I-Statements

by Sophia Tutorial

WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we will discuss how to utilize I-statements in communication, particularly in relation to conflict situations. The areas of focus include:

1. I-statements vs. You Statements
   a. Person vs. Problem
   b. Reaction vs. Response
   c. Identity vs. Action
2. How to Construct an I-statement

1. I-statements vs. You Statements

When we are in conflict or upset, the way we state what we're thinking or feeling can do a lot to either escalate or de-escalate the conflict.

When you want to communicate these thoughts and feelings you have a couple of different options for how you can do that:

- With a you statement
- With an I-statement

A **you statement** attributes a (usually negative) trait or quality to another person, whereas an**I-statement** explains how and why another person's actions affect the speaker.
There are three particular ways in which the difference between these types of statements manifests itself:

- People vs. problems
- Reaction vs. response
- Identity vs. action

TERMS TO KNOW

You Statement
Opposite to I-statements; a statement ascribing a given trait or quality to another, usually negative.

I-Statement

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A conflict resolution technique used to explain how and why one person's action affects the speaker.

1a. People vs. Problems

When you make a you statement, you're focusing on a person, instead of on the actual problem, or the action that you're upset with. This is considered a conflict resolution perspective known as **people vs problem**.

> EXAMPLE You come home to find your roommate has left the house a mess. You're frustrated, so you say, "Look at this mess! You are so sloppy! How can you live like this? You're just a pig!"
>
> Those are pretty strong words that really attack someone; the you statement actually ascribes an innate quality to another person. It's as though you're saying that in all cases, your roommate is a sloppy person.

When we do this, we lose sight of the issue, and instead the statement becomes a character assassination. The person will then react to that, which is why the conflict will escalate.

If you've ever been on the other end of this—if someone has ever described you in a negative way, you probably reacted because it's human nature to do so. You then end up in a battle over character rather than over the issue itself.

TERM TO KNOW

People vs. Problems
A conflict resolution perspective that focuses parties' attention on tangible actions and conditions within a conflict rather than perceived innate qualities of the parties.

1b. Reaction vs. Response

It's easy to use you statements when we're upset because we have an automatic, unconscious reaction, instead of a conscious response. This is considered a conflict resolution perspective known as **reaction vs response**.
We can turn this around by learning to use I-statements because they require a conscious response. In order to use an I-statement, you need to consciously think of what you want to say instead of just reacting.

This is not always easy to do in a conflict situation, so you may have to just stop for a moment to take a breath and think about how you want to phrase something.

Or you could actually take a break, if you're really upset. Then when you do state how you're feeling, you can focus on the action instead of the person's identity.

TERM TO KNOW

Reaction vs. Response
A distinction between automatic, non-conscious reaction to a stimulus and consciously chosen action in response to a stimulus.

1c. Identity vs. Action

In a conflict, our natural instinct is to attack the person that upset us; it becomes about that person's identity instead of about their action in this situation. This is considered a conflict resolution perspective known as **identify vs action**.
This is why an I-statement is designed to focus on the actual problem rather than the person. Using an I-

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statement enables you to address the behavior that's causing you to be upset.

EXAMPLE Instead of telling your roommate that she's a slob, you might say something like, "When you leave such a mess in the kitchen, I feel really unappreciated and upset because I have to clean it up before I can make dinner."

Notice what you've done here: instead of making an inflammatory statement about the person's identity, you focused on the issue at hand. The real issue is the fact that there's a mess in the kitchen, and you're upset because you have to clean it up.

TERM TO KNOW

Identity vs. Action
In conflict resolution, similar to people v. problems, a focus on specific actions performed by a party rather than the party's innate nature.

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2. How to Construct an I-statement

There are really three parts to an I-statement:

- The action or behavior
- Your response/feeling
- The impact

STEP BY STEP

1. *Focus on the Action*

To construct an I-statement, you first focus on the action by saying something like, "When you x..." with x being the action or the behavior exhibited by the other person.

2. *Focus on Your Response*

Secondly, you focus on how you're responding or feeling: "When you x, I feel y..." with y being however it is you're feeling or responding.

3. *Focus on the Impact*

Finally, the last part of the I-statement focuses on the impact: "When you x, I feel y, because z," with z being the impact of the person's action.

EXAMPLE Let's say you're at work, and you've been expecting a report from somebody. You need this report on time, but the person gets it to you very late, at the very last minute. It would be easy to react to that; you might want to say something like, "You're so lazy and disorganized."

But instead of making that kind of you statement, you make a conscious response that focuses on the problem with an I-statement. You might say something like, "When you get these numbers to me so late, I feel like maybe you don't care about the project because the lateness affects everybody who has to meet

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deadline. They need those numbers."

So what you've done here is focus on the action: "When you x (get me the numbers so late), I feel y (that you don't care about the project) because z (this impacts others on the team who need this information)."

BIG IDEA

By changing the way we phrase things, we can move away from you statements that focus on people and identity. You statements are based on an unconscious reaction, which can escalate a conflict.

When we instead choose to make a more conscious response by using an I-statement that focuses on the problem and the action, we can actually de-escalate a conflict. I-statements give us the ability to improve our communication with the other person, and move forward in resolving whatever it is that is upsetting us.

SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that the **difference between I-statements and you statements** in conflict situations is that you statements are unconscious reactions that place their focus on the identity of other people, while I-statements are conscious responses focusing on the problem or action that is actually causing the conflict. You now understand that you can **construct an I-statement** by first naming the action, then stating your feeling or response, and finally explaining the impact of the action. By using I-statements instead of you statements, you have the ability to improve communication and thus de-escalate a conflict. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.

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