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2025 ICA Workshop: Fort Worth, Texas

From Negative to Positive: How to use positive language to say anything and yield positive results in lessons and interactions with colleagues

From the seemingly harmless things we often tell our students like "don't rush this phrase" to interactions with colleagues where we might say "I can't make it at that time," our society and industry is overwhelmed with negative language. Participants will be able to work together to replace negative statements with positive language. Learn to replace "don't rush" with "stay steady" and "I can't make it at that time" to "I can make it if it's an hour later." It takes some thought and commitment, but participants will learn some simple ways to make positive language become their primary language.

Background

While working as an admissions counselor, I was selected for a training workshop presented by Dr. J. Mitchell Perry where positive language was one of the main topics. Following the training, I presented the topic to several other departments. With a few modifications, I have implemented Dr. Perry's approaches in lessons and daily interactions for several years with positive results.

I. Introduction

1. Positive vs. negative language (why does it matter?)

A. Optimism

- Optimism is powerful and empowering
- Optimistic people tend to live longer and healthier lives (20%)
- Optimistic people tend to be more productive
- Optimistic people tend to have good quality relationships
- Optimistic people tend to be more influential and persuasive
- Optimists are problem solvers and recover faster from setbacks
- Optimism increases performance quality and brings others up

B. Pessimism

- Pessimistic people are often cynical (funny/popular, but kills power)
- Pessimists can be toxic and draining and tend to live shorter and unhealthy lives
- Pessimistic people often catastrophize and can get stuck in crisis mode
- Pessimism is a sort of learned helplessness that results in powerlessness
- Pessimists tend to wallow in problems and dismiss positive outcomes (dumb luck)
- Chronic pessimism decreases performance quality and can bring others down

2. The psychological impact of positive vs. negative phrases

A. Negative language and fear-based motivation

B. Positive language and reward-based motivation

C. Reception based on the audience and individual life experiences (test and see)

II. Change the Focus of Your Language

1. What EXISTS vs. what is missing
2. What CAN be done vs. what is impossible
3. The REWARD vs. the risk
4. RECOVERY vs. giving up

III. The Problem with “Not”

Say what things ARE vs. what they ARE NOT (what exists rather than what is absent)

- A. “Not bad” becomes GOOD
- B. “Not good” becomes BAD

IV. The Problem with “If we don’t ____, then we won’t ____”

Shift to “When we ____, then we will ____”

- A. “If we don’t perfect this section, then we won’t stay together at the concert” becomes WHEN WE REHEARSE THIS SECTION CONSISTENTLY, THEN WE WILL STAY TOGETHER AT THE CONCERT.
- B. “If you don’t practice long tones, then you won’t have endurance” becomes WHEN YOU PRACTICE LONG TONES, THEN YOU WILL HAVE ENDURANCE.

V. The Problem with Absolutes like “always” and “never”

1. These are conversation enders and can make your listener want to defend or push back

- A. “You are always late to rehearsals” becomes I HAVE NOTICED THAT YOU ARE OFTEN LATE TO REHEARSALS. IS THERE A WAY I CAN HELP?
- B. “You never have a pencil with you” becomes I HAVE NOTICED THAT YOU ARE OFTEN MISSING A PENCIL. HOW CAN YOU PLAN BETTER? or... THE EXPECTATION IS THAT YOU HAVE A PENCIL AT EVERY LESSON.

VI. Shifting to Positive language - Practical Application

1. Neutralize a negative statement (still somewhat negative, but moving in a positive direction)

- A. The magic of the word “avoid”
 - “Don’t rush” becomes AVOID RUSHING
 - “Don’t be predictable” becomes AVOID PREDICTABILITY
- B. Using “un” words
 - “I am not available at 10:00” becomes I AM UNAVAILABLE AT 10:00
 - “I am not happy” becomes I AM UNHAPPY
- C. Using “dis” words
 - “I don’t like Mozart” becomes I DISLIKE MOZART
 - “They don’t agree on tempos” becomes THEY DISAGREE ON TEMPOS
- D. Soften the absolutes
 - “You are never prepared” becomes YOU ARE OFTEN UNPREPARED
 - “We always practice at 8:00” becomes WE USUALLY PRACTICE AT 8:00
- E. Change the statement into a question
 - “Don’t use that fingering” becomes IS THAT THE BEST FINGERING?
 - “We shouldn’t dress casually” becomes IS CASUAL DRESS APPROPRIATE?

2. Transform negative statements into positive statements

(Change the FOCUS word for the desired result - neutralize first)

- “Don’t rush” to “Avoid rushing” and finally STAY STEADY
What do you want? STEADINESS (the real focus word)
- “Don’t be predictable” to “Avoid predictability” and finally BE SPONTANEOUS
What do you want? SPONTANEITY
- “I am not available at 10:00” to “I am unavailable at 10:00” and finally I AM AVAILABLE AT NOON
What do you want to convey? WHEN YOU ARE HAPPILY AVAILABLE
- “I am not happy” to “I am unhappy” and finally I AM SAD
How do you really feel? SAD
- “I don’t like Mozart” to “I dislike Mozart” and finally I HATE MOZART
Tell me how you really feel about Mozart? MOZART SUCKS! (just an example)
- “They don’t agree on the tempo” to “They disagree on the tempo” and finally THEY NEED TO AGREE ON TEMPO
What do they need? TO AGREE ON ONE TEMPO
- “You are never prepared” to “You are often unprepared” and finally IT’S IMPORTANT TO BE PREPARED
What do you want? TO CONVEY THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING PREPARED
- “We always practice at 8:00” to “We usually practice at 8:00” and finally WE COULD PRACTICE AT A DIFFERENT TIME IF NEEDED
What is important here? FLEXIBILITY
- “Don’t use that fingering” to “Is that the best fingering?” and finally LET’S WORK TOGETHER TO FIND THE BEST FINGERING IN THIS CONTEXT
What is the result we want? THE BEST FINGERING IN THE CONTEXT
- “We shouldn’t dress casually” to “Is casual dress appropriate?” and finally LET’S DRESS PROFESSIONALLY.
What do we want to convey? DRESSING PROFESSIONALLY

VII. Tools for Shifting Language

1. Replace the following words in your daily language:

A. Not, Never, Always, Nothing, None, No, Isn’t, Can’t, Won’t, Shouldn’t, Couldn’t...
(although NO could be argued depending on context or as a simple answer to a question)

2. Practical examples of common expressions and their positive replacements

- A. “Not bad” to VERY GOOD
- B. “Not as bad as I thought” to BETTER THAN I THOUGHT
- C. “Don’t procrastinate” to GET STARTED NOW
- D. “No problem” to IT’S A PLEASURE
- E. “Not only that” to IN ADDITION TO THAT
- F. “Not to mention” to AS WELL AS
- G. “Don’t be late” to BE ON TIME
- H. “Don’t forget your books” to REMEMBER YOUR BOOKS
- I. “You can’t find a better reed” to THIS IS THE BEST REED YOU CAN FIND
- J. “Why don’t we...” to HOW ABOUT, LET’S TRY, or WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Transform teaching/workplace statements from negative to positive (neutralize first if needed):

- A. You can't call me after 10:00 PM.
Neutralize _____
Positive _____
- B. If you don't give me your schedule, I can't plan the schedule for the studio.
Neutralize _____
Positive _____
- C. I'm not clear on the dynamics you are trying to convey.
Neutralize _____
Positive _____
- D. That isn't important right now.
Neutralize _____
Positive _____
- E. Don't be afraid to use more air.
Neutralize _____
Positive _____
- F. I don't like that concert hall.
Neutralize _____
Positive _____
- G. It's not uncommon to squeak while playing this passage.
Neutralize _____
Positive _____
- H. Don't forget your music!
Neutralize _____
Positive _____
- I. Don't play so loudly there.
Neutralize _____
Positive _____
- J. Never write on your music in ink.
Neutralize _____
Positive _____
- K. If you can't play it slowly, then you can't play it quickly.
Neutralize _____
Positive _____
- L. You are always so hard on yourself.
Neutralize _____
Positive _____
- M. You don't have to play it the fastest, but you can't be the slowest.
Neutralize _____
Positive _____
- N. I don't understand the confusion. Wasn't I clear?
Neutralize _____
Positive _____
- O. That's not necessarily bad.
Neutralize _____
Positive _____

Now, for an added challenge, transform these company slogans:

A. Nobody doesn't like Sara Lee.

Neutralize _____

Positive _____

B. Don't leave home without it.

Neutralize _____

Positive _____

C. Betcha can't eat just one.

Neutralize _____

Positive _____

D. If it doesn't get all over the place, it doesn't belong in your face.

Neutralize _____

Positive _____

E. Once you pop, you can't stop.

Neutralize _____

Positive _____

F. It's not just coffee. It's Starbucks.

Neutralize _____

Positive _____

G. Melts in your mouth, not in your hand.

Neutralize _____

Positive _____

H. There are some things money can't buy. For everything else, there's Mastercard.

Neutralize _____

Positive _____

I. There is no substitute.

Neutralize _____

Positive _____

J. If you don't look good, we don't look good.

Neutralize _____

Positive _____

Key takeaways that I would like to emphasize:

1. Awareness is the first step to change. Take note of how often you use negative language.
2. Start with the word "avoid." It is the easiest way to begin shifting to positive language.
3. Work towards saying what things are instead of focusing on the absence of something.

What are YOUR takeaways?
