



COMMUNICATION SOFTENERS

For Assertive Leaders

Softeners are phrases that “soften” a particular message to others. They are used to minimize a defensive reaction in another person. They are the opposite of direct language. They are more effective when used conversationally and not so grammatically rigid. The objective is to say things in such a way that it doesn’t put another person on the defensive. However, they are less effective with certain individuals, such as aggressive people. Always begin by using a softener. If the message is still not getting through, you may have to switch to direct-but-kind language.

OBJECTIVE	SOFTENER
When delegating or asking someone to do something	* “Is there anyway I can ask you to...”
To bring an issue out in the open, especially a potentially touchy issue	* “It seems as though...” “It almost seems like...” Ex: “Ever since I was promoted IT ALMOST SEEMS LIKE there is this tension between us. Have you noticed that?” Ex: “THAT ALMOST SOUNDS LIKE an excuse. Is it?”
When an employee says “No” to a manager’s request	* “That’s tantamount to insubordination. I’ve gotta’ ask, are you sure you want to walk down that path?” This wording allows the employee to self-correct and save face.
When giving advice on a particular issue	* “May I suggest that you...” Ex: “MAY I SUGGEST THAT YOU leave a few minutes earlier so you can get to work on time?”
When apologizing	** “If I offended you, I apologize from the bottom of my heart. Please know that it was not my intention to offend, but to simply point out...”
When asking for a commitment	** “Can I count on _____ from now on?” After stating what it is you want, “Is there any way that I can get that from now on?” or “Can I get that?”
Responding to “I’ll try”	* “I appreciate your willingness to try. However, what I need is a firm commitment. Can I get that?”
When you don’t understand something they are saying or why they did something you consider incorrect	* “I’m not sure I understand. Can you rephrase it?” or “I’m not sure I understand why you took that approach. Can you help me?”
When trying to reconcile a disagreement or argument in which both sides refuse to budge	** “Can we agree to disagree on this?”
Using “I” statements vs. “You” statements. “I” statements are assertive; “You” statements are aggressive.	** “When you _____, I feel _____ because _____.” Ex: “WHEN YOU are late, I FEEL frustrated BECAUSE it puts the whole team behind.”

* Written by Doug Kelley.

** Source unknown.