

The *Three Words of Being* Technique

By David Spungin, MSOD, PCC

Often in my executive coaching conversations, I'm helping a client to prepare for an upcoming event or challenging conversation they need to have. They explain how they're feeling anxious about a particular situation and would like to spend time on how to best handle it. Perhaps it's the customer who is upset and threatening to switch to a competitor. Or they need to make a pitch to their peers on the executive team, but know that certain factions will respond negatively to their idea. Regardless of the situation, they want to talk about what they should do next, and identify the risks and rewards of particular courses of action.

This is when I'll offer that before we focus on what we'd **like to do**, it might benefit them if we spend some time on how they'd **like to be**. Typically, they'll respond back with, "Uhhmm, sure, David...what the heck are you talking about?" That's my opening to share my story of where the *Three Words of Being* technique originated for me and how I've used it ever since.

It was 2013 and I was in South Africa doing a consulting engagement as part of my Masters in Organization Development program. We were tasked with a large-scale OD project for a \$10M organization in the entertainment industry. Our small team arrived to our client's site and met up with their internal L&D department to get a briefing before we began work. I'll never forget what happened next! We were bombarded with slides designed to prove their high educational pedigree and level of competency. Very little of the presentation had anything to do with our project. This was an act of intimidation! What was supposed to be a friendly, mutually supportive endeavor had our team feeling like we were in "hostile territory."

Later that day, our team learned the reasons behind the behavior. We were American consultants coming from a prestigious university to do work in their backyard. That carried a lot of cultural baggage with it. While our team was just trying to "cut our teeth" as OD consultants, we were being perceived as bona fide experts. Of course, that's exactly what we were trying to project, as we didn't want anyone to know this was our first major client engagement together. That didn't work out so well for us. With each side feeling slightly inadequate, we both engaged in coping strategies in an attempt to build credibility.

As we prepared for our next meeting, my team discussed **what we should do next**. We were trying to choreograph the language that we should use and specific actions we could take to build trust quickly. Yet, we kept coming across as too mechanical or inauthentic. That's when it hit me...How did we **need to be with them** to improve our effectiveness? We brainstormed some ideas and ultimately settled on being **humble, curious, and supportive**. We decided that night we didn't need to rehearse any longer. We would let these *Three Words of Being* guide our collective actions.

The next morning, we revisited our three words together immediately before our client meeting. It was amazing how it changed the conversation! Our team's energy was completely different, and our client responded in turn. They began to let down their guard, as they realized we were not a threat, but a resource. The project went on to be a huge success!

So, this brings me to how I use this technique in my coaching conversations today.

1. First, I request that my client to reflect on how they typically "show up" in these situations. I'll ask, "What are three words that this person/faction/etc. would use to describe you?" The point of this is to create some empathy for and awareness of how they are normally perceived.
2. I'll then spend some time asking the client to consider the impact of this perception and, given the anticipated event/conversation, "what they need to be mindful of."
3. Next, I'll ask my client to come up with their own **Three Words of Being**. "How do they **need to be** perceived in order to be effective?"
4. Finally, we will talk about some specific behaviors and actions that might support their intentions. I'll ask, "What might this person/group pay attention to that would indicate that you are embodying these three words?"

Many clients report that this technique works quite well for them. They get less concerned about rehearsing and scripting what they want to say and more focused on the energy that will best serve them. The right words and behaviors seem to manifest at the right moment. Give it a try with your clients--I hope they find it equally helpful!