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*"Prescriptions for Effective
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Ego-Boosters Versus Ego-Busters

By Susanne Gaddis, Ph.D.

At the most fundamental psychological level, there are, essentially, three kinds of people: Those that see the glass as half-empty, those that view the glass as half-full and those that will argue for hours as to whether it's a glass at all!

Now ask yourself, which category do you fall into? Do you inflate and encourage – or are you more like a human vortex, a steady drain on emotional resources? Are you a courage-builder or a spirit-sucker? Do your colleagues view you as a burst of upbeat energy – or as a vitality-vampire, sucking the positive lifeblood out of your co-workers? Are you an ego-booster or an ego-buster?

When you truly begin to embrace the fact that your words and actions contribute to the overall energy and happiness in your life and the lives of your co-workers, you'll make a radical decision to positively reframe your outlook, speech and actions. Now, let's look at the seven top ego-busting behaviors – How we can help those who use these destructive communication patterns, and how we can change these behaviors in our own speech.

1. **Overwhelmingly Negative Speech** – In order for an organization to flourish, and not flounder or experience flat growth, they need to pump up their positive speech. Quite often, these are people who suffer from the ball-and-chain syndrome – where every task (no matter how small) – is a crushing chore, an insurmountable burden.
 - You: If most of your day-to-day dialogue is negative, pessimistic, sarcastic, hurtful, harmful, blame-ridden, guilt-inducing and filled "I can'ts augmented with extra doses of "poor-poor-pitiful-me," it may be time for you to make a healthy change to the positive. Try to strike a better balance by choosing positive, optimistic, reassuring, encouraging, morale-building, forward-thinking, "I can" words.
 - Others: If you hear others engaged in negative dialogue, first acknowledge them by saying, "Gee, it sounds like you are really unhappy," or "I can tell by what you are saying that you are frustrated." Then ask them, "Share with me something that is going right." You can also offer a comment such as, "Do you realize that when you complain/are negative about _____ that it really has a

negative impact on my morale – and what I need from you is to hear you offer up some of the positive things that are going on around here.”

2. **“I Didn’t Do It!”** – Truth be told, no one really cares about what you’re unwilling to do or can’t do. They’re only interested in finding out what you have done, are willing to do or can do. Experts agree that if every person involved in a task took a mere 10 percent responsibility in a project’s outcome (negative or positive), the work responsibility could be evenly distributed and shared.

Folks that play the “blame game” lose on all accounts: They fail to function as a team player and lose their co-workers’ respect. Playing the “blame game” is a career-killing move.

- **You:** If you are blaming another, and the task *truly* wasn’t your responsibility, then give the person who needs the task completed very specific and helpful information. Without this, you will seem lazy, uncooperative and a non-team player. If you continue playing the “blame game,” no one will approach you with any new tasks. Task assigning = trust.
 - **Others:** If someone is blaming another, you can ask them: “What can you do and what are *you* willing to do in this situation?” In these situations, blaming-throwing can go on indefinitely, so oftentimes, eliciting some information is better than none.
3. **Grapevine Gossipers** – If you think that you’ll have nothing to talk about if you omitted all of the gossip in your everyday speech – You need to reassess your communications! Gossip is damaging, especially in a work environment. Just how far will employers go to stop gossip? Two years ago, municipal workers in Cascavel, Brazil, were banned from gossiping during working hours under a new law. Any public employee caught spreading rumors or gossip about their colleague ran the risk of being fired. The city claimed that civil servants have the right to work in a professional environment and said the new law promotes integrity.

In 2001, a nationwide study conducted by a UK group, Industrial Society, claimed that, on average, American men gossip more than women. The idea that gossip is largely a women's thing is deeply ingrained; saying that men gossip more than women is like saying that men have more shoes than women!

But how do you define gossip? The authors of the study described true gossip as meeting five essential criteria:

- ✓ The person being talking about is not present;
- ✓ The people having the conversation have an established relationship with the subject;
- ✓ The information has no direct impact on the lives of the people conducting the conversation;
- ✓ The conversation is generally negative in tone, and
- ✓ The conversation is morality-based in its implications.

The study concedes, however, that men and women gossip quite differently. While women gossip primarily to bond with one another, and men do it to bolster their self-esteem.

- You: If you're the department's "gossip grapevine," try to cut your gossip by 10 percent. You'll soon find that it's easy to cut back on the time you spend "sharing news & views" about co-workers and managers. You want to feel included and embraced in your group, but what you're really doing is serving as the "enabler" of negative relationships.
- Others: When someone tries to share gossip with you, ask them, "Why are you sharing this information with me? I would prefer not to talk about _____ without him/her being here." Defend others in their absence, just as you'd wish for others to defend you. And remember, if a person gossips with you, they'll gossip about you!

4. **"I'm Okay, But You're Not Okay"** – Perhaps the most difficult behavioral pattern to deal with, passive-aggressive behavior plays an insidious role in interpersonal communications. This "I'm okay, but you're not okay" (*but I'm not going to verbalize this, I'll just subtly undermine you*) conduct can prove frustrating.

- You: If you're the culprit in passive-aggressive conduct, you need to more carefully identify your needs. Don't expect positive responses from your negative innuendos and sarcastic "off-the-cuff" comments. Try to more articulately, concisely and clearly state your needs.
- Others: Those that fall into passive-aggressive behavior tend to take negative jabs in their speech and then follow it up with comments like: "Gosh, I was just joking," or, "Lighten up!" and "Can't you take a joke?" remarks. In order to deal with this type of conduct, you can ask the person to repeat any necessary information, deadlines, agreements, etc., and (face-to-face) agree

to specified terms. Whatever you do, don't be sarcastic or attempt to "even the playing field" with similar negative comments, this will only serve to further "fuel the fire" in passive-aggressive individuals.

Controllers & Micro-Managers – This is, at its primal level, a form of controlling behavior.

- **You:** If you find yourself micro-managing your employees and co-workers, your core issue is trust. You don't trust people. As a result, people will not trust you. Let people set their own deadlines – typically, they'll set shorter deadlines than you would and, as a result, they'll have a better attitude about their project and their own abilities.
- **Others:** When you find yourself working for a micro-manager, you need to start a positive communication campaign. Push a constant stream of communication out to your manager. Use phrases like: "This is where I am on this project, and unless I hear from you otherwise, I'll move forward to [Step B]." Send out a copious flow of updates and information, allowing the person to (slowly but surely) develop trust in your working relationship.

5. **"Poor Me" Victim Mentality** – This very damaging ego-busting behavior can spell "disaster" for a budding career.

- **You:** If you indulge yourself in "victim mentality," realize that you can badly (sometimes irretrievably) damage your career. Using the "poor me" excuse in professional environs can make you seem ill equipped in handling undemanding situations, thereby allowing others to deem you completely incapable of managing more stressful and challenging ones. Realize that it serves no positive purpose to whine and moan, "The other department got all of the new computers... We never get any of the good stuff," type of speech. It merely brands you as the department's top grumbler, grouch and complainer.
- **Others:** If you work with a person who continually views the half-full glass as half-empty, you'll need to assist them in moving their communications in a more positive direction.

6. **Cyclops Syndrome** – Diagnosing "Cyclops Syndrome" is easy. People who have it, have one big "eye" – that is focused solely on themselves. This self-centered behavior stems from egocentric mentality – "It's all about me . . .enough about you . . .now let's talk about me!" I also call this

“one-upmanship” communication or “OOPS,” syndrome – or Our Own Personal Story (OOPS) syndrome.

- You: If you find yourself using “I”-focused dialogue, it’s time to reassess your focus on others. If you find you don’t congratulate others on their victories, but rather use them as (yet another) opportunity to build yourself up: “Oh, I already got a raise” rather than, “Congratulations on your raise!” – stop your egocentric speech patterns.
- Others: People suffering from the “Cyclops Syndrome” don’t allow others a moment “in the spotlight.” Completely unaware of other’s needs, they always have a better story, a bigger win or a more impressive development than anyone else (or *OOPS* – Our Own Personal Story). Self-centered Cyclops-sighted folks will always shift and bring the focus back on themselves: “Oh, you think you’re having trouble on your ward, just wait until you hear mine,” and “If you think your child is doing well in school, mine is doing better...”

Susanne Gaddis, PhD, known as the Communications Doctor, is an acknowledged communications expert who has been speaking and teaching the art of effective and positive communication since 1989. With a specialized expertise in healthcare communication, Susanne delivers workshops, seminars, and keynote presentations across the United States. For more information, or to book Dr. Gaddis for an upcoming conference or event call 919-933-3237 or visit: www.communicationsdoctor.com.