

Business Skills 360 – Diplomatic and Direct Language

Discussion Questions

1. Can you think of some situations where you must be very careful about the words you choose?
2. In which types of situations is it necessary to speak very directly to people?
3. Which do you prefer to hear from a boss or leader: very direct language or polite and careful language? Why?

Vocabulary

Emotions are running high – if emotions are running high, it means that people in a group are becoming upset, angry, or agitated; “Jim tried to make a joke because emotions were running high and everyone needed to calm down.”

On edge – very nervous or tense; “The interviewees were all on edge as they waited for their names to be called.”

The clock is ticking – we say “the clock is ticking” when there is a tight timeline or approaching deadline; “Come on guys, the clock is ticking on this project so nobody can leave until it’s finished.”

Fine balancing act – a situation that requires balancing opposing people, activities, or views; “The mediator has to perform a fine balancing act between the union and the owners.”

Offended – emotionally hurt or upset; “Julie was very offended when her boss suggested that women should get paid less than men.”

To cushion the blow – to make a bad situation or bad news seem less serious; “The CEO cushioned the blow of the pay cuts by announcing an increase in vacation days for all employees.”

Lousy – very bad; “You’ll make a lousy impression at your interview if you arrive in a wrinkled suit.”

Chances are – “chances are” is a way of introducing something that we think will most likely or probably happen; “Chances are if we raise prices, customers will complain.”

Course of action – a short-term plan or sequence of activities; “The managers met to decide the best course of action after the discovery that employees had been stealing money.”

Sense of urgency – the feeling that a situation needs immediate attention; “Bart’s sense of urgency about the website problems drove him to stay at the office past midnight.”

Head-to-head – a discussion between two people; “I think I need to have a head-to-head with Fiona about being late for work every day.”

Asking for trouble – if you are “asking for trouble,” you are making a decision that will lead to problems; “Considering the recent financial scandals, not following accepted accounting practices is asking for trouble.”

To assess – to examine and evaluate; “Interviews allow a company to assess the character of potential employees.”

On board – if someone is “on board” with an idea or plan, it means he or she agrees and will follow; “I was happy to learn that all of my colleagues were on board with my plan to throw a surprise party for Mr. Bridges.”

One-size-fits-all – suitable or appropriate for everybody or every situation; “The company wanted a customized English training course rather than a one-size-fits-all solution.”

Transcript

Hi! It's Tim Simmons here with another edition of Business Skills 360. I've been listening to the current series on handling a crisis, and I just wanted to jump in with a couple of important points on the *language* we use in a crisis. We've heard some folks dealing with a pretty serious crisis: an accident at a factory. And maybe you've noticed how some of the people are quite careful about the words they use. Careful is important.

You see, a crisis is a sensitive situation. **Emotions are running high** and people are **on edge**. There is the potential for conflict if you do or say the wrong thing. At the same time, **the clock is ticking** and you may not have time to manage everyone's feelings. For these reasons, you have a very **fine balancing act** between being diplomatic and being direct.

What do we mean by being "diplomatic?" Well, diplomatic language is polite and careful. We use it so people don't feel **offended** or get upset. Let's see how this works in practice. Imagine you need to tell your boss about a bad accident. Do you say "There's been a bad accident?" You could say this, but it's probably too direct. To **cushion the blow**, you could say something like "It seems that there's been quite a bad accident." How is this more diplomatic? Well, it starts with "It seems..." That's an indirect way of introducing something. "Perhaps" and "maybe" are other common ways to do this. Or you can use "apparently," like this: "Apparently there's been quite a bad accident."

Now, the other thing you heard there is "quite," as in "*quite* a bad accident." That's a minimizing expression. It makes the situation sound not as bad as it really is. We do this when we say things like "this problem is *rather* urgent" and "we have a *slight* problem." Just by adding words such as "quite," "rather," "slight," "a little," and "a bit," we can be more diplomatic.

Okay, another way to be diplomatic is by using questions. Imagine you think someone made a **lousy** decision. You could say "You made a lousy decision." But **chances are** that person is going to react negatively, so you should be diplomatic. In this case, you can use a question, like "Are we sure this is the right thing to do?" Or maybe you think someone is trying to decide on a **course of action** too quickly. You could say "Wouldn't it be better to talk about this a bit more?" Questions, especially ones starting with "would" and "wouldn't," are more diplomatic than direct statements.

Okay, but do we want to be diplomatic all the time? Definitely not. Diplomatic language can be rather indirect. And for that reason, people might not understand just how serious we are. Sometimes we need to **convey** a **sense of urgency** or give very clear instructions. In these situations, we need to be direct.

Imagine you're having a [head-to-head](#) with an employee after a big accident, and you don't want him to talk to the media. You could be diplomatic and say "It might not be a good idea to talk to the media." But that's not strong enough. In this case, you should be direct and say, "Don't talk to the media." This is what we call an imperative, which is a sentence with no subject. We use them for commands, like "Fix the problem" or "Tell me what happened." Imperatives are direct, not diplomatic, which is exactly what you need here.

Direct language is also essential when you're giving instructions, which need to be clear, especially in a crisis. Imagine you want an employee to inspect some machinery, repair any problems, and then file a report. Do you start with "Maybe we should have a little look at that machinery"? Is that clear? That sounds like you're thinking out loud. The person who hears that may or may not do it. In a crisis, that's [asking for trouble](#). You need to be clear and say "First, inspect the machinery. Then fix any problems you find and file a report." No diplomatic language like "maybe" or "little." The instructions are perfectly clear because they're direct.

So, when should you be diplomatic and when should you be direct? Well, you really need [to assess](#) the situation and determine which is best. Diplomatic language can protect people's feelings. It can also avoid conflict and build trust. Those can all be very important in a crisis, when everybody needs to be [on board](#) with a plan. On the other hand, direct language can show a sense of urgency and seriousness, and it can prevent confusion. Those are also important in a conflict, when things must happen quickly and misunderstanding is just not an option. Remember that to be a good crisis manager, you need to adapt your style and strategy to the situation. You can't have a [one-size-fits-all](#) approach to the language you use.

That's all for today. If you'd like to test yourself on what we've just covered, have a look at the [myBEonline.com](#) website. There you'll find a quiz about today's show as well as a complete transcript. Next week, we'll return to our podcast series on managing a crisis. Listen carefully to how the people use both diplomatic and direct language. So long, and see you again soon.

Review

1. According to Tim, why do we sometimes need to use diplomatic language?
 - A. to put people on edge and enhance emotions
 - B. because the clock is ticking
 - C. to avoid making people feel offended or upset
 - D. to decrease the chance of misunderstanding
2. Which of the following words does Tim say can make a statement more diplomatic? (Select all that apply)
 - A. rather
 - B. seems
 - C. don't
 - D. first
 - E. slight
 - F. apparently
 - G. because
 - H. quite
3. Tim says that questions, especially those beginning with _____ and _____ are more diplomatic than direct statements.
4. Which of the following statements are examples of the type of direct language called "imperatives?"
 - A. Why don't you call the technician for help?
 - B. Take this letter to headquarters.
 - C. I'm going to handle this situation.
 - D. Don't discuss this with anyone outside our department.
 - E. Is this the best you can do?
 - F. Have the report on my desk first thing in the morning.
5. What does Tim say about instructions?
 - A. They should be clear.
 - B. They should be expressed diplomatically.
 - C. They should be phrased as questions.
 - D. They should be in groups of three.
6. What are the advantages of using direct language?
 - A. It can build trust and protect people's feelings.
 - B. It can avoid conflict and promote unity.
 - C. It can resolve a crisis and increase confidence.
 - D. It can show a sense of urgency and prevent confusion.

Review Answers

1. According to Tim, why do we sometimes need to use diplomatic language?

C. to avoid making people feel offended or upset

2. Which of the following words does Tim say can make a statement more diplomatic? (Select all that apply)

A. rather

B. seems

E. slight

F. apparently

H. quite

3. Tim says that questions, especially those beginning with _____ and _____ are more diplomatic than direct statements.

Would / wouldn't

4. Which of the following statements are examples of the type of direct language called "imperatives?"

B. Take this letter to headquarters.

D. Don't discuss this with anyone outside our department.

F. Have the report on my desk first thing in the morning.

5. What does Tim say about instructions?

A. They should be clear.

6. What are the advantages of using direct language?

D. It can show a sense of urgency and prevent confusion.

Online Practice

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