



Conscious Communication

Four Critical Pieces of Information

Observations & Evaluations

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We live in a culture of evaluations and judgments. They are incorporated in our language in words like: faster, better, smarter. We judge and evaluate constantly. We need to evaluate just to survive: “Do I need a coat today?”, “Is the bath too hot?”, “Can I cross the street safely now?” However, evaluations, when stated as facts, can cause us problems in negotiations. Often evaluations are heard as criticism: “What a ridiculous idea!”, “You did it wrong!”, “You’re being petty.”

When we are communicating a concern to another person we want them to focus on the specifics of what we are saying without interrupting, and yet maintain a connection with them. If we express ourselves using evaluations, judgments or diagnoses the other person is likely to interpret these as criticism, and may begin to feel defensive and start criticizing us in return. An approach more likely to maintain a connection is one that uses observation to describe our concerns.

An observation is something that we can see, hear, or touch. It is something that can be mea-

sured. Evaluations involve interpretations or judgments about the things we have observed. They are subjective. We may observe that there is a chair in the room, but that it is a big chair or a beautiful chair would be an evaluation.

It is not easy to separate our evaluations from our observations, especially in the field of social concerns where we use evaluations in our appraisal of situations. The following story is an example of how difficult it can be:

I was asked to mediate a dispute in a social service agency, dealing with ex-patients of mental health institutions. The dispute was between the executive director and one of the caseworkers of the agency. The content of the conflict was completely subjective, with evaluations and interpretations stated as facts.

At an initial meeting, I asked about the conflict. The executive director, (E.D.), began the discussion:

E.D.: “I think we need to transfer one of our clients to another agency but the staff in charge doesn’t agree with me.”

Me: “Tell me why you think your client needs to be transferred.”

E.D.: “He’s violent.”

Caseworker interjects: “He’s not violent, he’s afraid.”

Me: “Tell me what actions of his you are calling violent.”

E.D.: “He scares people.”

Caseworker interjects: “He looks a bit strange.”

Me: “What does he do to scare people or leads you to believe he’s violent?”

E.D.: “He has no sense of right and wrong.”

Caseworker interjects: “Well, emotionally he’s only about 4 years old.”

E.D.: “He thinks he can get away with anything.”

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Caseworker interjects: "He's not smart enough to know that."

E.D.: "He needs more attention than we can afford to give him."

Caseworker interjects: "He just wants to be accepted like everyone else."

Notice how the caseworker contradicts or modifies the executive director's evaluations of what the client is, does, has, thinks, needs or wants. The caseworker has a different evaluation, and neither party is describing anything that is observable or measurable.

The problem was two-fold: What to do for the client based upon conflicting evaluations and how to go about making that decision without alienating everyone involved. What turned out to be at stake here was the executive director's fear that anyone get hurt. Her concerns led her to make a unilateral decision to transfer the client to another agency. The caseworker, having much closer contact with the client, did not view the transfer as necessary and saw it as merely transferring the liability to another agency that would not provide any more safeguards than they could. Until we got to these underlying issues, the evaluations remained the battleground.

The point of my sharing this story is to show the difficulty that can arise from mixing evaluations with observations, stating evaluations as facts.

The following table of examples illustrate the difference between observations which are mixed together with evaluations, and how those statements might be expressed as an observation without the evaluations:

Evaluations that infer what....:	Evaluation:	One possible observation:
he is	"He's violent."	"He swings his arms around when he's afraid and has hit staff on two different occasions."
he does	"He scares people."	"People unfamiliar with him tell me his looks and actions are startling."
he has	"He has no sense of right and wrong."	"He has taken things that don't belong to him."
he thinks	"He thinks he can get away with anything."	"There are no consequences for unacceptable behavior."

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