

Solution 45. Negative? Show them how to be nice.

Virtually all employees recognize that their success depends on good work relationships. However, not all employees recognize that good relationships thrive on positive language, and many do not know how to incorporate positive language into their writing.

Share the examples below with any employees who come across as abrupt or negative. Most employees will feel the differences in the sentence pairs and will be grateful for the positive examples.

- State what you can do—not what you can't do.
Not this: I can't meet with you now. It has to wait until Monday morning.
But this: I can meet with you first thing Monday morning.

Not this: You can't use the room until we are finished with our meeting.
But this: As soon as we finish our meeting, the room is yours.
- State what the reader should do—not what not to do.
Not this: Never take more than two days to process a claim.
But this: Always process claims within two days.
- Use neutral rather than blaming language.
Not this: You forgot to leave your phone number, so I couldn't call you back.
But this: Please leave your phone number so that I can call you back.

Not this: I have no idea what you are talking about.
But this: I do not understand yet.

Not this: Your solution is completely unworkable.
But this: I have some concerns about the solution you propose.
- Use positive words to create positive feelings.
Not this: Company policy dictates that we are unable to divulge salary information.
But this: Because we value employee privacy, we keep salary information confidential.

Not this: We have received your letter of complaint.
But this: Thank you for your letter letting us know what happened.

Specific Challenges and Solutions

Challenge: A few employees may see little or no difference between their way of expressing something and a more diplomatic way. If they speak English as a foreign language, differences in tone may not be as clear to them as to native English speakers.

Solutions:

- Stress the principles above. For example, coach the employee to “State what you can do. Not what you can't do.”

- When the employee is working on a specific message, ask the individual to practice by stating his or her view negatively, then neutrally, then positively. Having the individual create his or her own three-way comparisons should help the employee recognize differences.

Challenge: Some employees will be uncomfortable greeting the reader and using the reader's name. They may believe that warmth and friendliness are not appropriate in business writing—or not appropriate for them.

Solutions:

- Encourage these team members to step outside their usual style anytime a friendly greeting and the reader's name would help soften a potentially negative message.
- Point out that many people regard a greeting as simple courtesy—not over-friendliness.

Challenge: A few employees will believe that their harsh statements are honest rather than brutal; they may have a difficult time understanding why it is important to soften the truth as they see it. They may believe that their harshness is warranted, for example, when their reader's work is obviously below standard.

Solutions:

- Emphasize that the employee's job is not to criticize others but to find a way to work together successfully.
- Coach the employee to recognize that typical responses to harsh criticism are defensiveness and blame. Ask the employee what his or her response would be if you had said "The way you wrote this stinks! Did you write it in your sleep?" (Be cautious: Choose an example that is not too harsh for the employee.)
- Emphasize that harsh, negative criticism can be viewed as harassment and that harassment will not be tolerated.