



Becoming a More Effective Communicator Through the “And Stance”

As an academic leader, department head, mentor, adviser, or teacher, you will often find yourself answering requests, offering advice, giving feedback, making decisions, and negotiating – often giving “bad news” to colleagues. Such conversations are difficult because you are often critiquing or criticizing them, disagreeing with them, or turning down their requests. This Quick Tip shows the power of taking the “And Stance.” Instead of opposing people, you are joining them in solving a problem.

What is this about?

In conversations, you will often naturally find yourself using the word “but,” as in:

*That’s an interesting idea for a proposal, **but** we can’t fund it now.
I hear what you’re saying, **but** you’ve missed the point.
You provided that information, **but** I didn’t include it.*

Using “but” often functions as a stopper word because, in English, it is regularly used to introduce criticism or disagreement. As a result, people shut down when they hear the “but.” They stop attending to what you are saying, and begin to prepare their responses.

- They can feel attacked and get defensive.
- They can feel criticized or insulted.
- The situation can get confrontational and become counterproductive.

Because of how often “but” is used to preface criticism, even when you are not intending to, the word creates distance and a barrier you and your listener.

Moving to the And Stance

A concept advanced by William Ury in his book *Getting Past No: Negotiating in Difficult Situations* (1991) is called “Taking the And Stance.” The “And Stance” means that you substitute “and” for “but” in your speech and writing in as many situations as possible. The rephrasing you undertake to accommodate the change is more effective than using “but,” especially as topics get heated or difficult. Moving to the “And Stance” in your own communication shifts you from being in opposition to aligning with others to solve a problem.

When you move to the “And Stance,” your goal is to keep your message the same as it would have been with a “but,” and make the conversation more constructive. It helps your audience attend to what you are saying, because they have not automatically shut down and switched to preparing to how to defend themselves. Used consistently, the “And Stance” can:

- reduce levels of conflict and disagreement, and
- increase the likelihood you will be understood.

Most importantly, by taking the “And Stance,” your listener:

- is more likely to attend/listen longer to what you are saying, and
- thus remember more of it.

The effect of taking the “And Stance” is that you align yourself with the other person in the shared objective of finding a solution to a problem. You:

- move from offering information phrased as criticism to aligning to solve a problem, and
- are more likely to acknowledge the worth and accomplishment of the other person in the process.





Some examples

Here are some ways to open a constructive conversation by using “and” instead of “but” and rephrasing.

Instead of saying:

*The first five pages are very good, **but** after that your organization and argument deteriorate.*

try:

*The first five pages are very good, **and** if the end were better organized and argued, it would be a better paper.*

or:

*The first five pages are very good, **and** if you continue the organization and argument you use in the beginning, it will improve dramatically.*

or:

*The first five pages are very good, **and** let's revise it to carry the organization and argument you have established all the way through.*

Or, instead of saying:

*I appreciate your interest in our position, **but** you don't meet our minimum requirements.*

try:

*I appreciate your interest in the position, **and** I hope you'll apply again when you meet our minimum requirements.*

Or, instead of saying:

*I'd like to be able to give you the day off, **but** we're short-staffed that day.*

try:

*I'd like to be able to give you the day off, **and** let's find a day when we won't be short-staffed.*

Powerful results

Overall, moving to the “And Stance” is totally invisible, and totally under your own control. Its use can improve your relationships and the effectiveness of your leadership by helping you align with others in solving problems instead of being oppositional and critical.

Using the “And Stance” changes your orientation, and in turn the way you communicate: as an approach to leadership, it energizes others, rather than enervating them or isolating you.

You can use it in everyday conversations, as well as in professional situations. Moving to the “And Stance” is difficult – monitor how often you say “but” and watch its effects on others when you see it used in meetings. Using this powerful tool requires attention and practice. It is worth the effort.

Further resources

Gunsalus, C. K. (2012). *The young professional's survival guide: From cab fares to moral snares* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), pp. 118-122, 125-126, 195-198.

Ury, W. (1991). *Getting past No: Negotiating in difficult situations* (New York, NY: Bantam), pp. 66-73.

Video

Gunsalus, C. K. The And Stance. Online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UYcZKctP6uI>

