

# Behavior Description

A Basic Communication Skill for improving interpersonal Relationships

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The Problem: If you and another person are to improve the way you get along together you must be able to convey what each does that affects the other. This is not easy. Most of us do not describe behavior clearly enough for others to know what actions we have in mind. Instead we usually state what we infer about his motivations, attitudes and personality traits; often we are not even aware we are inferring, rather than describing. Because we are so used to inferring, we may not even know what the other did that led us to our inferences.

The skill of behavior description then depends upon accurate observation which, in turn, depends upon being aware of when you are describing and when you are inferring.

The Skill: A statement must pass two tests to be a behavior description.

1. A behavior description reports specific observable actions rather than inferences about the person's motives, feelings, attitudes or personality traits. It states what was observed. It does not infer about why.

## Behavior Descriptions

Fran walked out of the meeting 30 minutes before it was finished.

Bob's eyes filled with tears

Becky did not say anything when Bill asked her a question.

## Inferences

Fran was annoyed.  
Fran had an appointment elsewhere.

Bob had a cold.  
Bob felt sorry for himself.

Becky did not hear Bill.  
Becky resented Bill's question  
Becky was embarrassed.

2. A behavior description is non-evaluative: it does not say or imply an event or action was good or bad, right or wrong. Evaluative statements (such as name-calling, accusations and judgments) usually express what the speaker is feeling and convey little about what behavior he observed.

## Behavior Descriptions

Jim talked more than others on this topic. Several times he cut others off before they finished.

"Bob, you've taken the opposite of most statements Harry has made today."

Fran walked out of the meeting 30 minutes before it was finished.

"Sam, you cut in before I was finished."

## Evaluative Statements

Jim is rude.  
Jim wants to hog the center of attention.

"Bob you're trying to show Harry up."  
"Bob you're being stubborn."

Fran is irresponsible.  
Fran doesn't care about others.

"Sam, you deliberately didn't let me finish."

The word "deliberately" implies that Sam knowingly and intentionally cut you off. All anybody can observe is that he did cut in before you had finished.

As an example of the difference a behavior description may make, let's suppose you tell me I am rude (a generalized trait), or that don't care about your feelings (an inference about my motivation). Because I am not trying to be rude and because I feel I do care about your feelings, I don't know what the basis is for your negative evaluation of me. However, if you point out that several times in the past few minutes I have interrupted you and have overridden you before you could finish what you were saying, I get a clearer picture of what actions of mine were affecting you.

Several members of his group have told Ben that he was too arrogant. Ben was confused and puzzled by this judgement. He was confused because he didn't know what to do about it; he didn't know to what it referred. He was puzzled because he didn't feel arrogant or scornful of the others. In fact, he admitted he really felt nervous and unsure of himself. Finally, Joe said that Ben often laughed explosively after Ben made a comment that seemed to have no humorous aspects. Others agreed this was the behavior that led them to perceive Ben as looking down on them and, therefore, arrogant. Ben said he had not been aware of this.

The pattern, then, was as follows: When he made a statement of which he was somewhat unsure, Ben felt insecure ...Ben's feelings of insecurity expressed themselves in an explosive laugh after he made the statement ...the other person felt put down and humiliated ...the other's feeling of humiliation was expressed in the accusation that Ben was arrogant. Note that Ben had no awareness of his own behavior (the laugh) which was being misread until Joe accurately described what Ben was doing. Ben could then see that his laugh was a way of attempting to cope with his own feelings of insecurity.

To develop skills in describing behavior, you must sharpen your observation of what actually did occur. You must force yourself to pay attention to what is observable and to hold inferences in abeyance. As you practice this, you may find that many of your conclusions about others are based less on observable evidence than on your own feelings of affection, insecurity, irritation, jealousy or fear. For example, accusations that attribute undesirable motives to another are usually expressions of the speaker's negative feelings toward the other.