>
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<tr>
<td>* Fran walked out of the meeting 30 minutes before it was finished.</td>
<td>* &quot;Bob you're trying to show Harry up.&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>* &quot;Sam, you cut in before I was finished.&quot;</td>
<td>* &quot;Bob you're being stubborn.&quot;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>* Fran is irresponsible.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>* Fran doesn't care about others.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>* &quot;Sam, you deliberately didn't let me finish.&quot;</td>
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The word "deliberately" implies that Sam knowingly and intentionally cut you off. All anybody can observe is that he did cut in before you had finished.
The difference of behavior description:

Let's suppose you tell me I am rude (a generalized trait), or that I don't care about your feelings (an inference about my motivation). Because I am not trying to be rude and because I do care about your feelings, I don't know what the basis is for your negative evaluation of me. However, if you point out that several times in the past few minutes I have interrupted you and have overridden you before you could finish what you were saying, I get a clearer picture of what actions of mine were affecting you.

Example:
Several members of his group have told Ben that he was too 'arrogant.' Ben was confused and puzzled by this judgment. He was confused because he didn't know what to do about it; he didn't know to what it referred. He was puzzled because he didn't feel arrogant or scornful of the others. In fact, he admitted he really felt nervous and unsure of himself. Finally, Joe said that Ben often laughed explosively after Ben made a comment that seemed to have no humorous aspects. Others agreed this was the behavior that led them to perceive Ben as looking down on them and, therefore, arrogant. Ben said he had not been aware of this.

The pattern, then, was as follows:

1. When he made a statement of which he was somewhat unsure, Ben felt insecure.
2. Ben's feelings of insecurity expressed themselves in an explosive laugh after he made the statement ...
3. the other person felt 'put down' and humiliated...
4. the other's feelings of humiliation was expressed in the accusation that Ben was arrogant.

Note that Ben had no awareness of his own behavior (the laugh), which was being misread until Joe accurately described what Ben was doing. Ben could then see that his laugh was a way of attempting to cope with his own feelings of insecurity.

To develop skill in describing behavior, you must sharpen your observation of what actually did occur. You must force yourself to pay attention to what is observable and to hold inferences in abeyance. As you practice this, you may find that many of your conclusions about others are based less on observable evidence than on your own feelings of affection, insecurity, irritation, jealousy, or fear. For example, accusations that attribute undesirable motives to another are usually expressions of the speaker's negative feelings toward the other.
B. Feelings Description by John Wallen

Any spoken statement can convey feelings. Even the factual report, "It's three o'clock" can be said so that it expresses anger or disappointment. However, it's not the words that convey the feelings. Whether the statement is perceived as a factual report or as a message of anger or disappointment is determined by the speaker's tone, emphasis, gestures, posture, and facial expression.

This exercise does not deal with the non-verbal ways we convey feelings. It focuses on the kinds of verbal statements we use to communicate feelings.

We convey feeling by:

- **Commands**: "Get out!" "Shut up!"
- **Questions**: "Is it safe to drive this fast?"
- **Accusations**: "You only think about yourself!"
- **Judgments**: "You're a wonderful person." "You're too bossy-

Notice that, although each of the examples conveys strong feeling, the statement does not say what the feeling is. In fact, none of the sentences even refers to the speaker or what he or she is feeling.

By contrast, the emotional state of the speaker is the content of some sentences. Such sentences will be called "descriptions of feeling." They convey feeling by naming or identifying what the speaker feels:

- "I am disappointed."
- "I am furiously angry!"
- "I'm afraid going this fast."
- "I feel discouraged."

The goal is to help you recognize when you are describing your feelings and when you are conveying feelings without describing them. Trying to describe what you are feeling is a helpful way to become more aware of what it is that you do feel.

A description of feelings conveys maximum information about what you feel in a way that will probably be less hurtful than commands, questions, accusations, and judgments. Thus, when you want to communicate your feelings more accurately you will be able to do so.

**NOTE:**

Beware of the common speech pattern of “I feel that [you]...” and “I feel like [she]...” What follows this pattern is typically a judgment, not a feeling statement, although there are often feelings implied. Watch for this speech pattern in yourself, and take care to separate and identify the judgments from the feelings as a way to practice specificity.
Feelings Description Examples

Feelings implied
• Quiet! Not another word out of you!
• Quit complaining all the time!
• If things don't improve around here, I'll look for a new job.
• Did you ever see such a lousy place to work?
• You're a wonderful person.
• I feel like you know everything about this subject.
• Can't you hear I'm not finished? Don't you have ears?
• You have no consideration for anybody else's feelings.
• You're completely selfish.
• I can't do everything at once, you know!
• I feel like everyone dumps on me at the last minute.
• We all feel you're a wonderful person. Everybody likes you.
• This has been an awful day. Nothing ever goes right for me around here.
• This is a very poor exercise.

Feelings described
• Your words sound harsh to me, and I'm feeling annoyed.
• I'm afraid to admit that I need help with my work.
• I really respect your opinion. You seem to be so well-read.
• You've spoken before I've finished twice now, and I'm beginning to feel resentful.

• I'm worried that I can't get everything done, and I'm afraid my boss will think I'm not doing a good job.
• I feel comfortable and free to be myself when I'm around you.
• I feel discouraged because of some things that happened today.
• I'm a little anxious about this exercise because I don't get the point.
• I'm feeling tired, and I'm struggling to pay attention to this exercise.
• I feel inadequate to contribute anything in this group.
• I feel lonely and isolated in my group.

• I am inadequate to contribute anything in this group.
• For all the attention anybody pays to what I say, I might at well not be in my group.
• I feel that nobody in my group cares whether I'm there or not.
• I am a failure; I'll never amount to anything. That teacher is awful, he didn't teach me anything.

• I'm disappointed because I did so poorly on that test.
C. Ownership or “I” Language

We speak with specificity about our internal experience by using “Ownership” language to report our thoughts, feelings and wants about a situation. In doing so, we are claiming our own experience as being unique and distinct from events or others’ intentions. Speaking from this “I” position helps prevent defensive debates about the others’ intentions, and helps keep us in touch with our own experience of life. Who is the main character of each of my life, anyway? “It?” “We?” “You?” “They?” No! I am!

Generalizations or Inferences

• Your reports are always late.
• No one listens around here.
• The instructions are right here. Why didn’t you do it right?
• It went great this morning!
• You need to contribute more to our meetings.
• It made me happy today when the installation went smoothly.
• You know, you try so hard, but sometimes you still can’t get through to her.

Ownership or “I” statements

• When I get your reports later than 3:00 on Tuesdays, I feel irritated because I have to stay late to review them.
• I believe I’m not being heard, and I feel anxious and a little hurt about that.
• I put a lot of work into these instructions, and I want them to be valuable and useful. I am afraid that they might not be clear, and I may need to take time to revise them.
• I believe we made a great presentation, and I’m proud to be part of this team.
• When you don’t speak in meetings, I worry that you’re bored. I believe you have valuable ideas that would help the entire group, and I want us to have the chance to discuss them.
• I am happy the installation went smoothly today.
• I have tried many ways to communicate with her, but sometimes she still doesn’t seem to understand, and I’m frustrated about that.
D. Specific to What, When and Whom is involved

Often we are tempted to exaggerate into generalizations because of our built-up frustrations, sense of overwhelm, or uncertainties about what might happen if we were to be more specific. We inaccurately use words like everyone, everything, no one, nothing, always, and never.

As a listener, consider the relative usefulness of the A and B comments. Why does one seem more useful or helpful than another?

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<tr>
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<th>Specific as to What, When, Whom</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Everything is always late around here!</td>
<td>• I notice that the last two months’ budget reports were late arriving from Tom and Katy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• We never get our projects done within budget.</td>
<td>• We’ve exceeded our budget on our previous two projects, and I don’t know if we’re on track with this one. I’m concerned.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• They all think their department is the most important one.</td>
<td>• Janice and Ed spoke up strongly about what their department needed in the meeting today. I’m worried that our department’s needs on this project will be overlooked.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Second shift can’t ever do things right.</td>
<td>• The scrap rate on the second shift trimming operation is 10% higher than the day shift. What could be causing the difference?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Which is easier to hear? If you were the speaker having to report information about such problems, which do you think would produce a more constructive response from your audience?