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inside:

THE WORKPLACE

Kick Those BUTs

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The Advanced Computing Systems Association &
The System Administrators Guild

kick those BUTs

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Last issue we discussed OR. We continue our tour of short words by today discussing BUT.

“I liked the movie. But the ending was awful.”

“You’re doing a good job. But I wish you would show more leadership.”

So, did I really like the movie? As soon as the word BUT comes through the door, YES and NO go out the window. If someone later asks you whether I liked the movie, it’s hard for you to say YES (even though I said I did), because the effect of the BUT was to pretty much negate anything that came before it.

“Wait a minute,” you may say, “what’s wrong with trying to be precise by talking in detail about my reaction, rather than just saying YES or NO?” Are you really being precise by saying two things that contradict each other? We would argue that you aren’t. You are simply making statements that are very much open to confusion and misinterpretation. Depending on your biases, you may hear and quote me that I liked the movie, or that I thought the ending was awful.

More precision looks like this:

“I liked the first three quarters of the movie. The ending was awful.”

This gets rid of the direct logical contradiction, but is still emotionally ambiguous – it doesn’t tell how you felt about the movie as a whole. Even more precise would be:

“The first three quarters of the movie were great. The ending was awful. On the whole, I was disappointed with the movie.”

Not too many people may care whether I liked a particular movie or not. However, people tend to be very interested when the sentences involve their performance doing their job. In our experience, the word BUT appears in many performance reviews, and almost always should be eliminated. The same problems of logical contradiction and emotional ambiguity that were irritations when discussing the movies can be profoundly upsetting when people are getting their job reviews.

How can you get rid of BUTs? One rule is to replace most BUTs by AND. This makes it clear that you stand behind both sentences, and aren’t using the second sentence to take away the first. This is typically linguistically correct. It may feel awkward, especially if the two sentences have different emotional tone.

A good way to get rid of the emotional contradictions implicit in BUT statements is to displace the communication in time. Typically, in a performance review you are more interested in improving future performance than in punishing someone for past mistakes. So you can phrase suggestions for improvement as “if . . . then” statements about their future performance and point out the advantages that would come to everyone if the person changed their behavior:

“If you could show more leadership this coming year, it would make my life easier and position you well for a future promotion.”

or

“By showing more leadership next year, you’ll find that newer employees will be able to benefit more from your experience...”

Let's face it – as a manager, if we think someone should have been doing something and we didn't tell them to do it, we don't have any moral right to spring it on them in the performance review. We should have been talking about it all year.

Another way of defusing the emotional ambiguity of BUT, especially when there are serious problems that need correction, is to use the “feedback sandwich.” Talk about the positive, then talk about the negative, then overall talk about what is positive. Assuming you aren't actually firing the person, keeping the emphasis on more positive results in the future is a good strategy. So you might write something like:

“You have come up to speed quickly and accomplished more than we expected in the first year. Unfortunately, you made a couple of key mistakes that cost us the Fletcher account, leading to an overall negative assessment of your performance this year. We expect that you can put these mistakes behind you and be more successful next year.

This conveys four messages. There were some good things about the year. There were some problems. Overall, the problems predominated. And in the future we expect you will grow past this difficult year. By contrast, the typical BUT sentence:

“You had a good year, but your mistakes cost us the Fletcher account.”

is much more ambiguous, and the overall tone more negative.

So when writing reviews, or in general when expressing your opinion, use your word processor to look for BUTs, and get rid of them. There is always a better way to be more precise.