



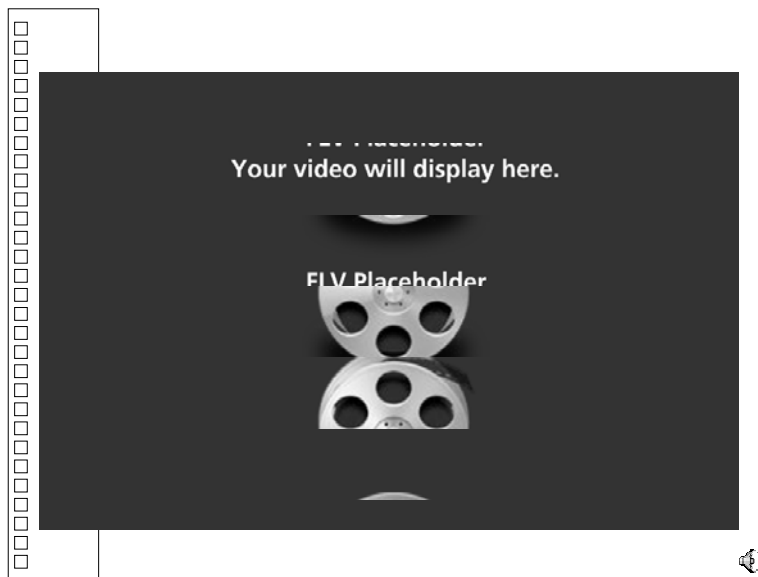
REACH Program: Session 8

Listening Skills: Dealing with an Angry Person



Up until now, we have been working with anger as an individual and internal issue. But we know that anger emerges during interaction. It is as if we have been shooting hoops in the driveway, imagining hitting the big shot right before the buzzer, but we haven't played against someone with his hand in our face at game speed.

The Greek dramatist Aeschylus is regarded as the originator of drama because he introduced the second actor. Before him, an actor would play his part onstage without the response from other characters. With Aeschylus, drama came to resemble real life more, because it portrayed relationships—with conflict, caring, betrayal and intrigue. From this point forth in the Reach program, we shall be talking about anger in real-life situations, with the second actor: spouses, coworkers, and children.

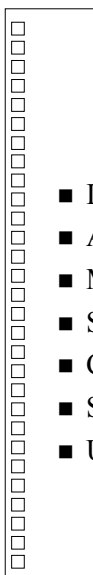


This is a picture of the Blob, the creature from the classic horror movie. In the film, this red, sticky thing falls from outer space, then begins swallowing people, one by one. It slips into buildings in one way or another, and devours everyone inside. Eventually people team up and kill it with ice. That's a brief plot summary of the film.

Anger is similar—it gains access to an interpersonal situation, then swallows everybody, quickly. Unless we can team up against it, and have effective strategies of warring against it, we are doomed.

Let's talk about this blob of anger.

- *What feeds it? What actions or words make anger bigger?*
- *What actions or words might make it smaller? Think of situations when an argument was starting—the Blob had your foot or leg—but someone did something which slowed its growth.*



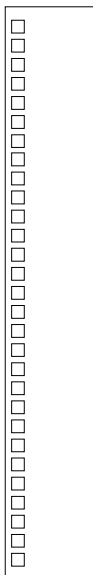
Words to Avoid with an Angry Person: Inflammatory Thoughts

- Insults, labeling: “You’re being a jerk!”
- All-or-nothings: “You *always/never*...”
- Mind-readings: “You did that because you...”
- Shoulds: “What you did was *wrong*.”
- Catastrophizing: “You totally screwed everything up.”
- Sarcasm: “Thanks a whole lot for your help!”
- Ultimatums and threats: “Say that to my face!”



There are several types of things I can say that would increase the size of the Blob of anger. If I give voice to the inflammatory thoughts we discussed earlier, this is likely to inflame the anger in the relationship. Here are several example of “Blob-enhancers”:

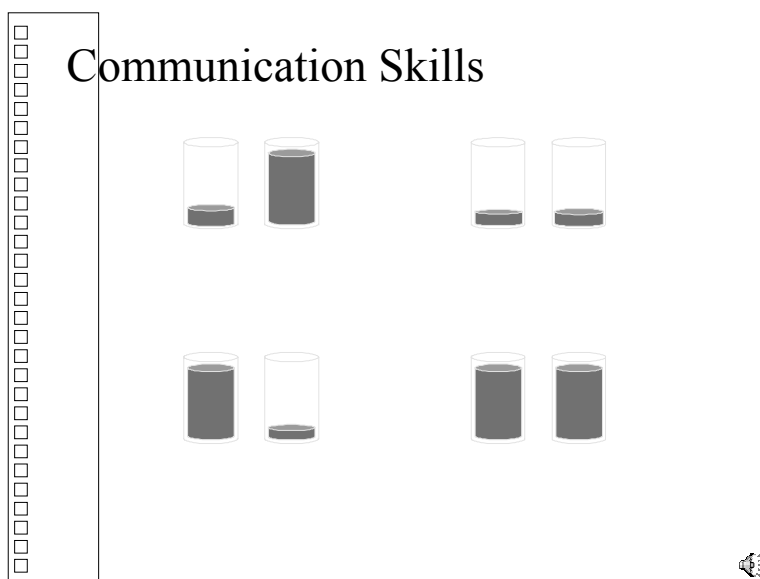
- *Insults and labels: “You’re being a jerk!”*
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- *Shoulds: “What you did was wrong.”*
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1. Listening



The first, and maybe the most obvious, strategy is to listen. This is actually pretty simple. Don't just do something—stand there.



Listening is one of four major communication skills. In the diagram above, think of yourself as the glass on the left, and the liquid as levels of need or levels of stress.

- In the top left picture, when another person has a high need-level and your need level is low, you use listening skills.*
- In the bottom left picture, when you have a high need-level, and another has a low need-level, you use assertiveness skills. We will discuss these skills at our next session.*
- In the top right picture, if both persons have low need-levels, we can use creative problem-solving. For instance, we both are feeling fine, but trying to decide how to spend our weekend. We can brainstorm possible ideas together.*
- In the bottom right picture, both persons have a high need-level. This requires conflict-resolution, involving all the other skills. I need to be able to listen at the right time, speak assertively, then put my feelings and issues aside for a while and brainstorm possible win-win solutions.*



Listening: Things to Avoid

- Don't interrupt
- Stay relaxed
- Reflect back what you hear
- Ask permission to respond



- *It's important to not interrupt. Hear the other person out*
- *Stay physically relaxed (remember when I said that all the skills we worked on would be called on?)*
- *Reflect back what you hear, concentrating on how the person feels*
- *Ask if they're finished. Ask permission to respond*



2. Be Open to a Different Outcome



- Let go of your position
- State what you need, not what you demand
- Listen with an open mind



You may approach an issue with a certain position—a certain outcome which you want, and you may find yourself holding tight to that outcome.

The problem is, the other person may be holding tight to a different position.

Let go of your position, and focus instead on what you need. For example, Mary wants John to take responsibility for more housework, but his position is that he works more outside the home than she does, and that's her job. As long as they stay focused on their respective positions, it is an either-or situation, and there can be only one winner. John's need is to have a chance to relax after work. Mary's need is to be less stressed when she's home. It's possible that they can find a solution where both needs can be met.

John might say to Mary, "Sounds like you're upset I haven't agreed to participate more in the housework. I'm not saying that can't happen. Tell me, what's up?"



3. Judgment Softeners

- “In my judgment, ...”
- “With all due respect...”
- “I may be wrong, but my opinion is...”
- “My first reaction is...”
- “You may disagree, but my belief is. . .”



Judgments can be gas on the fire in an interaction. When delivering a judgment, prefacing it with a simple statement can make a difference in how it is heard.

For example, let's say you're in an interaction, and the other person said, "You're wrong!"

Notice the difference in your feeling if they said

"In my opinion, you're wrong."

"With all due respect, I think you're wrong."

"My first reaction is that you're wrong."

"You may disagree, but my belief is that you're wrong."

The differences may seem subtle, but the cumulative effect can be dramatic.

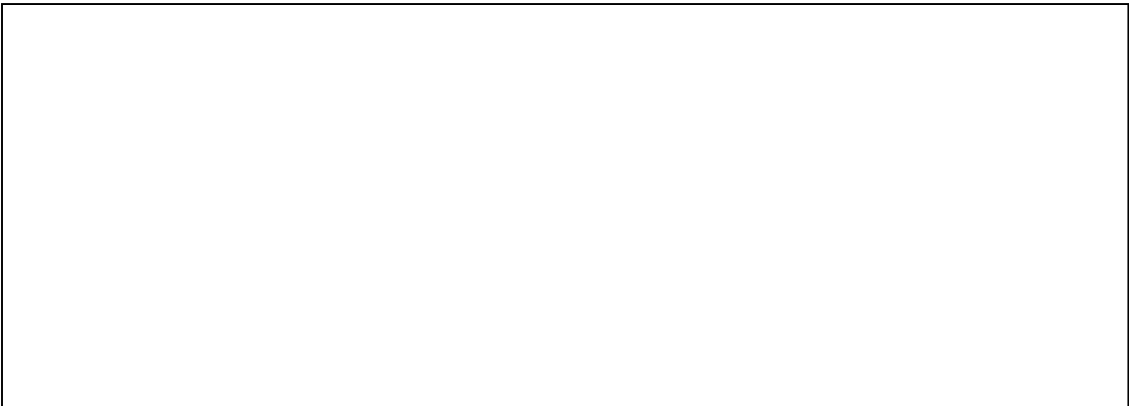


4. Apologize

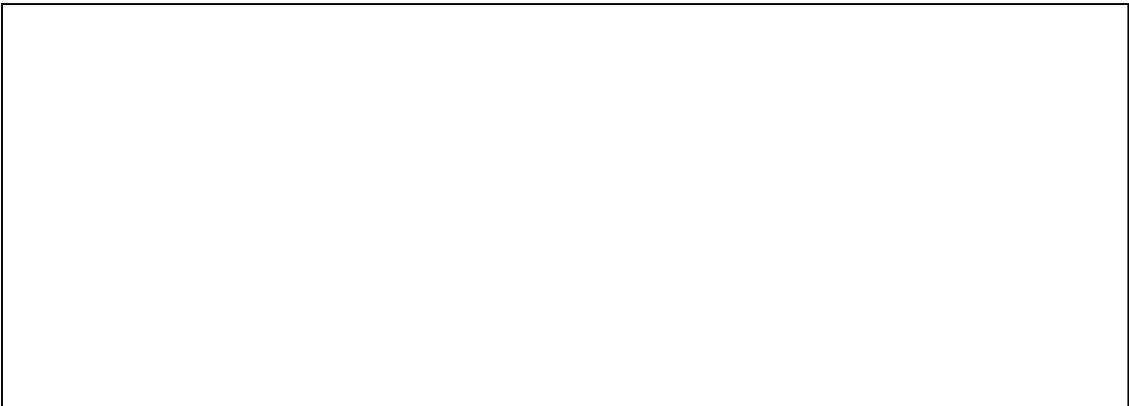


Let's spend some time developing what I call An Apology With the Head Held High.

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5. Allow Time to Think



- Allow the other person time to think
- Allow yourself time to think

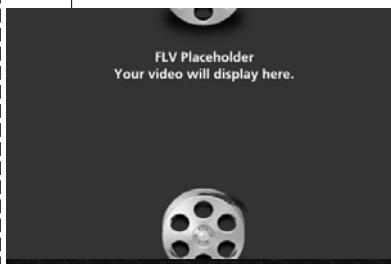
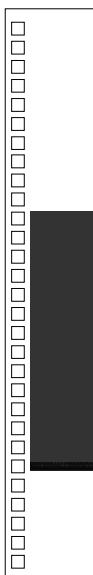


Time is an important Blob-reducer. Decisions are best made when we are calm. For that reason, it is important to allow time into the interaction.

Allow yourself time. For example, “My first instinct is to say no, but it’s too important an issue for us to decide it in the heat of battle. Let me ponder that a bit and get back to you.”

Allow the other person time. “Look, you don’t need to react right away. I just want you to think about this.”

6. Team Up Against the Argument



- Discuss the damage you think the arguing is causing
- Take responsibility for your part—it takes two
- Propose teaming up against the arguing



The other person is not the enemy. The arguing is the enemy. It is important to be able to team up with the other person against the argument.

- *Discuss the damage you think the arguing is causing*
- *Take responsibility for your part—without qualification*
- *Propose teaming up against the arguing*

For example,

“I hate what’s happening between us. This arguing is really taking its toll. I know it’s not just you—I’m playing a big part here. I just wish we could figure out a way to stop.”



End of Session 8

