

Observations and evaluations transcript

So I want to share a language tool I find really useful which when you know how to use it makes it much more likely that the other person is going to listen to you whether you are talking to them or writing them a message. And the distinction is between observations, which are helpful in this context, and evaluations, which are not so helpful.

So an observation is a neutral statement of fact in Needs Understanding, whereas an evaluation is my personal interpretation of the facts. For instance I might say, "I'm really concerned about the time scale. The team just don't have any sense of moving rapidly on this deal." And in this case "the team don't have any sense of moving rapidly" is an evaluation. It's the judgment I'm making about the progress that I'm seeing because I'm frustrated with what is happening. If I stick it in an email to someone it may well throw up a defensive reaction, "Well I don't think that's fair, it's more that they want to make sure that the job is done properly!" The recipient may well be triggered by my evaluation and so be less likely to hear my concern.

If I had another go at it, then the observation I could use instead might be, "I followed up twice since sending through the draft contract a fortnight ago and I haven't heard back from the team. I'm really concerned about the timing." In my experience, it's much more likely using that kind of observation language that you will get someone hearing the thing that's really important to you, that you are concerned about the time scale. It leaves space for an exploration of what's going on to delay things and much more likelihood that you will get clear about the real problems, so whether that is a team attitude issue or a people problem or whatever it is.

So how do you go about making an observation rather than an evaluation? And the thing to look for is the observable facts, namely things that everybody would agree on no matter who listened to your story. So put yourself in the shoes of the recipient of your spoken language or your written language and see if there's anything that could be construed as a judgment and if there is whether you are content to send it or say it in that form or not. It can be helpful just to get your antennae out actually in day-to-day life and spot – where am I making evaluations and where am I making observations? If there's no issue of understanding between you and someone else, there's no problem with making evaluations – very useful shorthands and often not a problem at all. But it's where you're potentially likely to have a disagreement or a difference of opinion that it's particularly key to focus on observations.

Often in trainings I'm asked, "What if I'm actually really triggered? Is this just a case of changing my language to sort of make it all polite?" And I would say the answer is absolutely not. I love to see authenticity. Sometimes it can be very helpful to translate into observations and just take a bit of a step back and see yes I can authentically send that instead of the evaluation I was planning. Sometimes actually it's really difficult to do that, and another thing that you can try if you're in that position is to own the evaluation. So that's something like, "I'm telling myself when I see no emails coming in – I'm telling myself that the team doesn't have a sense of urgency and I feel really concerned. I'd love to hear what you think?" So you again make it easier for the other person to cross over to where you are and get what's going on for you without getting their hackles up.

So there is more on this in the book on pages 122 to 126. This is part three of the book which I love because it's a change of rhythm from Parts One and Two – it is full of very gritty language tools like this one for making change. So I hope you enjoy it!