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How a Lack of Tact Created the Telephone

First, let me say that I am in favor of using tact. It's the grease that makes human interactions work more smoothly, and takes the edge off of difficult conversations. It helps people focus on the issue and not be distracted by *how* the issue is presented.

As with any tool, however, it's important to know when to use it, and when not to.

Alexander Graham Bell Gets His Bell Rung

In the 1870s, Bell was a tutor to deaf children in Massachusetts. He had a lifelong interest in helping the deaf, and had previously developed a model of how speech was produced by passing air over vocal cords, causing them to vibrate.

He also had an ongoing interest in electricity and wondered whether it would be possible to use a spark, or any variation in the intensity of electrical current, to transmit human vocal sounds.

He discussed this idea with Joseph Henry, a physicist who was a pioneer in the field of electromagnetism and the first Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. Henry agreed that Bell's idea was an original one and the basis for a great invention.

Bell, however, lamented that he did not have the knowledge or skill to make an actual working device.

Henry's less than tactful, but motivating, response was, "Then get it!"

The Power of Bluntness to Motivate

The force of Henry's blunt reply knocked Bell out of his self-imposed limitations. He went to work, learning and experimenting. Less than two years later, he produced the first working prototype of a telephone, and in 1876 he was awarded the patent for it.

I wonder whether Bell would have been motivated to acquire the knowledge and develop the skills to make the telephone work if Henry's response had been less blunt, something along the lines of, "Well, all the information you need is out there. Good luck."

Bluntness Is the Nuclear Option

Being blunt – that is, telling another person something without any softening language – can easily offend, or create problems where none existed. This is especially true if you are bluntly telling another person something that is difficult or painful to hear.

Being blunt should be thought of as the “nuclear” option – use only in circumstances where being direct is the only way to make the point that needs to be made.

Blunt vs. Brutal

There’s a difference between being blunt and being brutal. Bluntness is a strong call to action, or a strong way of re-orienting another person’s attention to the heart of a matter. Its focus is on the solution.

“Brutal” may include a blunt message, but it is delivered with negative content or meaning as well. It focuses on shortcomings, and feels like a personal attack. If Joseph Henry had said, “Then get it, you idiot!” to Bell, that would have shifted the focus from a solution to Bell’s problem to a criticism of Bell himself.

How to Know When to Be Blunt

Have you ever been in a conversation with your boss when you just knew that he or she was working up to give you some “constructive criticism,” but he or she was drawing it out so long, trying to be diplomatic and tactful, that you become more and more uneasy about just how bad the news was going to be? This is the kind of situation in which a little less tact, and little more directness, would better serve both of you.

Remember, being direct does not mean being brutal. You can still use the “oreo” technique (sincere compliment followed by direct statement of problem, followed by helpful suggestion.) Just don’t spend so much time on the sincere compliment, all the while looking concerned, that the person you are talking to begins to squirm.