

Invitational Language, Embedded Commands and Future Pacing

“I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” Maya Angelou

The meaning we derive from our own internal dialogue and from other people’s language directly affects our experience of the communication; furthermore, the language we use is a reflection of our subjective experience. So learning the subtleties of language patterns and, where appropriate, challenging them gives us greater understanding of both the message we are communicating to others and what other people ‘really mean’ by what they are saying.

Paying attention to both our own and other people’s language patterns enables us to ask questions to ensure we are communicating and have understood what is really intended. By increasing the coherence in our language patterns and challenging the perceptions we form about ourselves in the way we delete, distort and generalise our experience, we can reconnect ourselves with our original experience, which in turn allows us to fulfil our true potential. We can also support others in doing the same, enabling them to be more congruent and authentic.

Invitational language does not assume there is only one way or a right way, but rather empowers people with the underlying belief that their thoughts and feelings matter. It also helps them to understand that individual experience may vary and is neither right nor wrong - it is simply their experience.

Invitational language is language that incorporates invitations and options rather than imperative style commands.

Invitational Language is based on 7 principles:

- Being intentional and choosing our words carefully
- Stating what we are saying positively – saying what we want rather than what we don’t want (see Embedded Commands below)
- Using verbs (words ending in ing) rather than normalisations – *relating rather than relationship*
- Using positive presuppositions – *“I’m sure you’ll think of something shortly”*
- Future pacing – inviting someone to go into the future and experience something as if it is happening now (see Future Pacing below)
- Framing negative thoughts as perceptions of a moment in time and can be subject to change – *“So at the time, you perceived the task to be difficult.”*
- Emphasising that we all have a choice in how we behave – *“great that you choose to ...” “you might choose to ...”*

Questions form a key role in having an invitational as opposed to directive communication style. (See Open Questions Resource.)

Directive language tends to create resistance. Consider how you feel if you say to yourself or some else says to you “*you must, you should, you ought to*”.

Giving or implying a choice also encourages participation. Saying things like:

- I invite you to ...
- If you feel like it...
- When you are ready ...
- If you want to ...
- As an alternative, you could ...
- Perhaps ...
- You might choose to ...

Maintain an attitude of curiosity rather than judgement. You may be surprised at what they say and what you learn.

Embedded Commands

Our unconscious mind obeys commands; we seek out the command in a sentence and ignore the rest. Follow these instructions: “*Don’t think of a purple spotted orange.*” What did you do? In order not to think of a purple spotted orange, we have to think of it first and then not think of it!

Consider the implications when we are talking to a colleague or a customer and we say “*I don’t want you to worry about*” or we write at the end of a letter or email “*Don’t hesitate to contact me*”. What we are actually communicating to the other person is “*to worry about ...*” or to “*hesitate to contact me*”.

Consider what happens when you tell a small child “*Don’t spill the milk from your glass*” compared with saying “*Carry your glass carefully.*”

Instead, it is often more helpful to tell people what you actually want them to do, think, or feel.

Future Pacing

Inviting someone to go into the future and visualise achieving their outcome can massively increase their motivation and determination to achieve their goal. It enables them to experience what it is like to have their chosen outcome. If this is done in a way that uses all of their senses, it can be really powerful.

Linguistically, using words like “*and as you*”, “*and after ...*” or “*and when ...*” moves people forward in time.

You can also use questions such as “*and when ..., then what happens?*” to encourage the person to consider the implications of what they are saying. This can be particularly useful if someone has come up with a solution to a problem and you want to encourage them to think it through and make sure it will actually work as a solution.