



## Episode 15: The Key to Clear Communication

Welcome to In the Right Direction podcast, where we believe you get to choose what's on your plate, you can manage the overwhelm, and that change is possible. I'm your host Deb Elbaum and I'm here to share insights and strategies to increase your happiness, one baby step at a time. Let's dive in.

Hi everyone, it's Deb. Today, I'm going to start with an easy question. How are you doing? Chances are you answered, good. So I'm curious. What does good mean to you? You might mean that you are well rested, that you got a full night's sleep, or maybe you mean that you received an email this morning with information you had been waiting for. Or maybe you're not exactly sure how you feel and you're using the word good as a habit or a reflex.

We all use words like good, bad, better, and best. We say that we want to be a better leader or that it was a bad conversation. While these words convey a sense that something is positive or negative. We often use them on autopilot because they're easy. And they undermine clear communication.

The truth is we simply don't know what someone else means when they say they're good or they want to be better. Used alone without further elaboration, these words keep us from building our self-awareness and effectively engaging our brains higher level thinking. And. When we use them in conversation, they don't allow the other person to immediately understand what we mean. Today let's talk about words like good, bad, better, and best. One of my clients calls these filler words because they fill a sentence in, in a general and vague way. I like to call them placeholder words. They hold the place for a follow-up, more descriptive word or phrase.

Now it's easy to understand why we all use placeholder words. They're easy on our brain. They don't require extra thinking effort. And sometimes using a placeholder word is fine. If you're rushing or making small talk, you might choose to say I'm good or not press someone else who says they're fine. However, many times we do have the chance to slow down. We do care and we do want to be intentional.

When we take the time to get curious, ask, and redefine these placeholder words, we can all benefit. We can build our emotional vocabulary, clarify and communicate our thoughts. And we help our brain.

Here's an example, a client who was interviewing for jobs told me that she had a good interview while I was pleased that she was happy. The word good doesn't help me as her coach fully understand the situation. What was good about it? I asked. She clarified that it was good because her conversation with the hiring manager flowed. They had common interests and she came up with an answer she was proud of when asked a question she had never thought about before.

When we pause to fill in our placeholder words, it helps us in three ways. It gives us the chance to practice self-reflection. It gives us the opportunity to clarify what we want and identified potential action we can take. And it engages our higher-level thinking in general. Let's take these one at a time.

First, defining our placeholder words helps us build self-awareness. Most of us move so fast in life that we don't stop to consider how we're really doing. How is my day going? How does my body feel? When we take the time to slow down and let our brain chew on the question, we build our attunement to our emotions and what our body might need.

We come to know ourselves better, and self-reflection can then lead to self-care. A client of mine was having a bad day. We got curious, we defined what bad meant for her. And in her case, she realized that bad meant feeling disconnected. She realized that what would turn her day around was to deeply connect with a dear friend.

Taking the time to reflect leads, to increased personal insight and potential self-care.

Second, defining our placeholder words can help us measure a situation more accurately to identify potential action. For example, let's take that word better. Many of my clients come to coaching and say, I want to be a better leader.

I ask them, what does better mean to you? Because better is vague to measure. What does a better leader mean anyway? What does it look like? This is the opportunity to clarify better. When I ask my clients what a better leader means, I get a range of answers. For some people it's feeling more confident when managing up. For others, it's having more effective ways to handle difficult colleagues. And for others, it's carving out time each week for big picture thinking. If I didn't probe, what better meant, I might focus our coaching in the wrong area. By clarifying what better means for my clients, we can create a clear roadmap and action plan and concrete ways to measure progress.

When we're clear with our language, others understand us more accurately and can respond more appropriately.

Third, clarifying our placeholder words is good for the brain. The act of choosing a more specific word engages our prefrontal cortex, that part of our brain right behind our forehead. Our prefrontal cortex helps us do our higher-level thinking, like making thoughtful decisions, setting long-term goals, and seeing other people's perspectives.

When we sort through our vocabulary and choose a more accurate word or phrase, instead of that placeholder word, we are asking our prefrontal cortex to jump into action. We are immediately engaging this part of our brain to engage our higher-level thinking.

Here's a personal example. The other day I was feeling off. You might even say bad. When I took the time to really consider what was underlying this negative emotion. I realized it was nervous anticipation. I needed to deliver a no, and I was worried what the other person would think of me. I sorted through all the words in my emotional vocabulary to better define what bad meant.

And when I chose another word like nervousness, my prefrontal cortex helped me start thinking more clearly. It was then easy to make a plan about how I could deliver this no, in the most direct and honest way possible.

So what can we do when we hear ourselves or other people using placeholder words? We can do two things. We can get curious and we can ask. First, we can set our radar to listen for those placeholder words. When we hear them, we can step into a curious perspective. If you hear someone say that was a good conversation, get curious about what they mean. Do they mean that the conversation was full of problem solving? Or that it was quick and efficient? Or maybe there were a lot of jokes and laughter.

Remember, we have no idea what someone means when they use the word good or bad, which is why we ask. The second thing we can do to define placeholder words is to ask. When you hear those words, invite the other person to clarify. What do you mean by good? What would better communication look like? By taking the time to pause and ask, we're helping them build their internal awareness, build their emotional vocabulary, and engage their prefrontal cortex for their higher-level thinking. Only through asking and listening, can we truly understand what someone else means. And when we get curious and actively listen, it leads to increased connection, trust and productivity.

Here's my invitation to you: In the next few weeks, listen to your language and the words your colleagues use. Notice when you, or they use a placeholder word. And when you hear one, I encourage you to ask yourself or the other person, what do you really mean? What does good mean? What would better look like? Remember to get curious and ask. See what you notice and see how taking this approach deepens and clarifies your thinking and enriches your conversations.

Thank you so much for listening and being part of my community. I hope you have a great day. And by that, I mean a day that is purposeful, checks off some boxes on your to-do list, and connects you with those you care about. If you enjoyed this podcast, please subscribe and share it with a friend. Until next time!