



CENTER FOR
COMPASSIONATE
LEADERSHIP

LANGUAGE MATTERS:
SIX PHRASES THAT CAN TAKE
YOUR COMMUNICATIONS EFFECTIVENESS
TO A HIGHER LEVEL

The words we choose and how we say them can have a profound impact on our ability to lead compassionately. In a multi-year study at Google looking to answer the question “What makes a team effective?”, the most important factor by far was psychological safety, which is the condition when team members feel safe to take risks and be vulnerable in front of each other. If you want to engage in compassionate leadership, one way to nurture a safe environment is by using language that does not activate a stress response. Use these six phrases to foster the creation of a secure and inclusive environment where all team members feel like they belong. Those you lead will feel able to express their ideas freely, question the ideas of others constructively, and remain more often in a zone of creativity and productivity and out of fight/flight/freeze mode.

1. **Say “I hear you.”** The most important thing that you can do when someone shares with you is to pay attention, listen, and receive their message. When you are present that way, it shows them respect and that their ideas matter. Saying “I hear you” first will let them know of your attentiveness.
2. **Say “Yes” before “No.”** When one of your team brings forth an idea that just doesn’t work for you, before shooting the idea down, affirm for your teammate some positive aspect of what they’ve brought forth. Your positive comments might focus on details of their plan, appreciation for their courage to speak up, or applauding their initiative and creativity to seek a solution. Only then express concerns about the plan’s weaknesses and disadvantages you see. Two important benefits come out of this. First, by avoiding “no” right away, you will decrease the chance that you throw your teammate back on their heels, make them defensive, and cause them to shut down. In addition, your positive expression and modeling shows that you are listening and encourages future creative work, input, and participation.
3. **Say “Tell me more” instead of simply asking “Why?”** The word “why” is a dangerous word that can easily convey judgment instead of curiosity, even when curiosity is the intent. It can make people defensive. But if you ask them to tell you more, you make it clear that you are listening and curious to learn more about their ideas.

4. **Ask “I wonder if...?”** Try this the next time you already know the answer or have a better solution. Instead of unilaterally declaring the answer, present your solution as an idea to be discussed. You will include your teammates in creating a better plan, and will let them know that your ideas are open for critique in the same way that theirs are. Additionally, you never know what improvements to your idea may be offered if you open it to discussion.
5. **Ask “What do you think about that idea?”** And then listen! Good leaders don’t stop growing. One of the most valuable contributors to a leader’s growth is helpful feedback. Don’t wait for a formal 360° review process to hear from the people working with you. Ask for feedback on a regular basis. This will make your team understand that you value their opinions, and that it is okay to express dissenting opinions. Foster a practice of ongoing respectful dialogue, positive and negative, and your team’s effectiveness will take off.
6. When it is time to move to action, it is the leader’s role to wrap up the conversation, so say, **“Thank you for your input. Let’s now move forward this way:...”** Clarity is crucial for a team to know the direction they are heading, the next steps, and each team member’s role in the plan. A compassionate leader listens to and considers all ideas, discusses advantages and disadvantages respectfully, and then acts decisively based on that dialogue. Your team will appreciate the clear direction provided by your leadership and be well prepared to move into constructive action.

These six phrases will help create an environment of psychological safety where you lead. The content of what we say is the heart of the matter, and how we say things and the words we choose to say it will have a dramatic impact on how well the heart of the matter is understood by those you are leading.