

Positively Communicating

A close-up photograph of a hand with fingers spread, forming a heart shape. The hand is lit from the side, creating a warm, golden glow. The background is a solid, vibrant green color.

Using positive language is a powerful tool for improving communication in a group and making members more solution oriented.

**By Teresa Huggins
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How often have you ended a meeting believing that the student leaders understood their responsibility, only to find out they did not? How often have you wished that all leaders would stay focused on solutions instead of problems? It is the language we choose that allows others to fully understand our expectations and desired outcomes. Our word choice can generate fear and uncertainty when focused on the negative or create solutions when focused on the positive.

A fundamental strategy for improving group communication is to provide the time and space for students to create their

own successes. More specifically, each time there is a project planning meeting with students, you have an opportunity to use positive language techniques to increase group communication. In addition to giving positive verbal instructions, provide written details and deadlines.

Allowing students to select a date for an event or a meeting time empowers the students and increases their “buy in” to the program. Telling them when to do something takes away their empowerment and decreases their desire to fulfill their responsibilities. Let the students be the heroes. By providing choices and modeling positive language, student commitment to follow through will increase and student projects will progress as planned.

When we teach students about the use of their language—both the thoughts in their mind and the ones shared with others—we offer them a new perspective. They begin to move from an “I hate it when we have to...” to “this provides me with an opportunity to challenge myself to grow” mental perspective.

Helping students become more aware of their own language use and the power of their word will yield positive results. Our language use can produce effective and positive outcomes for the students. When an entire group of people begin using similar positive language, synergy occurs, resulting in more effective outcomes.

Consider integrating the following language techniques during project planning sessions.

- The formula “E + R = O” refers to “the Event + Response of person = the Outcome.” Awareness of this formula increases personal responsibility and diminishes the tendency to blame others. If each individual thinks from his or her point of contribution to the solution, more individuals will begin participating.

For example, instead of saying “no one comes to the dances,” students will say, “What did I do or say (or not do or say) that created this outcome? What can I do to increase attendance at dances?”

- When faced with a challenge, instead of focusing on the negative aspects of the matter, focus on the opportunities and state, “We have to create....[unity, or opportunity, or a solution].” By focusing on possibilities, students will start generating solutions rather than creating tension within the group.
- Have each student write down his or her responsibility using the phrase, “I commit to...” which is the beginning of an action on their part. They can also have accountability partners who will help them follow through with their commitments.
- Certain language choices help students follow through with responsibilities. Using proactive language yields positive results. Phrase requests with the outcome you desire.



Instead of...	Use...
“Don’t forget to...” “Remember to...”
“I have to...” or “I should...” “I choose to...”
“Our problem is...” “I create solutions for...”
“I don’t like this...” “What works for me is...”
“We need to...” “Let us consider...”

Instead of...

Use...

“I need you to...” “I invite you to...”
 “Why didn’t you...” “Help me understand why you...”

- When checking for understanding of one’s message, say “What I heard was....” and rephrase their comments. Then follow up the rephrase with “Did I understand correctly?”
- Provide feedback in a way that increases participation. In giving feedback and in evaluating the success of a project, use the following phrases: “What worked for me was...” and “What would work better for me is....” This allows the listener to understand your perspective while feeling accepted and understood.
- At times, written communication like e-mails may be misinterpreted because voice tone is removed from the written communication. When sending e-mails, end your message with a phrase that lets the reader understand your intention, such as “in the spirit of open and clear communication, in the spirit of clarifying

les, in the spirit of....”

- When people are feeling uncertain, instead of having them share the “it won’t work, it hasn’t worked before, it can’t be done,” mentality, use the phrase “up until now” to help them see ties that lie ahead. For example, instead of “we haven’t been able to raise enough with that program,” say, “Up until now,

we haven’t found a way to generate more funds. Let’s begin thinking of other strategies that we can create and use.”

The use of choices and positive language is a powerful tool. In our experiences, the transition from negative language to positive language for both teachers and students may take time to adjust the old language habits and thoughts. Be aware of your language use and its effect on others and be consistent in positive language use.

In the spirit of creating positive communication, we invite you to enjoy solution-oriented conversations with your students! ■

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