

Hiding Inside Grammar

This is another of our Technique Tips for moderators/group facilitators.

Very often when a respondent in a group is speaking they will use second or third person forms in order to mask the fact that they are expressing an opinion.

The second person distortion goes something like: 'you don't want to worry about losing your passport when you're on holiday.' No-one can reasonably disagree with this, any more than 'you don't want to die while you're out at the shops today, do you?'

But the point is that the speaker, through the use of *you*, rather than 'I', conjures the illusion that you, singular, or plural, all have this thought, when in reality the idea of losing your passport is never something you worry about any more than you ordinarily contemplate death while shopping.

As a moderator, you should say to the speaker: 'do you worry about losing your passport on holiday? I would prefer it if you would speak from 'I' when you're expressing your views or concerns. If not, it makes it sound as though we all have the same thought.'

The third person distortion is usually something like: 'It's well known that sweets are bad for you.'" Here the third person 'It is' sounds as if there is a fact out there that is well known and the speaker is merely reporting it. This can very quickly drive group conformity in a way that does not represent the diversity of opinions in the room.

Once again, the moderator needs to point out the distortion: 'to be honest it's debatable whether sweets are bad for you. Some would argue that they are a perfectly legitimate form of reward or energy. Is it your opinion that sweets are bad for you?'

Again it is a way to redirect your informants so that people take responsibility for their opinions rather than invoking the support of everyone else or the facts of the matter.

Hundreds of times this failure by moderators to make people responsible for their own contributions leads to false positives or false negatives in groups. It also leads to premature closure on matters that could benefit from a proper airing and debate in the group.