

Is a three-letter word ruining work relationships?

Manager to employee: "This report was due to the customer on the 15th. I asked you to send it by the 10th. What happened?"

Employee: "I was planning to e-mail it on the 15th, but I forgot. Sorry."

Manager: "You always do that. You don't leave yourself any leeway. Then something distracts you and you forget. Now you've got an angry customer."

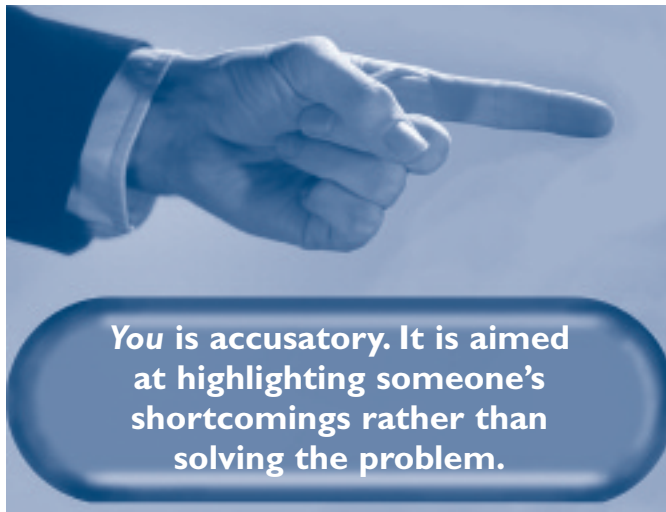
Employee (turning red): "I was only a day late."

Manager: "You don't get it, do you?"

We can easily imagine this exchange continuing to go downhill. The main culprit? A three-letter word: *y-o-u*.

There were eight *you's* in the manager's brief words. *You* is accusatory. It shines a flashlight in the other person's face and puts that person on the defensive. It is aimed at highlighting someone's shortcomings rather than solving the problem.

The disagreement could have been between co-workers, family members or anyone. The point remains that making "you statements" does not lead to problem solving. It leads to more conflict.



A Better Way

To resolve a problem with another person, we need to focus on the problem, not the person. Here are some steps for doing that.

1. Describe the problem – just the facts at this point.
2. Ask questions to get the other person's point of view.

3. Listen without judgment or comment.
4. Use "I statements" to explain how you see it. Stick to the present issue.
5. Explore alternative solutions, and ask for a commitment to a solution that meets the needs of both of you.
6. Implement the plan you agreed on.
7. Follow up to evaluate the outcome and determine whether anything else is needed.



Let's consider how the opening exchange might have looked if the manager and the employee had followed these rules:

Manager to employee: "This report was due to the customer on the 15th. I asked you to send it by the 10th. What happened?"

Employee: "I was planning to e-mail it on the 15th, but I forgot. Sorry."

Manager to employee: "That's why I like reports mailed early – just to be sure. Now we have an angry customer. How can we make sure this doesn't happen again?"

Employee: "I'll start sending them at least five days early."


Manager to employee: "I would appreciate that."

Snags to Avoid

Look out for hidden or implied you-statements. What makes a you-statement is its impact. It is a statement about the other person, not about the speaker or the issue.

For example, had the manager said, "Putting things off until the last minute is irresponsible," the employee would most likely have responded negatively. The *you* is in there, but it is hidden. The manager is really saying, "You are irresponsible for putting things off until the last minute."

Another common mistake is making what sounds like an I-statement on the surface that is really about the other person. For example, if the employee says, "I am not going to listen to any more of this tirade," the implication is, "You are on a tirade, and I'm not going to listen to you any more."

You can avoid these and other snags by shining the flashlight on the problem, not the person, and looking for solutions. 



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