

Listening to our language / 7 Habits / Stephen Covey (1989)

Because our attitudes and behaviours flow out of our paradigms (our mental maps of how we believe the world is), if we use our self-awareness to examine them, we can often see in them the nature of our underlying maps. Our language, for example, is a very real indicator of the degree to which we see ourselves as proactive people.

The language of reactive people absolves them of responsibility.

- “That’s me. That’s just the way I am.” - I am determined. There’s nothing I can do about it.”
- “He makes me so mad!” - I’m not responsible. My emotional life is governed by something outside my control.
- “I can’t do that. I just don’t have the time.” - Something outside of me – limited time – is controlling me.
- “If only my wife were more patient.” – Someone else’s behaviour is limiting my effectiveness.
- “I have to do it.” – Circumstances or other people are forcing me to do what I do. I’m not free to choose my own actions

That language comes from a basic paradigm of determinism. And the whole spirit of it is the transfer of responsibility. I am not responsible, not able to choose my response.

One time a student asked me, “Will you excuse me from class? I have to go on a tennis trip.”

“You have to go, or you choose to go?” I asked.

“I really have to,” he exclaimed.

“What will happen if you don’t?”

“Why, they’ll kick me off the team.”

“How would you like that consequence?”

“I wouldn’t.”

Listening to our language (cont.)

"In other words, you choose to go because you want the consequence of staying on the team. What will happen if you miss my class?"

"I don't know."

"Think hard. What do you think would be the natural consequence of not coming to class?"

"You wouldn't kick me out, would you?"

"That would be a social consequence. That would be artificial. If you don't participate on the tennis team, you don't play. That's natural. But if you don't come to class, what would be the natural consequence?"

"I guess I'll miss the learning."

"That's right. So you have to weigh that consequence against the other consequence and make a choice. I know if it were me, I'd choose to go on the tennis trip. But never say you have to do anything."

Examples of reactive and proactive language:

Reactive Language	Proactive Language
There's nothing I can do That's just the way I am He makes me so mad They won't allow that I have to do that I can't I have to I should	Let's look at our alternatives I can choose a different approach I control my own feelings I can create an effective presentation I will choose an appropriate response I choose I'd prefer I want

A serious problem with reactive language is that it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. People become reinforced in the paradigm that they are determined, and they produce evidence to support the belief. They feel increasingly victimised and out of control, not in charge of their life or destiny. They blame outside forces – other people, circumstances, even the stars – for their own situation.