

ADR Skill of the Month

Alternative Dispute Resolution Services (ADR)

- Mediation
- Training
- Coaching
- Facilitation

April 2010

Southwest SELPA
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“I” Messages Really Do Work

There I was in Palm Beach, Florida, conducting professional development training for non-profit administrators, and it was going great. Everyone was actively participating and had been open to learning new communication techniques. Then I came to the topic of “I” Messages and they immediately shut down, one of them proclaiming, “Oh Marc, that stuff is a bunch of California woo-woo. It doesn’t work on the east coast.”

So I called upon an ADR Skill we’ve presented previously, namely bringing “legitimacy” to the case we’re trying to make. I suggested that they trust me on this, because the techniques – when used appropriately – absolutely work, which may be why “I” Message theory happens to be imbedded in the curriculum at the Harvard School of Negotiation. (Invoking the Ivy League is a sure fire defense against the dreaded woo-woo assault...)

I don’t know who actually developed the “I” Message formula or I’d gladly cite the source but the way it plays out in practice may be understood as follows.

Step 1: “I feel...” (Talk about your feelings)

Step 2: “When ...” (State the specific behavior)

Step 3: “Because...” (Explain what happens to you)

Step 4: “And what I NEED is ...” (What makes the situation better)

Please see the next page for some things to remember and suggested tips on practicing the ‘I’ message formula

Marc Purchin, Director of ADR Services

Things to Remember and Suggested Tips On Practicing the Skill

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- When we talk about difficult situations (those about which we have strong feelings) we need to be careful how we say things. We don't want to make the situation worse by prompting anger or confusion. We need to provide important information about ourselves quickly, clearly and in a way that encourages the other person(s) to work with us to find a solution.
- Talk about yourself; about what you think, feel, need and want. (eg. "I have a problem, I feel angry. I need more clarity from you about meeting times. I want to be able to plan the rest of my day. I think this problem is serious.")
- Use neutral language, but be as specific as possible to convey how someone's actions made you feel.
 - Vague: "I can never count on you."
 - Specific: "I got angry when you forgot our meeting yesterday."
- Begin your sentences with "I" instead of "You."
 - More effective: "I feel hurt and neglected when you don't let me know you will be late for dinner."
 - Less effective: "You don't care about me anymore. You are late on purpose to ruin dinner and hurt my feelings!"
- State your positive intentions to resolve the conflict. (eg. "This difficulty between us concerns me. I think if we sit down and talk, we can make things better. I'm willing to spend the time necessary to improve the situation.")
- Tell the other person that you want to listen to his or her viewpoint. (eg. "I realize we may each see this problem in a different way. Your point of view is important to me. I will take time to listen to all you have to say about it.")

Practice, practice, and practice some more. Try role-playing with one or two people you trust. Get feedback. Ask, "How did this feel to you?" "Did my message put you on the defensive?" "What can I do differently?"

If you are part of a staff development or parent support group, take some time on this: break up into pairs and have each person take a turn. Then reconvene the whole group and invite volunteers to share their 'I' Messages. Remember, this "stuff" is an art, not a science – but it works – and we can all learn from each other... even people from other coasts.