

Leadership Caffeine™—How Effective Leaders Use the Personal Pronoun “I”

By Art Petty, October 6, 2013

A Cup of Leadership Caffeine Few words in the leader’s lexicon are simultaneously as powerful for building credibility and as potentially lethal for destroying credibility as the personal pronoun “I.”

I’m a big fan of the word when applied carefully and properly.

“I” works great when applied occasionally in front of “believe” or “think.” It’s priceless when it comes to expressing opinions and offering suggestions in the course of a discussion. There’s no ambiguity about your perspective or your ideas. It allows others to understand where you are coming from in a discussion. It helps others understand both your interests and your position on a topic.

Of course, as a leader, your goal is to spend a majority of your energy promoting and cultivating the ideas of others.

Newsflash: it’s not all about you.

“I” works great in front of any statement where you are taking responsibility for actions or outcomes. Accountability starts and ends with the concept of “I,” and anything less comes off as weak or weasel-like. “We we’re wrong” doesn’t cut it when seeking to take accountability for a decision or failed set of actions.

“I was wrong” is the only acceptable response for a leader who has made a mistake.

5 Reasons Why the “I’s Don’t Have It:

- 1. “I” creates destructive noise!** Place too many “I’s” in conversations that sound like, I want, I expect, I know, I did, I was right etc...and the term begins to jump out into the immediate environment with a loud bang every time it’s uttered.
- 2. “I” frames the discussion around your views,** reducing or eliminating the opportunity for alternative frames to emerge. Yes, if you as the leader frame the problem or options, you’ve guaranteed that other ideas will remain out of sight.
- 3. You come off as arrogant.** Over use of “I” quickly begins to sound egotistical and comes off as arrogant. It creates a dividing line in the conversation and challenges the receiver to take a contrary opinion or capitulate.
- 4. You kill dialog before it gets started.** Over use of “I” reduces the opportunity for dialog and foments the move towards argument.
- 5. Overuse of “I” by someone in a leadership role subjugates the receiver.** It’s a sign that the abuser is striving to compensate for weakness and insecurity.

There’s a lot of “I” going on in Washington right now...and very little “We.”

The last I looked, that important document started with, “We the people...,” not “I the president” or “I the congressional leader.”

The Bottom-Line for Now:

Think carefully about your use of “I” as a leader and apply it sparingly, mostly around issues of accountability. If you must use it, preface it liberally with questions such as, “What do you think?” and “What do you believe we should do?”

Your position is a big enough problem for your credibility. You don’t need to verbally punch your team members in the face at every encounter.

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