How Do I *Prepare* Others for what I Want to Say?
Part III
Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

As I have noted in previous June articles, this will be my last column until September. Once again, I would like to express my appreciation for the comments, questions, and insights offered by my readers during the past year. I always welcome your feedback as I attempt to share my thoughts about a variety of different topics that I believe will be of interest to my readers.

****

My [April articles](#) focused on the importance of "preparing" others for our communications. This preparation is especially challenging when we sense they will strongly disagree with our message and even respond in an angry and/or defensive manner. Last month I described the words I would have used to "confront" a teenager in a residential treatment program about his provocative behavior. In this column, I will return to several other vignettes offered in my April article and suggest ways in which I would respond in each situation. Prior to considering these vignettes, it might be helpful to consider the beliefs I outlined in my May column that can serve as obstacles to effective communication, including the notion that there is only one "right" way to say and do things and/or quickly dismissing a proposed attempt at "preparing" as not likely to succeed.

One other point. Several of my readers wrote that they found it informative when I detailed the actual words I would have used and my rationale for using these words as I reviewed last month's vignette. Given this feedback, I plan to go into the same depth for the vignettes included in this column. While this will result in a lengthier column than usual, I hope the specificity in dialogue provides a clearer picture of the points I am addressing in our communications.

The Vignettes from Part I

"Nagging" parents of a teenager. Parents of 13-year-old Lucy (all names are pseudonyms) contacted me as a result of their ongoing frustration with what they detailed as her "lack of responsibility in putting away dishes, cleaning her room, completing her schoolwork." They observed that their reminders for Lucy to fulfill her responsibilities elicited an angry, "You're always nagging me," to which they retorted, "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, this response from the parents did not result in improved responsibility on Lucy's part and, if anything, increased tension in the household.

In a session with the parents, I introduced the following question: "How can parents remind their kids to be more responsible without the latter feeling they are being nagged?" Lucy's parents immediately questioned if that were even possible with their daughter. Lucy's mother observed, "She accuses us of nagging the moment we remind her of her responsibilities."

As I often do in these kinds of scenarios, I asked several questions including, "Have you noticed times when Lucy is more responsible and doesn't have to be reminded to do things?" Although it may seem obvious, the reason I pose such a question is based on a therapeutic technique that has been labeled the "exception rule." As the name implies, it is rooted in the premise that when parents are encouraged to reflect upon exceptions to what they consider to be their children's typical problematic behaviors, it may open a door to understanding when and why more positive behaviors are apparent. In my experience the exception rule can also alert parents to realize that an "irresponsible" child is not irresponsible every moment of the day and there is realistic hope for improvement. The exception rule is not limited to a parent-child relationship but is relevant for almost all relationships.

After some consideration Lucy's parents reported that she did not have to be reminded to be on time for a twice a week babysitting job with a neighbor's two young children that occurred right after school. While the mother of the young children was home at the same time, Lucy's presence provided this mother an opportunity to engage in work-related activities. Lucy's parents added that although she had to be reminded to do her homework, she was responsible about getting ready each morning to be on time for school.

Although these "exceptions" might seem small, their existence sets the stage for me to say, "Although it's frustrating when Lucy doesn't meet certain responsibilities, I'm glad to hear that there are times during the week when she doesn't have to be reminded to do things."

Having identified at least a couple of areas of responsibility, my next goal was to encourage the parents to specify a couple of areas in which they would like to see Lucy more responsible. Limiting the desired changes to just a couple of areas rather than what can be experienced as a never-ending list by a child or teenager increases the probability that the child will be less likely to feel overwhelmed and more likely to begin to make changes. The parents

selected having Lucy put her clothes in the hamper and not on the floor in her room and also complete her homework assignments on time.

I next said to the parents, "I want to ask a question that may at first seem somewhat unusual, but I think it might help us in approaching Lucy." Lucy's father replied, "Just ask." I responded, "What do you think would happen if you asked Lucy, 'Do you think we nag you too much?'" Lucy's mother looked incredulous and quickly exclaimed, "Why would we ask that, we know that Lucy thinks we always nag her?" I explained that such a response by Lucy would not surprise me, that I would expect her to say the two of you always nag her.

Lucy's parents looked even more bewildered. I continued, "I'm looking for some way to lessen Lucy's knee-jerk response that you always nag her, perhaps paving the way for a more productive dialogue. Thus, if Lucy, as expected, says you're always nagging her, you can say, 'We know we come across in that way when we remind you to do certain things, but we want to figure out with you a way to stop having to remind you so that we don't always seem to be nagging you.'"

I cautioned that Lucy might quickly return to her default response that they always nag her about everything. If she does, they might be tempted to resort to their own default response that the only reason they have to remind her is because she doesn't meet her responsibilities, and if she met her responsibilities, they wouldn't have to remind her.

I advised that if these defaults came into play, they suggest to Lucy that the three of them select just a couple of responsibilities upon which to focus instead of presenting her with a long list that would be experienced as overwhelming.

My next recommendation may seem puzzling, but I have found it very effective. I proposed that the parents say to Lucy, "We realize even as parents we may forget to meet some of our responsibilities. If you notice that happening, this is how we would like you to remind us (parents can decide how they would like to be reminded; I've heard a wide spectrum of answers including, "Just tell me" or "Send me a text"). Once parents have the courage to announce how they would like to be reminded, they can then say, "Now that I've mentioned how I would like to be reminded, how would you like to be reminded just in case you forget to do something you said you would do?"

I hope that this kind of approach with its accompanying remarks is not perceived as simplistic in addressing complex issues. As I've noted, these kinds of preparatory comments

serve as initial steps to create a respectful, problem-solving means of communication. While they might not always accomplish this goal, with Lucy and her parents they contributed to nurturing a less tense, more productive relationship.

You want us to spoil children. The second vignette highlighted my belief that when students are engaged in what I call "contributory" or "charitable" activities, it reinforces positive behaviors, including caring and intrinsic motivation while lessening self-defeating, counterproductive actions. I learned that my enthusiasm for this intervention was not shared by all teachers. At school conferences, I heard, "Why would you reward students who are not doing their own work by allowing them to read to younger students? That privilege should be restricted to the students who are demonstrating responsibility." The same sentiment was voiced about other possible activities such as assisting a secretary in the office, watering the plants in the classroom, or feeding a pet. I made it clear that I thought that contributory activities should be available to all students, whether they were struggling in school or not.

In my April column, I wrote 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 slowly recognized that if teachers were to change their perspective about contributory activities for struggling students, it would be necessary for me to consider the ways in which I presented my ideas about such activities. I wondered, "What was the best way to prepare teachers to hear my viewpoint, a viewpoint that they may immediately reject?"

The answer at which I arrived was similar to the one I recommended to George (please see my May article), a staff member at a residential treatment center, in his work with Ralph, a teenager in the program—namely, to voice the possibility of disagreement before offering a proposed intervention. Thus, at school conferences I began to state, "I have some thoughts about strategies I might use with my patient in the school setting, but I've been told by some educators that some of these strategies feel as if we're giving in to kids or rewarding their negative behavior. If after I'm finished describing these strategies you think it seems as if I'm giving in to students or reinforcing their negative behavior, please let me know. That is not my intention at all and honestly, why would teachers apply a strategy that they perceive does not hold kids accountable?"

I was impressed that this and similar statements served to minimize the doubt and cynicism associated with any of the strategies I recommended. Teachers displayed a refreshing

openness to listening to my rationale for different interventions. After hearing me, some teachers and school administrators were were still concerned that these contributory activities could be interpreted as reinforcing negative behavior, but they were more willing to engage in a discussion about the possible positive impact of these strategies.

Not surprisingly, even with preparation some teachers rejected outright the idea of using contributory activities or similar interventions with some challenging students. One elementary school teacher dismissed my recommendation for Sarah, one of my patients. In an angry voice she said to me, "Your philosophy will lead to having more spoiled children who feel they can do anything they want and still be rewarded."

In last month's article I discussed psychologist Daniel Goleman's observation that sometimes "the amygdala gets hi-jacked." That happened to me as I considered what I interpreted to be this teacher's very accusatory assessment of my philosophy and work; in response, I questioned the effectiveness of this teacher's approach. The questions I ask attendees at my workshops to consider, such as: "What do you hope to accomplish in any interaction with another person?" and "What do you intentionally say so that the other person will be most willing to cooperate with you?" were pushed aside under a cascade of negative emotions. In this scenario the possibility of reinforcing a positive relationship with Sarah's teacher was diminished and Sarah's progress suffered as a result.

I began seeing Sarah a couple of months before the school year ended; she was going to have a different teacher the following year. As a result of my relatively brief interactions with this teacher I did not have ample time to resolve my differences with her, although I'm not certain even if I had several more months, I could have done so. What I did do was engage in a great deal of soul-searching reflecting upon how I might have handled the situation with this particular teacher more effectively so that I would be better prepared to manage similar situations in the future. One insight I had was that I was asking this teacher to be more empathic towards Sarah, a child whom she obviously did not like and viewed as "entitled" and "manipulative," and yet I could not be more empathic towards this teacher, whom I did not like. I've often asserted that it's less challenging to be empathic with people who agree with us or follow what we ask them to do; however, a true test of empathy is to attempt to understand the world of someone who angers or disappoints us.

What might I have done with Sarah's teacher? With hindsight I think it would have been helpful if I had acknowledged and empathized at the beginning of my meeting with her teacher that some of Sarah's behaviors could be very frustrating. Instead, I started by suggesting an intervention the teacher might use, which could easily be interpreted by this teacher as telling her what to do in her own classroom without any appreciation of the challenges Sarah presented.

An important goal was for me to develop a cooperative relationship with Sarah's teacher. Given this goal another possible response to her "spoiling children" comment might have been, "I appreciate your letting me know that you believe that what I'm suggesting might contribute to children becoming spoiled rather than helping them to be more responsible. That's not my intent at all, so I have to figure out another way of sharing my ideas without their being seen as leading to spoiled kids." If we keep in mind a primary goal of developing a collaborative relationship with this teacher, this latter kind of comment serves to validate what the teacher is saying. Validation does not mean you agree with another person but rather you are attempting to understand their position, which typically lessens a sense of negativity and anger. Validation invites rather than closes off continued dialogue.

Another preparing technique involves what clinicians label "joining." One of my favorite examples of joining, especially important when we are interacting with people who possess very different perspectives from our own, is to identify even one small area of agreement and focus on improving that area. Although I did not use any kind of joining strategy with Sarah's teacher, which I believe may have proved beneficial, I now use it more frequently in my clinical and consultation activities.

How might joining have been employed with Sarah's teacher? The latter "accused" me of spoiling kids, emphasizing the importance of kids becoming more responsible and respectful. When she expressed that goal, it would have been an opportune time for me to have commented, "When you used the words 'responsible' and 'respectful,' I also want the same outcome for kids. I realize we have some of the same goals for raising and teaching kids, and where we seem to differ is what we consider to be the best strategies to reach these goals."

I've found that if we can identify just one or two goals with which we agree and focus on the most effective strategies to achieve those goals, our chances of working collaboratively increase noticeably. I've often asserted during my presentations that even if there is only a 5% agreement with another individual about important goals, that's where our time and energy

should be initially devoted rather than on the 95% about which we disagree. Working on the 5% is more likely to create positive results than focusing on the 95% areas of disagreement. Once those positive results have been achieved, it will be easier to address topics that are housed within the 95% area of disagreement.

Let people know they're not doing a good job. This third vignette represents a dynamic I have witnessed on numerous occasions in different settings and relationships, whether parent-child, employer-employee, supervisor-supervisee. It is especially represented by the behavior of someone in what might be considered a position of power. The specific illustration that I described in my April article was in a department in a biotech company that was headed by a manager who was described by departing staff as overly critical and not likely to offer positive feedback. When I interviewed this manager, I quickly learned that his basic position was to let his staff know when they weren't doing a good job so that they would become more responsible. He added that it was not necessary to offer positive feedback when they had done a commendable job since the latter is what is expected.

I believe that most of us would question the logic, wisdom, and effectiveness of such a negative approach. Unfortunately, as previously noted, I have witnessed and continue to witness this dominance of negativity in many situations. In viewing this dynamic from a "preparation" perspective, it is evident that what lessens communication or feedback from being experienced as accusatory or critical is that the recipient of the feedback is very aware that the person providing such feedback truly cares about them and has provided positive feedback on a regular basis.

I've also emphasized in my presentations and writings that the expression of positive feedback may transpire within a "micromoment" and may include both verbal and nonverbal communication. These micromoments or microaffirmations arouse positive emotions that benefit all parties involved in the interaction that has taken place. The creation of positive emotions is a powerful preparatory force for all kinds of interpersonal situations.

In Parts I and II, I wrote that I planned to discuss an article that resonates with this three-part series. However, given the length of this column, rather than my summarizing the article in question, I decided to provide the following direct link.

Final Comments

Although I will not be sending out another column until September, I will continue to provide links to articles on my social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn.

I hope that during the next couple of months you have ample time to reflect, refresh, and relax, all important qualities to help us to become more resilient and manage the many challenges and stresses that are present in today's world.

http://www.drrobertbrooks.com/