

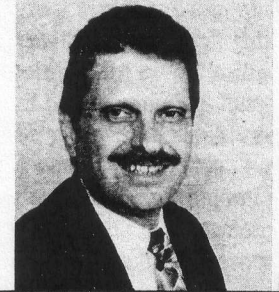
## "LIVING IN NEW KINDS OF SITUATIONS"

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(Serving People With Mental Retardation and Other Developmental Disabilities)

### TRAINING FOR TODAY

*It's All In How You Say It*

By Thomas E. Pomeranz, Ed.D.



As a trainer I am struck by the importance of HOW we communicate the training message to staff. Our method of communication is crucial and determines our success as trainers--IT'S ALL IN HOW YOU SAY IT.

As trainers, we are faced with the challenge of successfully communicating our purpose, methods and mission. Simultaneously, we have the opportunity to transition and cement the way in which the field's professionals and paraprofessionals think, communicate and impact upon the lives of the individuals we serve as advocates.

Most basic to this idea of advocacy is the WAY in which we communicate our training to others, and the relationships that are developed as a result of that training. As trainers we are responsible for enhancing the competency and effectiveness of those we train.

This transition and re-thinking of the impact of our language in the training process is a result of the emergence of

#### People First language.

People First language stems from a desire to ensure that our language and activities are sensitive of the individuals we serve.

Individuals with disabilities, not unlike all individuals, are affected by the words we use. People First language ensures that people with disabilities are spoken of as people, with understanding, dignity, empathy, and equality. For example, individuals are now spoken of as "people with mental retardation," instead of "the mentally retarded."

Because our ultimate goal lies in assisting each individual in enhancing his or her independence and improving the quality of life, a language that refers to the person and that person's ability, not the disability, is necessary, if not crucial. Again, a person who in the past has been referred to as "a client that is wheelchair bound" is now referred to as simply "an individual who uses a wheelchair."

By communicating and thinking with a focus on people and their abilities, not disabilities, we, as trainers, act as catalysts for positive change. We create positive self-fulfilling prophecies--thus facilitating independence. The premise of People First language is, simply, all in how you say it.

People First language helps us avoid the devaluing aspects of labeling--taking the most unfortunate quality or behavior associated with that person and referring to that person by that label.

It's a basic flashback to a lecture received from your second grade teacher after being caught labeling another student as "stuck-up" or "overweight." The rule enforced then was "treat others as you would like to be treated." And in the case of people with disabilities, the "rule" is the same. People with disabilities are people, first and foremost.

In People First communication, labels such as "runners" or "headbangers" are not used to identify

individuals. Rather, one might indicate that a particular individual engages in headbanging.

It has been recognized that the use of a label, in and of itself, carries with it the weight of a self-fulfilling prophecy. People applying such "labels" to individuals have been conditioned to expect that particular behavior or action to occur.

People First language has a powerful impact on the performance expectations of individuals. When training staff, People First language promotes the message that people with disabilities simply need assistance or support in some aspects of their lives. This language becomes a mandate to staff to no longer "care for" individuals but rather "care about" them. "Caring for" implies "to do for" while "to care about" is demonstrated by assisting individuals in learning new skills.

People First language dictates the expectation of an individual's ability to choose and take action. Staff, historically, were taught to "give clients privacy." No more! Staff are now to be instructed to teach and assist individuals to take privacy. People First shows reverence for an individual's growth and development in order that greater degrees of independence are reached.

Key considerations to keep in mind when training and "inspiring" staff to utilize People First language are as follows:

**1. EXPOSE YOUR VULNERABILITY** - As an instructor, humility goes a long way. Indicate that it has been most difficult for you to alter your language and that at times you still may "slip" and use less than appropriate vocabulary.

**2. DON'T APOLOGIZE** - Neither the instructor nor the student need apologize for years of using non-People First language. The important thing is recognizing the need for People First language NOW!

**3. MONITOR MATERIALS** - Check and double-check handouts, videos, and other educational/training materials for use of People First language. Do Not necessarily discard good materials simply because of the

lack of People First language. Prompt staff in how improvements could be made in the language used in the materials.

**4. USE POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT** - All use of People First language and market effort or improvement of its use deserves positive attention.

**5. REPHRASE, DON'T CORRECT** - Despite all efforts, participants will struggle for a time with a total adaption to People First language. Instead of pointing out the error, simply rephrase the staff member's question or comment using People First language.

Improve the effectiveness of your training and enhance relationships between all individuals by remembering -- IT'S ALL IN HOW YOU SAY IT.

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