

If You Want to Be the Boss, Say “We” Not “I”

by David Burkus

MARCH 06, 2015



The royal “we” has a long and interesting history. Many attribute its first usage to King Henry II, who in 1169 used it to imply he was speaking for both himself, and for God. Over time, leaders began to use it to imply them and their constituents (a distinction that got a little blurry when Margaret Thatcher proclaimed “we have become a grandmother” and got a significant amount of chastisement). But beyond using the plural pronoun to indicate that you speak on behalf of others (or deity), it turns out that using “we” could also mean you’re more considerate of others and possibly even a better leader.

A team of researchers - Ewa Kacewicz, James W. Pennebaker, Matthew Davis, Moongee Jeon, and Arthur C. Graesser – studied the use of pronouns by individuals in a variety of contexts. Their theory was that pronoun usages (first-, second- or third-person and singular versus plural) could provide clues to an individual's status inside a group or a hierarchy and possibly their likelihood of attaining higher status.

Pronouns help to signify a speaker's focus of attention. When people feel insecure, self-aware, or diminished, they are more likely to focus their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors inward. Indeed, studies suggest that people manipulated to focus inward often increase the rate of first-person singular pronouns (such as "I," "my," or "me") used in their speech. By contrast, the researchers theorized that individuals using first-person plural and second-person (such as "we," "us," or "you") ought to demonstrate an outward focus, considering the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of others.

In addition, researchers suggest that an outward focus is an important requirement of those who hold, or look to attain, status. Status in a group is often conferred or legitimated by the group being led. Because of this, they theorized, individuals who demonstrate a strong focus on the group and its members (instead of on themselves) often attain higher status. Those who are self-focused would get looked down on, regardless of whether they held positions of authority. Perhaps the pronoun was a small, but potent, signal to others.

To test these assumptions, the researchers designed five separate studies in which language was used in a variety of contexts, but all in situations with status differences between the people communicating. In the first study, participants were placed in four-person groups with a randomly chosen leader and given a decision-making task. In the second and third, two-person teams were either given a series of problems to solve or tasked to talk informally through an online chat forum (and later self-reported their assessment of status relative to the other person). In the fourth study, nine volunteer participants submitted their email correspondence with up to 20 other individuals and self-reported their status relative to each individual. The fifth study was perhaps most interesting; the researchers collected 40 letters written by soldiers in the Iraqi military under Saddam Hussein (obtained through the Iraqi Perspectives Project). Half of these letters were written from higher ranked officers to lower ranks and half by lower ranked to higher ranked officers.

In their analysis of all five scenarios, published in the *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, the researchers found surprisingly consistent results. Individuals with lower status overwhelmingly tended to use first-person singular pronouns (“I”) compared to individuals with higher status. Likewise, higher status individuals used significantly more first-person plural (“we”) pronouns relative to those with lower status (the only exception to the “we” effect was found in the fourth study, of natural use emails and self-reports of status). Second-person pronouns (“you, your”) also appeared more frequently in the language of high status participants in all five studies, though the effect was weaker than “we.”

The studies’ results imply that higher-status individuals do demonstrate an “others-orientation” significantly more than lower status individuals. Likewise, lower status individuals appear more self-oriented. All five studies were correlational, so it’s difficult to tease out whether an others-orientation was a cause of rising status or a simply result of operating at a higher status. In either case, however, the studies’ results underscore the importance of an others-focus for those seeking to rise in their organizations.

While switching from singular “I” to the plural “we” may not make you a king or win you a premiership, it might help shift your perspective from self-focused to others-focused, make you more aware of the needs of others and, as you work to meet those needs, might just make you a better leader.



David Burkus is the best-selling author of three books, including the forthcoming *Friend of a Friend*, and Associate Professor of Leadership and Innovation at Oral Roberts University. For more information, visit his website.

This article is about COMMUNICATION

 FOLLOW THIS TOPIC

Comments

Leave a Comment

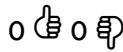
POST

4 COMMENTS

Luis Boticario 2 years ago

What are your thoughts about U.S. military hierarchy? In the U.S. Military we are taught to work as a team and as team leaders in senior positions we take credit as a team, not ourselves. As a matter of fact, we are told during transitioning courses that as we pursue civilian positions after a career in senior military positions we should use more "me" and "I" and less "we".

REPLY



▼ JOIN THE CONVERSATION

POSTING GUIDELINES

We hope the conversations that take place on HBR.org will be energetic, constructive, and thought-provoking. To comment, readers must sign in or register. And to ensure the quality of the discussion, our moderating team will review all comments and may edit them for clarity, length, and relevance. Comments that are overly promotional, mean-spirited, or off-topic may be deleted per the moderators' judgment. All postings become the property of Harvard Business Publishing.