

WAYS TO JUST SPEAK

Build a bridge before walking the canyon

The emotional bond between two people is like a bridge between two sides of a deep canyon. A strong bond or emotional connection is like a sturdy bridge made of steel that can support heavy weights. If the emotional connection between two people is weak, then the bridge is more like a shaky footbridge made of wood and vines.

The messages people send to each other can be compared to materials we send across the bridge. A strong bridge can support tanks, large trucks, and other heavy equipment. Likewise, a strong bond between people can support the full weight of straightforward honesty. This assumes, of course, that the people speak with the intention to support each other and not with the intention to blame or hurt.

Before speaking candidly to another person, we can strengthen the emotional bridge first. We can do this in many ways. For example, we can be willing to listen as well as to speak. We can also make amends for our mistakes and release past resentments. These choices can transform a creaky emotional bridge into a superstructure that supports candid speaking.

Risk sounding foolish

When we speak candidly, we might say something that others find stupid or offensive. That risk is real. And a sure-fire way to avoid this risk is to avoid speaking. When we do, we rob ourselves of the opportunity to gain more skill at communication. We also rule out the possibility of truly getting to know others and letting them get to know us.

Speaking candidly calls for a willingness to risk sounding foolish. We can remain silent, avoid the risk, and cheat ourselves and others of feedback. Or we can say what we think, risk sounding foolish, and be willing to make amends when needed. The reward is a life filled with more friendship and love.

Speak to the way people listen

When you talk to a bowler or make a speech to a group of bowlers, you might get nowhere if you talk about “shooting straight” or “hitting a bull’s-eye.” Instead, switch to “making a strike,” “hitting the pocket” or “avoiding gutter balls.” You’ll probably connect with more people.

The suggestion here is to meet your audience where they are. Every group of people with a common interest has a particular set of preferred words, phrases, and images. Listen for their special language and tap into it. Then you can start broadcasting through channels that are already open. When in Rome, speak as the Romans do.



Think twice about advice

Other people might request your advice. Much of the time, an effective response is to turn down the request.

Giving advice can do more harm than good. Advice can imply that others lack the ability to see their own problems or discover their own solutions. Some people interpret advice as a recipe to follow blindly, and others might spend more time criticizing your ideas than generating their own solutions. At other times, people already know what they really want to do and feel offended if your advice contradicts what they think.

Often it is wise to withhold advice and let others work out their own problems. We can insult them by rushing in with an answer and doing what they can do for themselves.

Suggestions, on the other hand, can be empowering. A suggestion is an option, a possibility. Offering suggestions is like taking a friend to the deli. Though you point out your favorite dishes, your friend ultimately chooses what *she* will eat. In the same way, you can avoid giving advice, offer possibilities, and assist others to brainstorm their own options.

This advice about advice is not absolute. Sometimes advice works, especially when people take your ideas as possibilities and not prescriptions. When giving advice, share ideas only in your area of expertise, and be specific.

Preview, fill in the details, review

If your message is long or complex, remember an old adage that professional speakers use when they step in front of an audience: “First, tell ’em what you want to tell ’em. Second, tell ’em. Third, tell ’em what you told ’em.”

Those three elements can be useful in telling your truth even when your audience is one person. When you speak, consider leading with your main points. Then add the details about each point. End by restating your main points.

This practice can be especially useful if you’re in conflict with another person and your communication is emotionally charged. When you preview, add details, and review, you speak thoughtfully and slow down the pace of the conversation.

Say what you are “not” saying

Consider starting a conversation with what you are *not* saying. This strategy often works well in times of high emotion, when the conversation is generating lots of heat and little light: “I am not saying that I want you to move out. I am saying that I’d like you to respect my desire for privacy.”



Speak assertively—not aggressively

Assertive does not mean *aggressive*. According to one dictionary, being assertive means that we “affirm positively or declare with assurance.” To be aggressive means “to attack, assault, commit an act of hostility, or to begin a quarrel or controversy.”

Aggressive acts happen when the operating rule is “win or lose.” According to this rule, when one person wins or gets what she wants, another person loses.

Assertive acts take place when the context changes to “win-win.” When we are assertive, we are confident *and* respectful of others. We ask directly for what we want without feeling embarrassed or inadequate. We can work hard to get what *we* want *and* work hard to help others get what *they* want. We can speak *and* listen. Getting what we want does not have to mean that others lose.

Avoid statements disguised as questions

Questions can be powerful. They can be liberating ways to learn. Knowledge is born of questions.

Questions can also be a disguise for assertions and requests that we’re afraid to make. We can verify this by converting those questions into statements:

“What do you think you are doing?” becomes “Please don’t do that.”

“Do you like his new haircut?” becomes “I don’t like his new haircut.”

“Don’t you think that’s silly?” becomes “I think that’s silly.”

When we hide our opinions, desires, and requests behind questions, we do not take responsibility for them. Maybe it’s just an unconscious habit. Maybe we feel it’s too risky to be forthright and candid. Whatever the reason, we lose the chance to speak candidly.

We can be aware of questions that are really statements and practice speaking the truth. When we do this, others know they can trust us. People learn that they don’t have to second-guess us or play mind reading games.

Now, really, don’t you think this is a great idea and a better way to communicate?

Write a letter

Some of us are more comfortable writing a message than speaking it. This is often true when the message is emotionally charged.

Writing helps us clarify our thoughts. We might discover that what we really have to say is not what we originally thought.

Writing a letter can also include an invitation to talk further. The letter can offer suggestions that define and give structure to future conversations.

And we don’t always have to send the letter. The act of writing in itself can have therapeutic value.



Ask these questions

No suggestion is absolute, including the suggestion to speak candidly. There are times when it is appropriate and effective *not* to speak—times when our speaking will hurt someone, spoil the punch line, or rob others of the opportunity to learn from their own experience.

Answering the following questions can help us decide when to speak and when to hold back for the moment:

- Is this statement really the truth from my point of view?
- Is this statement consistent with what I value and with who I say I am?
- Is this statement consistent with my promises and commitments?
- Would this statement hurt others unnecessarily?
- Am I saying this to get even or indirectly insult another person?
- Would this statement interfere with a conversation that is making progress?
- How much emotional energy (body sensations, knots in the stomach, headaches, heart pounding) is associated with my thoughts? Is there an underlying emotion that I want to discharge before I say what I'm about to say?
- What is the nature of my relationship with this person?
(We probably don't need to tell the cashier at the grocery store that he has bad breath.)

We almost always have a choice about whether or not to say what's on our mind. Most of us err on the side of withholding our thoughts. But if we share all our thoughts in the moment they occur, we might go too far in the other extreme.

The idea is to speak in ways that serve ourselves while contributing to others.

Keep sending—or choose to stop

You might apply all the above suggestions and still not feel sure that your message is being fully received. If that happens, you have several options:

- **Speak more.** Keep speaking until you are confident that your message is being received.
- **Ask for active listening.** Stop periodically and request that your listeners summarize your message in their own words. This often reveals gaps in your message as well as misunderstandings.
- **If no one is listening, give up speaking for now.** You could even announce your intention: "I'm not sure that I'm being heard right now. I'd like to talk about this later."



Just say it

The idea behind this Success Strategy is to tell the truth—the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

You can practice telling the truth in every domain of life and with everyone who matters to you.

You can tell the truth to your friends and your loved ones. Tell them whatever you want. Tell them your fears and your hopes. Tell them your dreams and your aspirations.

You can even share your heart with your competitors and with your enemies. You can just shake off any façades and walk open-hearted into the world.

Now this is an uncommon idea—probably impractical, and maybe even strange. And there are potential costs. If you speak candidly, you could get in trouble. You might get into conflict with key people in your life. They might get offended or even stop talking to you.

You can also get into trouble when you withhold your thoughts and feelings. Instead of relating to you as *you*, people will relate to you as all the masks you wear.

Telling the truth is not practical. It's not easy. It's just life-altering. Talking about our feelings, whatever they are, is a path toward releasing them and healing our relationships. After expressing a tough emotion like anger, we might find out that there's fear or compassion underneath it. Saying "You jerk, I'm so angry at you" can lead to "I miss you" or even "I love you."

So don't rehearse. Don't wait for the right moment. Don't evaluate how you will look if you say it. Don't worry if the syntax isn't quite right. Don't always consider the outcome. Don't weigh your words, and don't speak in order to please someone else.

Just speak, and ask others to do the same.

