

## CHAPTER NINE:

# Language Protocol



Another critical factor in building that all so important safe environment is having the appropriate language protocol.

The language protocol that I have found to be the most effective can be difficult for many. In fact, for some it will be a complete departure from how we've been trained to communicate, but it may well be that it is for those very same people that the language protocol was created.

It is certainly the case that it's not just what we say that matters. How we say it and whether we say it are equally vital if we are to achieve a safe environment where members of the group can share openly and honestly.

No matter what you think, or even what you hear from a friend now and again, the basic truth is that in settings like a PEG, no one actually wants advice. People often ask for advice, but really what they mean is, "I want your help, your support, or your ear." The question is: How can you help without giving your advice or telling someone what to do, or what you think, or what you would do?

It is very tempting to just blurt out, "Here's what you need to do," or "What I think is best," or "There's a solution to this, now..." In the process of doing that, you subconsciously leave the other person with the feeling that you know what's best and/or a concern about how can he/she be so stupid as not to see the answer. Despite your best intentions, you have taken a person who is already vulnerable and diminished another notch or two his/her self-image. Not a result that you are after in PEG – or probably most any other time.

So, you ask, how exactly do we help one another and what is our purpose if we can't give advice? What if the person asks for advice?

Great questions. I can promise you, though, that I've worked with PEGs since 1991, more than 80 percent of them composed of successful corporate CEOs who believe – often accurately – that they know how to deal with all kinds of problems. In every case, I have found there to be no reason to feel you can safely give advice. Let me explain why.

Take a look at how you can help if you can't give advice. During a PEG meeting, a person who brings an issue to the group benefits in many ways.

First, he/she thinks about the issue and prepares the presentation in advance. If there's no reason to worry about being second guessed or otherwise affronted, it's easy to engage in this process straightforwardly. And, no surprise, that itself can provide a good portion of the needed "answer." A little like coming up with an answer the minute you take it out of your head and into the dinner conversation.

Next, the presenter benefits by expressing his/her issue to a group of people who listen, care and are not judgmental. Think about it: where else in your life can you expect that result, no judgmental questions asked? (The presenter benefits most, of course, from thought provoking questions, not those asked to clarify.) And definitely not to be overlooked, if you're worried about the issue and designing your presentation, you're going to think about the questions that members of the group might ask. This provides more upfront clarification, even if those questions are never actually presented.

Finally, the presenter benefits by hearing the experiences of other members of the group. But, don't forget that every PEG member benefits in much the same way. If you give advice, it is specific to the problem being presented. If you talk about your experience, it is a little – or maybe a lot – different. Every listener can then apply it to his or her issues. In some circles, this is called synchronicity. In PEGs, it's called standard operating procedure. And, looking at things from a negative perspective, you also risk alienating yourself from your PEG members if you resist sharing your experiences when the opportunity arises.

Throughout the process no one gives advice. It's simply not necessary and the risks of the damage it can cause are far too great. You risk belittling a person who's already vulnerable, even if he or she is talking about success instead of failure. Either way, the underbelly is up.

- You risk seeming to be a “know it all,” and thereby compromise your relationship with other group members and their comfort.
- You lose the possible serendipitous application to the issues other PEG members are thinking about.
- And, most important, you undermine the safe environment that ensures honest, open and complete sharing in the future.

So this is not how you're used to talking? Bet not. Neither am I. But with some practice it's not all that hard to learn. Awkward as it may be in the beginning, your goal is to speak strictly from experience, so you focus on using statements that incorporate the word "I," not "one" or "you." It isn't too often you hear, "One really likes dark chocolate." Nor, unless there is the underlying "Where'd ya get that extra 15 pounds?" message, will you say, "You really like dark chocolate, don't you?" But, "I really like dark chocolate" says you know the feeling. You are telling stories on yourself.

There is yet another refinement. To keep you comfortably within the protocol, your stories are best in the past tense. (Even if you still like dark chocolate.) If you analyze that for a minute, you'll see how it takes your story from being in any way chiding to being a simple explanation of "This is what happened to me. I know it's not exactly the same, but I surely do understand at least some of what you're feeling. And, for what it's worth, this is what I did and it did (or, sometimes better yet, did not) work."

Here's what you **DON'T** say:

"You should really quit smoking."

"If I were you, I'd quit smoking."

"You ought to quit smoking."

"I recommend that you quit smoking."

"I would quit smoking."

"I believe that one should not smoke."

Here's what you **DO** say:

"I used to smoke four packs of cigarettes every day. My doctor said I was going to die if I didn't quit. My husband stopped sitting next to me when I smoked. We had fights every night about my habit. I tried to quit several times, but I always went back to it. Then I saw one of those guys with a hole in his throat and I decided that wasn't for me. I started to use the patch and I was able to quit."

OR

"I still smoke three packs a day, and I often try to quit, but I always go back to it. I've really become addicted to smoking. I know it's not good for me, but I just can't stop. I know what you're going through."

OR

"I have no experience with smoking, but I had an addiction to alcohol. I used to drink every day. Finally, I realized that it was getting out of hand. It was affecting my relationship with my family and my performance at work, and I decided to go to AA. I'd tried to quit drinking before many times, but it turned out I needed a support group of people who understood and who were going through the same thing."

OR

"I have no experience to share with you, but I want to offer my support and my ear anytime. I wish you good luck on your journey."

OR

"I smoked for 10 years and I thought nothing of it. In fact, I thought it was cool. I finally realized that it didn't mix well with my professional image. I also realized that it was just a nervous habit. I used Nicoderm and it really worked. But first I had to make the decision and the commitment."

Yes, following the language protocol takes a little more time, a little more thinking and a lot of practice. But it's worth it. In these examples you heard the message "I share your pain," "I'm not perfect either," and "I'm not passing judgment on you." Whatever the experience, the messages were of comfort, support and caring. Every speaker listened with heart and head.

In much the same way, you can do a lot to improve the question and answer period by watching how you ask questions.

Here's what the smoker has no doubt heard all too often:

"Why don't you just quit?"

"Don't you think you should quit?"

"Don't you know that smoking is bad for you?"

And here is an approach that may actually make a difference:

"How long have you been trying to quit?"

"What products or systems have you tried in your pursuit?"

Finally, no matter how adept you are at choosing your words and following the language protocol, if you are not expressing the way you really feel, there are other parts of the communication process that will give you away. Your tone or your body language can negate your words in short order. What you are about here is actually changing the message you want to send, not the manner of sending it!

One particularly memorable meeting made me realize with startling and life-changing clarity how ineffective even the best advice can be and how powerful a sincerely shared experience is. And this time, it was not an effect I only witnessed, but one I found myself deeply involved in. First, a little background on me.

My parents were divorced when I was three years old, and until I was 11, they fought fierce and bitter custody battles. During those eight years, I saw my dad only three times. Because my mother was concerned that he might kidnap me, I was never alone with my dad. A chaperone always kept a watchful eye. Then I moved to the United States with my mother. When my dad visited, he encouraged me to visit him when I went back to Egypt, and slowly over the next seven years, we began to build a relationship.

Not unlike many other fathers, he started to criticize me for a host of things when I entered my teenage years. It became uncomfortable enough for me that when I turned 18, I decided I no longer needed him in my life. The distances, both emotional and geographic, that had defined our past together made the decision an easy one to make and carry out.

In the decade to follow, members of my mother's family gave me lots of advice aimed at getting me to call my dad. The advice was well intentioned and it came from people I respect and who clearly had my best interests in mind. It did not, however, change my mind.

When I was 25, I became a member of a PEG. Three years later one of our members, whom I'll call Brett, brought to a meeting the eulogy he had delivered at his father's funeral. After reading it to us, he paused, looked up, and added how much he wished he had played with his dad the way other kids he knew had. He added honestly and with no pride how very much he wished his father had acknowledged his (Brett's) success. He concluded by saying how deeply he wished the closeness they had begun when his father lay dying could have begun many years before.

The emotion-laden quiet that followed lasted only a minute or so. Then, one by one, everyone began to talk about their relationships – or lack thereof – with their fathers. The meeting became even more emotional, of course. To a person, everyone was moved. In my case, for the first time I understood – no felt – how much I was missing by staying away from my father. I called him the very next day.

I wasn't the only one who learned, and in fact the learning had almost as much to do with us as a group as it did with each of us as individuals.

We learned that every presentation is an opportunity for us to become closer by learning more about one another – if we share our experience rather than give advice.



We learned that if we want to preserve our egos and keep our distance, we give advice.

We learned that if we want to get close to someone, we share our truth (good, bad and ugly) rather than pass judgment by offering advice and opinion.

We learned that no one wants advice, we just want solutions, but that the person with a challenge is the person with the solution to that challenge. Our job is to ask appropriate questions, and offer our experience.

Most of all, we learned that our PEG is a gift!

## **IN BRIEF:**

**Make your message one of support, not judgment.  
Communicate with “I” messages.**

**Make your experience useful to every listener – including  
yourself.**