

UNDERSTANDING STROKES AND DISCOUNTS

MANAGEMENT COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUES THAT HELP PEOPLE FEEL “OK OR NOT-OK”

We all know that words and voice tone can affect the feelings of others. To help motivate an employee for maximum performance, it is more effective to communicate so that the person gets a stronger feeling of OKness which builds positive motivation and confidence. Feelings of Not OKness tend to lessen motivation and commitment. Here is a chart describing different kinds of Strokes (units of recognition or acknowledgement) that lead to feelings of OKness and Discounts (absence or withdrawal of recognition or acknowledgement) that lead to feelings of Not OKness. Most Strokes and Discounts are of the “Conditional” variety, shown in bold face in the chart below.

Strokes help people feel OK **↔** **Discounts help people feel Not OK**

OK	UP+	CP+	CN+	UN+		UP-	CP-	CN-	UN-	Not OK
+	Unconditional Positive Stroke	Conditional Positive Stroke	Conditional Negative Stroke	Unconditional Negative Stroke		Unconditional Positive Discount	Conditional Positive Discount	Conditional Negative Discount	Unconditional Negative Discount	-
Some examples of different kinds of Strokes and Discounts that might be used.										
	I think you are a really valuable person.	I really value the work you do.	I don't like it when you work that way.	I think you are a worthless person.		Of course I support you; you're on my staff.	You did that well, but you always do well.	(Ignore the behavior being shown.)	(Totally shun the person.)	

Voice Tone

Often the difference between a Stroke and a Discount is determined by the tone of voice that is used. A friendly tone, even when asking for a change in behavior, can retain the positive effect of a Stroke. An accusatory tone, even when simply requesting information, can serve as a Discount and create a feeling of Not OKness.

“Just Kidding”

People in some organizations make a practice of using “digs,” “zingers,” and other mild insults as Strokes, but they can have the same effect as Discounts. When humor or a joke serves to mask an insult, especially when delivered by a person in a position of authority, the feeling of Not OK may lurk behind the uncomfortable laugh. Genuine good natured and well-intended kidding, under appropriate circumstances, can create strong feelings of OKness among friends, but the difference between kidding that is a stroke and insults that are discounts can be subtle. It is often best to err on the side of caution to avoid unfortunate misunderstandings.

Receiving Strokes and Discounts

It is a useful rule of thumb to consider accepting 80% of the strokes offered and use the good feelings they create to help motivate yourself. Some strokes are covertly manipulative, so it is appropriate not to accept all strokes offered. Conversely, it is appropriate to consider accepting 20% of the discounts offered which might be sources of developmental feedback, but reject 80% so that bad feelings are kept to a minimum in your life. Feeling good about yourself, and helping others feel good about themselves, contributes to optimum performance in organizations.