

# Say What You Mean; Mean What You Say

Seven steps to being a more authentic communicator.

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Behavioral styles tell us that only about 18% of the population score high on the scale that favors [assertiveness](#) and dealing with things head on. These are people who thrive on conflict, will say what they think, don't care who they offend (at times) and are bold in their approach. The remaining 82% of the population tends to shrink away from conflict, would prefer not to address things, or just tolerates someone who yells and curses. Why is it so hard for people to say what they mean, and mean what they say, sometimes?

You have probably been told that [lying](#) is wrong, but then telling a white lie seems necessary in order to avoid hurting someone's feelings. You know you shouldn't talk about another person behind their back but it's so much easier to "seek input" from someone else than it is to tell the person you have the conflict with that something is wrong. You want to confront someone but not be mean, but you wait too long to have the discussion and the straw breaks the camel's back and you find yourself yelling and screaming, and now you look like the "bad guy or gal".

Many people never learn how to appropriately say what they mean, and mean what they say. In school, if you dare to react negatively to what a teacher (who might be wrong) says to you, there are consequences for speaking out. Parents are often not good at the communication process so they may shade the truth, become overly [bullying](#) or overly passive, and neglect to model good communication in their behavior.

Think about the bosses, co-workers, friends, teachers, and colleagues you may have had over the years who simply were not good at communicating. You may have learned, months or years later, about something you did to offend them or something important they neglected to share. People are hurt when the truth comes out later, but why is telling the truth at the time such a hard thing to do?

Our culture values "niceness" over truth in many cases. People who address issues, or bring something up to someone that could be perceived as hurtful, are looked upon as the problem. If you point out what someone else has done wrong, instead of the person considering the feedback and having an objective conversation, the threat is there that they will go off and tell someone else about what a mean person you really are.

When you grow up without good role modeling, how can you learn to say what you mean and feel good about it, while leaving the other person with their [confidence](#) and security in place? It takes

practice and diligence, but the results are worth it. Consider these seven steps to being a more authentic communicator:

1. When you want to deliver negative or non-positive feedback, consider your goal. What do you hope to accomplish as an outcome? Do you want the person to be more aware? Do you hope they will change their behavior? Are you trying to stop them from hurting themselves and others? Think about your own intention first. Many times we just want the other person to know something – we don't have an expectation for what could happen once they know. If you have an outcome in mind, you can frame your comments differently—"I'm hoping if I share some feedback you might reconsider the way you are treating our daughter."
2. Ask permission and make sure it is the right time to offer feedback. Let the person know you'd like to share something, but make sure they are open to hearing it. Sometimes people are weaker than other times—you don't know all of what is going on with them. Prepare them for the discussion; "I would like to share some feedback; is now a good time or would there be a better time for you?"
3. Be objective and stick to facts in your approach. Try to refrain from using a broad brush. This is why parents are taught not to say "bad boy" or "good boy"; you don't want to opine on a person's overall character. Instead, say "That outburst at the dinner table was upsetting. I think there was another way you could have handled it. Are you open to hearing my thoughts and suggestions about how to address the issue next time?"
4. Acknowledge your own thoughts and feelings—it's perfectly fine to have a reaction and to share it. "Truthfully, I don't even know if what you said was hurtful; it's just that the tone of voice and the yelling was distressing to me. I have a hard time enjoying my meal when you are so upset and angry." Many people don't know how their behavior impacts someone else. Sometimes if you can point out why it was bothersome, the person gets a chance to do it differently next time.
5. Remember, you are not responsible for how another person reacts. If you have something to say but you don't want to hurt someone else's feelings, does that mean that the situation isn't any less real or legitimate? You always want to stop and consider your own motives, but you can't be responsible for what everyone else thinks and feels. Be responsible in your delivery, but not responsible for the reaction.
6. Take the time to think about the other person's viewpoint. Seek to understand with genuine interest. You can give feedback, but you also can try and see the person's perspective; "I'm curious about why you seemed so angry at the dinner table? I know our daughter wearing her earbuds while we eat is upsetting to you, but is something else going on?" Sometimes inquiring and trying to draw someone out can be more beneficial than trying to teach them something.
7. Do your best to remember that most people haven't learned well how to be open and honest in a non-hurtful, productive manner: It's not taught in schools. It's not often learned at home. It's a fundamental skill that most people lack. Do your best to practice saying what you mean, and meaning what you say. It's possible that others around you will follow suit.