

## Coaching Language: A Key to Student Learning

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One of the most important factors in student engagement and motivation is frequent and effective faculty – student contact (Chickering and Gamson, 1987). How communication flows and is received can make or break the learning relationship. The use of coaching language is a tool that facilitates a strong learning/working relationship.

What makes coaching language different from common everyday speech is the use of positive phrasing and language softeners (Nguyen, T.T.M, 2013). Combined, these two components help draw out students and establish a safe working environment. When students feel safe, they are more apt to accept constructive criticism with a positive attitude (Leung, Su & Morris, 2001). Coaching language can create a positive, nurturing environment where students open up to learn.

Positive phrasing tells students what needs to be done and proposes positive actions as alternatives. Combined with language softeners such as *perhaps*, *maybe* and *could*, you create communication that is perceived as supportive and encouraging (Nguyen, 2013). Many times we use negative phrasing without realizing it. Statements like ‘please don’t hesitate to contact me’ can be stated more positively as ‘please contact me anytime.’ Negative phrasing is perceived as having a low key tone of blame and contains words like don’t and can’t. Our brains subconsciously ignore negatives like don’t and shouldn’t and only focus on the words following them. For example, if someone tells you don’t think about elephants, the first image in your brain is typically an elephant.

Softeners are phrases that are put at the beginning of a sentence. The goal is to gentle your words. A question like ‘what do you want?’ can sound forceful. Changing the question to ‘I wonder what you are looking to accomplish?’ is gentler and perceived in a positive manner. Phrases like ‘I wonder,’ ‘I’m curious,’ and ‘I’d like to ask you’ at the beginning of a question generates a softer tone.

Shifting to the use of positive language is an ongoing process. Begin with small steps. Pick out a couple of negative words or phrases you use often and focus on changing them to positive language. Telling someone ‘don’t forget’ can be perceived as negative. Replacing ‘don’t forget’ with ‘please remember’ creates a more positive message. ‘Don’t worry’ can be replaced with ‘focus on a solution.’ Another example is ‘never give up’ which can be replaced with ‘just keep going.’ Email is actually an excellent way to incorporate coaching language by editing out negatives before you hit send. After you get comfortable using positive language in your writing, begin to integrate it into your verbal communications.

Start your communications with a specific positive (Fowler & Wilford, 2015). Positives like ‘good job’ or ‘excellent work’ are too generic. Point out something specific that is done well. Be respectful without patronizing. Keep the tone of your communication congenial and diplomatic. Use clear and direct language free from innuendo or sarcasm. Focus on the positive actions you want to see. Use a warm, but professional tone. Instead of reacting to the student, take the time to make a well thought out response naming concrete, specific behaviours or actions.

Encourage and support students. It goes a long way to help build confidence and trust. Additionally, manage expectations. It’s very positive to do more than expected than to promise and not be able to accomplish all your tasks.

Positive feedback needs to be specific and realistic (Fowler & Wilford, 2015). If you praise someone for doing the minimum, then s/he won't be motivated to do more. If you overdo positive feedback, the message received will seem insincere. Remain positive even when giving negative feedback by communicating how the student can improve (Van Der Helden & Boksem, 2012).

Use the sandwich approach. Begin with positive feedback and end with positive feedback leaving negative feedback in the middle. Students will be more open to negative feedback when you open and close with specific positives. This approach does not work when negative comments are specific and the positives are too general or vague. The intent when using the sandwich approach is to give balanced feedback. The positive comments must be as specific and genuine as the negative feedback. The entire communication is perceived as useful and becomes a positive experience.

Here is an example of the sandwich approach:

The tone you use in your writing style is conversational and easy to read. I especially like your use of personal examples intertwined with the theories we are studying. What you need to work on is appropriately referencing your source documents. When you use your own words to describe a theory, you need to tell your reader where this information was taken from. Please refer to the resource section of your course syllabus where you'll find websites that can help you with reference formatting. Overall, your descriptions of the theories are clear and concise. The connections you make between your experiences and these theories help me see how you take what you are learning and relate it to a practical application.

As a teaching tool, the tone of your communications can support learning. The use of coaching language enhances a student's ability to accept feedback and learn from it. Positive and encouraging communication between faculty and students display mutual respect and helps develop a working relationship that is based on trust.

### References

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