Pay Attention to Intention

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My co-worker takes everything wrong. I say A, and she hears Z, then we get into yet another argument. Any solutions?

We all have had conversations like this, where we are off and running before we even know what happened. One way to clarify communication and therefore avoid disagreement, is to check intentions. Pay a close look at what you are trying to convey. Do your words match your intent? Do you truly understand the intention behind what your friend, spouse or co-worker just said? If communication is not working, stop and figure out why.

We all interpret what we hear through the filter of our unique experiences. We may have clear intentions, but the other person's filter causes him or her to add a whole different meaning to what we say. Lack of self-awareness can color our speech, unintentionally flavoring what we say with anger or sarcasm. The listener then picks up the bad feeling, and reacts to the feeling rather than the words.

Ask, "What is my intention?" before a difficult conversation. What are you really trying to convey? Do your words match your message?

Asking, "what is my intention?" before any conversation, especially one that might be difficult, can make all the difference. If what you said has been misinterpreted, asking, "what did you hear me say?" can open the door to an honest exchange.

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Personal story: Years ago I analyzed my intention following several combative political discussions. I realized the answer was, "to prove them wrong." No wonder I was so ineffective. No one ever alters his or her opinion when approached in this manner.

Some self-reflection can help clarify our own intentions. Ask yourself, "What do I need?" "How can I ask for it in a way the other can best hear?"

To become more self aware, Raj Gill, Lucy Leu and Judi Morin, recommend this exercise from their Nonviolent Communication Toolkit:

1. Bring to mind something you said. Recall something specific that involved:
    *   "negative feedback" or "constructive criticism."

- agreeing to do something someone asked of you.
- saying no.
- being "good" or "nice."
- telling a joke or saying something funny.
- being sarcastic.

2. Describe on paper what you said, and state the intention behind it.

3. Reflect on whether there were deeper layers of intention.

4. When you are aware of your intention, decide if you want to change anything you said or did.[1] Would saying it differently make your purpose clearer to your listener?

Part of becoming aware of intentions is to be careful about assigning an intention to someone else. "She did that just to irritate me!" "He just wants me to fail!" How do we really know someone else's intention? Ask.

"What did you mean when you said _____?" Or engage in a little self-reflection, "Did I hear that the way she meant it?" Did your own mental filter change the meaning of what the other said? Take responsibility for what is yours, and try to let go of what is not.

If a conversation goes sideways, analyze what happened. Ask for a break. "Could we stop for a minute and figure out what just happened?" At what point did one of you react to something said? Is it a misinterpretation or a true disagreement?

In day-to-day dialog, observe the intentions of yourself and others. Pay attention to intention.

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[1] http://www.nonviolentcommunication.com/freeresources/article_archive/intention_lleu.htm