

## LESSON 9: RESOURCES TO HELP – YOUR WORDS CONT'D

Every conversation has two dimensions to it: tone and content. Tone has to do with how your voice sounds when you say something, and content is what you are saying.

### CONTENT (*Continued*)

#### **Hear him out**

The conversation stands a better chance of you making your point, if you will, early in the talk, stop speaking and listen! Your button-pusher is likely to do a lot of self-justifying, blaming, and excusing in his head. People tend to get defensive and focus on their rationale/counterattack when confronted. (Unless you are a very good, non-defensive listener.) This is why we must learn to pause, early on, and allow that person to talk or respond.

Hearing your button-pusher at the beginning of the conversation **helps to clear out his internal conversation so that there is more room and space in his mind for your words.** Don't go into your entire message about the problem yet. Touch on it to give him context, but begin instead with something like this:

*"I wanted to talk to you about our relationship, especially my experience of you being too angry with me. But I really want to first understand your side of things. Can you tell me what it's like for you, if you see this the same way, or if I'm doing something here that isn't helping?"*

Now wait. Except in very rare cases, your button-pusher should feel the grace and permission you are extending and present his side of things. He may not be organized or warm. If he gets too heated and it isn't subsiding, you may need to say, *"I know this is getting pretty emotional for both of us; can we postpone this for a bit when we feel better?"*

***Listen empathically.*** Do not make the mistake of correcting his perception of you here. Be still and understand his opinion. **You are not agreeing; you are listening.** And, if he has some valid points about your contribution to the problem, agree, apologize, and let him know you will change. Say something like this: *"I think you are right, that I nag and don't let go of things with you. I can see how that makes matters worse. I'm sorry for that, and I will work on that."*

However, **don't hear him out forever.** Some button-pushers get into their own protest, and it can take on a life of its own. When you think you have "gotten it," at least the basics, and he hasn't wound down, say something like this:

*"OK, I think I get your end of it, at least what is primary: You do get angry and withdrawn sometimes because the job is hard, but you think that I am overreacting and it's not as bad as I say. And I make things worse when I nag and don't get off your back. Do I have the general gist of it?"*

If he says you don't get it, then **go through the process again until both of you agree, not on the reality, but on the button-pusher's perception.** Your goal is to truly hear your button-pusher before you seek to be understood. Be open to getting some training in listening skills

from someone. Learning to paraphrase another's experience is a well-known and valuable tool to have.

Also, be aware of any tendencies you might have during the hearing-out phase to resent that he gets to be understood, and not you. This isn't about playing fair. You are intentionally delaying some of your own desires for a higher purpose, and that is increasing the odds that he will listen to your requests for change.

***State the problem.***

Make it direct and simple. Don't beat around the bush. It is about clarity and simplicity. You want to state what it is your person is doing and how it affects you and others.

**THE LEVEL OF THE PROBLEM: BEGIN WITH WHAT IS OBSERVABLE**

Frame the problem in terms of what can be seen, observed, and even measured. Tell him about specific behaviors or words that illustrate the problem: "*You get overly angry at home. You yelled at me last night when I asked why you were late to dinner.*"

***State the problem's effect.***

It wouldn't be a problem for you if it didn't affect you in some negative way. Present the problem in terms of the relationship as much as possible. The more you show how what he does hurts the "we" the better your chances of breaking through his defenses and resistances.

Here's an example:

*"Your yelling scares me and the kids too. They woke up last night. And I really distance myself from you when you do it. It is very hard for me to get close to you with that level of anger. It just shuts me down inside, and I can't get past it, even though I want to. I miss being close to you, but it is too impossible when you are that mad. Then, when you aren't angry anymore and want to be close, my feelings haven't changed and I stay away from you."*

You are trying here to elicit empathy and compassion from him regarding how his behavior is hurting people he loves and relationships he values. If he cares for you and others, that can be effective. If, however, he is too self-absorbed, afraid, or uncaring to be moved, don't give up.

You may have to say, "*So you admit you get irrationally angry and scared and distance me and the kids. But you also seem to be saying that you don't care. Are you saying that?*" Sometimes, having to own a statement like that will help a button-pusher to begin to see what he is doing. Not many people would like to identify themselves as someone who is doing something hurtful, and not caring who it hurts.

If he still does not get it, and you have tried several times, you may have to resort to help or implement consequences, as will discuss soon.