How Do I *Prepare* Others for what I Want to Say?

Part I

Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

Many years ago I was providing an ongoing consultation with the staff at a residential treatment center. They worked with very challenging children and adolescents, many of whom were placed at the center given their impulsivity and angry outbursts. These outbursts often masked underlying anxiety and depression, emotions these youngsters were not able to label nor manage constructively.

Over a number of months I developed what I considered to be a close, respectful working relationship with the staff. I was impressed with their openness in examining their feelings and thoughts when interacting with the children in their care. They were refreshingly non-defensive and communicated a willingness to consider new and different ways of handling the difficult behaviors exhibited by the residents.

At one memorable meeting, a staff member (I will call him George) immediately asked if he could discuss a situation he had encountered a couple of days earlier. He reported that he had attempted to discuss with Ralph (also a pseudonym), a teenager in the program, the latter's provocative behavior, especially as it impacted on younger children. Ralph steadfastly denied any wrongdoing, prompting George to provide more examples of the behaviors in question. Within just a minute or two Ralph became increasingly angry and attempted to shove George and had to be physically restrained by several of the staff.

After describing this incident at our consultation meeting, George asked, "How might I have handled things differently?"

I replied, "It was a difficult situation you faced with Ralph. He refused to take any ownership for his provocative behaviors even though others had observed these behaviors."

George nodded and I asked, "Did you have any sense that Ralph would act towards you as aggressively as he did?"

In a forthright manner, George answered that given Ralph's impulsivity and anger and his failure to accept ownership for his behavior, he thought that Ralph's reaction was a likely outcome. George added, "But sometimes we have to confront kids like Ralph even though we

know it might lead to an outburst. If we don't hold the kids accountable for their actions, they'll never change."

I observed, "The point you're making is very valid. We couldn't allow Ralph to continue behaving the way he did. And regardless of what you said or did in confronting him, he may have acted the same way. However, I've often struggled with the question if there are ways of *preparing* kids like Ralph or, for that matter anyone, for what we plan to say to lessen the probability that they will resort to an angry, knee-jerk reaction."

The Impact of *Preparing*

This last question about *preparing* served as a catalyst for a lively discussion with George and other staff that I will describe in next month's article. For now, I wish to offer some background about why I used that particular word.

In describing my interaction with George, I intentionally italicized the word *preparing*. It's a concept I've increasingly emphasized in my clinical and consultation activities and my writings. As one example, it is a prominent theme in the book I co-authored with David Richman, *Chasing Positivity,* that is geared for financial and business advisors and is equally relevant for almost any consultation/advisory relationship.

My use of the word *preparing* was not confined to my consultation with George. During this time in my professional career I began to write about "empathic communication," which I perceived as a form of communication that was characterized by empathy and caring, and that facilitated constructive dialogue with others. Empathic communication invited the following questions:

"In anything I say or do, what do I hope to accomplish?"

"Am I saying or doing it in a way that the other person (people) will be most likely to hear what I have to say, not become defensive, and respond in a constructive manner?"

"How do I *prepare* people to hear a message that I believe they may disagree with and even find critical, thereby lessening the probability that they will immediately dismiss or get angry with what I am attempting to communicate?"

In posing these questions, I was influenced by an article published in 1980 by psychologist Paul Wachtel that was included as one of the readings I assigned in a psychotherapy seminar I taught at McLean Hospital. The article was titled, "What Should We Say to Our Patients?: On the Wording of Therapists' Comments." In the abstract, Wachtel wrote that the

article placed "emphasis on ways of conveying one's message that help the patient to hear and confront what is being said in a productive way, in contrast to ways of presenting the same message that arouse resistance and anxiety and lower the patient's self-esteem." Wachtel added that the exact wording of the words we use with patients, while very important, is "a surprisingly overlooked aspect of how change can be facilitated or impeded."

A consideration of the exact words we use in any interaction—for example, between spouses or partners, parents and children, teachers and students, employers and employees, the list is endless— will play a large role in how productive that interaction will be. While the focus of this article is on the impact of words, I also recognize the power of nonverbal communication, including tone of voice and facial and body expressions. As a matter of fact, the research I conducted both for my master's and doctorate degrees examined the influence of nonverbal communication. I am well aware that nonverbal communication is understood to be more significant in many interactions than the words that are used. However, in my experience, if the words we use are rooted in empathy and caring, our nonverbal messages are likely to be in synchrony with these words.

Vignettes to Consider

The following are several examples taken from my clinical and consultation activities that place a spotlight on the significance of using empathic communication. In next month's article I plan to share the ways in which I responded in each situation. Please consider how you might reply.

"Nagging" parents of a teenager. Parents came to see me about their 13-year-old daughter, frustrated by what they termed her "lack of responsibility in putting away dishes, cleaning her room, completing her schoolwork." They said that whenever they reminded her to be more responsible, she would quickly respond, "You're always nagging me. None of my friends has parents who nag as much as you do." Her parents, out of exasperation, were prone to reply, "If we nag so much it's because you don't meet your responsibilities. We wouldn't have to nag you if you were more responsible!" Not surprisingly, their uttering this kind of statement did not lead to improved responsibility om the part of their daughter. In consulting with these parents, I engaged them in reflecting upon the following question, "How can parents remind their kids to be more responsible without the latter feeling they are being nagged?"

You want us to spoil children. Another example (or series of examples) involve experiences I have had at several schools when I consulted about children and teens I was seeing in therapy. As many of my readers are aware, one of my favorite strategies to nurture motivation and resilience in children is to provide them with opportunities to engage in activities that enrich the lives of others—activities that I call "contributory" or "charitable." There is a body of research that demonstrates that seemingly unmotivated students—even high school students ready to drop out of school—became noticeably more motivated, responsible, and hopeful when asked to help younger students in some manner, such as reading to them an hour or two a week.

I was excited by these research findings. They paralleled some of my own research and they resonated with the strength-based approach I was formulating in my work. I naively expected my enthusiasm to be shared by all of the teachers of all of my patients. In actuality, most of the educators were enthusiastic to implement new strategies, but there were those who offered the refrain, "Why would you reward students who are not doing their own work by allowing them to read to younger students? That should be left to the students who are being responsible." The same sentiment was voiced about other possible contributory activities such as assisting a secretary in the office, watering the plants in the classroom, feeding a pet.

I made it clear that I thought contributory activities should be available for all students, and not just those who were displaying problems in school. However, even when voicing what I considered to be an inclusive, not exclusive, position, I continued to be met with, "Some students don't deserve to read to younger students or help out in school. They haven't earned that right." One particular teacher who seemed very angry with any of my suggestions said to me, "The philosophy you're suggesting is to spoil children and I will not do that!"

I must admit that when I first encountered such critical comments, my initial thought was, "These are truly rule-bound and inflexible people who lack empathy and compassion." I was also upset by what appeared to be knee-jerk responses to my suggested interventions, feeling that they wouldn't even spend a few minutes considering the merits of what I had to say.

This was also a time in my career in which I began to embrace the significance of "personal control," that is, identifying factors over we have some control and can change rather than expecting or waiting for the other person to change first. As I reflected on how I might adopt personal control when interacting with teachers and others whom I considered to be negative and lacking in empathy I adopted a new perspective and asked, "What is it that I can do

differently in presenting my ideas so that others are less likely to immediately reject some of my suggested intervention and more likely to consider them?" This question led to yet another question, namely, "How do I *prepare* teachers who are quick to reject my suggestions to at least give them some thought?"

Let people know they're not doing a good job. One final vignette involving a biotech company. I was brought in by Human Resources to focus especially on a department that had a high rate of staff leaving. During exit interviews many of the departing staff directed their ire at the style of their manager. They described him as overly critical and not likely to express positive feedback. When I interviewed this manager, he had been made aware of the observations of the staff who resigned. He told me, "I know that some people see me that way, but that's because they don't think it's necessary for them to meet their responsibilities. I've found that you can't be lax as a manager. You have to let people know when they aren't doing a good job. Otherwise, you'll have a staff where a lot of people won't perform. If you're lax you may retain more staff, but what good is that if the ones who stay aren't very responsible."

Anyone hearing this manager's perspective and knowing that a number of his staff had left might recommend that the best solution would be to fire the manager. Even if that were the recommendation, it might not be easy to accomplish since arguments could be made that he had not crossed a line where termination would be justified. Putting that important issue aside, in listening to him I felt he had a genuine commitment to the company but possessed fixed, counterproductive views of what motivates staff and, at least at first glance, did not seem especially open to considering alternative views. Once again, I reflected upon what words I might use to encourage him to become more receptive to an alternate style of speaking with and managing staff.

Concluding Thought

As noted earlier, in my next column I will share the ways I replied in these different situations. I would encourage you to think about not only how you might reply but also how you can apply your responses to these vignettes to situations in your own life. Obviously, there is not one "right" way. In addition, in my May column I will discuss an article I recently read that, similar to the points raised by Wachtel in his article, examines those words and phrases that help us to communicate more effectively and that minimize miscommunication and misunderstanding.

http://www.drrobertbrooks.com/