



Whole Messages

A way to give feedback in the moment to anyone

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What is a Whole Message?

- The Whole Message model is a simple method for giving either positive or developmental feedback.
- It is particularly useful when the leader anticipates a difficult conversation with the recipient of the feedback. At the same time, when used for positive feedback, the experience can be a memorable and motivating experience for the recipient.
- A whole message is a four-part statement that **BEGINS** a conversation with another person.
- It is delivered in its entirety—all four parts in sequence without stopping.
- It should be concise and only take about 30 seconds.
- When created with care, and used to start a conversation, it can resolve tensions and create better understanding between two people.

OBSERVATIONS

are statements of what you see, hear, and touch. You describe the situation in concrete facts, specific events and behaviours.

WANTS

are a clear statement of the results you expect. Wants are an expression of what you would like to see change, improve, stop or continue. By clearly stating your expectation, there is a much better chance it will be achieved.



THOUGHTS

are your logical conclusions, inferences or guesses based on your observations. Frequently, thoughts involve clearly stating the impact of what you observed on yourself, others or the organisation.

FEELINGS

are the appropriate expression of your emotions. While the content of a message is extremely important, the emotions that are expressed, either verbally or non-verbally, often receive primary attention.

Observations

Observations are objective statements of what you see and hear. You describe the situation in concrete facts, specific events and behaviours.

- Outline the facts by talking about what, when, where, and how. Be careful with using Why as it can be subject to interpretation. Be careful with using Who because the Observations need to be from your perspective only.
- Avoid second-hand observations, such as “I hear that you did...” If you can’t base a whole message on your own observations, it is better to focus on the observation that people are coming to you with problems involving the other person.
- **Examples:**

“One of your Customers phoned me to say that negotiations with them have been difficult this year.”

"You exceeded your sales goal by 35% this quarter and by 20% over the whole year."

"This is the third product launch deadline you have missed and we have spoken about this throughout the year."

Thoughts

Thoughts are your conclusions, inferences, or guesses based on your observations. Frequently, thoughts involve clearly stating the impact of what you observed on yourself, others, or the organisation.

- **Examples:**

"I wondered why you hadn't brought this to my attention sooner."

"It seems to me that you have been extremely focused this year."

"It makes me believe that this isn't important to you for some reason."

Feelings

Feelings are the appropriate expression of your emotions. While the content of a message is extremely important, the emotions that are expressed, either verbally or non-verbally, often receive primary attention.

- The emotions you felt at the time are important to communicate so that the other person understands the effect of their behavior.
- **Examples:**

"I felt surprised by the comment they made."

"That's terrific! I'm really pleased."

"I am concerned by this behaviour."

Wants

Wants are a clear statement of the results you expect. Wants are an expression of what you would like to see change, start, stop, or continue. By clearly stating your expectation, there is a much better chance it will be achieved.

- **Examples:**

"I'd like us to be able to discuss these issues when they arise."

"I'd like to hear your ideas on how we can build on your formula for success across the whole department for next year."

"I want us to go through your project plan together and discuss where the difficulties were, and how you think they can be avoided next time."

Sentence Starters

OBSERVATIONS

"I saw..."
"I noticed..."
"I observed..."
"I heard..."

THOUGHTS

"I thought..."
"It makes me think that..."
"My perception is..."
"Might it be that..."

FEELINGS

"I feel puzzled..."
"I am concerned..."
"I am frustrated..."
"I am delighted..."

WANTS

"In the future..."
"I'd like you to..."
"Next time you are in this situation ..."
"Instead of _____, _____ would be more effective..."

Delivering an Effective Whole Message (1)

- A whole message needs to be delivered in its entirety. If you pause before the Wants, you run a stronger risk of the other person jumping in with a defensive remark. Sharing the wants focuses the ensuing conversation.
- When you are new to using the Whole Message model, prepare your whole message in advance, before your conversation. Remember to keep it concise, and use the four parts in order.
- For particularly difficult messages, write down what you want to say and practice delivering the message before you speak to the person. By practicing, you will increase your ability to deliver your message succinctly.
- As you get more comfortable with the Whole Message model, you may find you can create one “in the moment” as well. Just be sure that you have time for a conversation after you have given someone a Whole Message.
- So that the recipient can remember your message clearly, it is best to limit the data in your whole message to no more than **three** observations, **two** thoughts, **two** feelings, and **one** want. For complicated situations the one want may be simply to have a candid conversation to resolve the issue. Other situations may only require one piece of data for each of the four parts (Observation, Thought, Feeling, and Want).

Delivering an Effective Whole Message (2)

- The **Thought** part needs to be about *your* thoughts, nobody else's. Keep it logical and objective—a natural conclusion based on your observations so that it would be hard to argue with.
- When first learning the Whole Message model, people often accidentally skip the Feelings. They instead say "I feel" and then share another Thought or conjecture rather than their emotions. Sharing both **Thoughts** and **Feelings** separately is the power of the model. It helps the recipient understand the impact of his/her behaviour because you are shifting from the objectivity of Observations and Thoughts to the revealing of your personal emotions about the situation. This shift from Thoughts to Feelings, if done well, often deflates any defensiveness that may have been pricked in the recipient by your Observations and Thoughts.
- If the conversation starts to derail, change tactics and focus simply on active listening until you can get back on track. Nothing works better to de-intensify someone else's negative reactions than to listen to them and paraphrase what they say. Remember that active listening is not agreeing, it is communicating to the other person you have heard their views.
- In the **Wants** part, remember to keep it objective and to focus on future positive behaviours rather than the future omission of negative behaviours. For example, "I want you to keep in touch with your stakeholders more closely so there are no surprises at the conclusion of the project" is better than "I want you to stop avoiding sharing bad news with the stakeholders during the project."