Are you politician- or constituent-focused?

C onstituents elected you to represent them — to help ensure their safety, health, comfort and quality of life. They have put their lives, and their futures, in your hands. For this reason, you are invited to speak at schools, clubs, and business and community events.

So when you speak to constituents, what do you say? What do they hope to hear? What do they need to hear?

Talking about yourself: ‘politician-focused’

If you are like many representatives, you talk about what you are doing in the capitol — the bills you’ve passed, the battles you’ve fought in committee or on the floor, etc. You need to give all the details. Otherwise, how will your constituents know how hard you are working, right? It’s good for them to know you are busy, but they don’t really care.

You might call this politician-focused.

Talking about them: ‘constituent-focused’

If you focus on them, your constituents, then you talk about the new challenges they may face, the new opportunities they will have or the coming changes to their lives. Your constituents don’t want you to tell them everything. They want you to be like their doctor. They want you to take their pulse, ask how they are doing, and talk to them about their future. They want you to know them, care about them, and then help them.

When you speak to their world, you are constituent-focused.

Ask, listen, respond ... and then ask again

To be constituent-focused, caring and listening can serve as better tools than talking.

Remember, too, that few people are genuinely interested in the grisly details of the sausage-making factory. You don’t need to prove you are a politician. They already know that, don’t they? You need to prove you are a human being. To show your humanity, ask questions.

How are their families and jobs? Their schools? Their roads? What are their hopes, successes and concerns?

And if a constituent asks a question like, “What have you been doing in the legislature?” Consider it a trick question! Yes, you have worked hard and are proud of what you have been doing. But, no, they don’t really want to know what you have been doing. What they really mean is: “What have you done in the legislature for me?”

Your best answer may be short and followed by a clarifying question: “Your question is important, and my answer may be way more information than you want. Can you tell me your specific interest?”

They will feel like you care.

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A change in pronouns can be a ‘game changer’

How can you frame your message so people will listen? A few small changes can make a big difference in your impact. Go back to high school English class. Remember sentence structure? Most sentences have a subject and an object. The subject takes the action. The object is . . . an object.

Constituents don’t want to be the object. To make sure you are focusing on them, connecting with them and getting them interested in what you say, make them the subject. Literally, or at least grammatically.

You can force a change in your speaking style with one simple step: Don’t begin your sentences with first-person pronouns; these are “politician-focused” sentences talking about yourself.

We had great success in the last session. We got some things done that we are proud of. Our new laws will make a difference. I will keep you informed about what I am doing!

If “I,” “we” or “our” are the subjects in your message, then what you say is about you! You are the hero in your sentences. You are focused on you. Consider making them, your constituents, the subjects of your sentences and the heroes of your stories, by starting sentences with “you” and “your.” “Constituent-focused” sentences talk about them:

Your leadership and participation in the community’s safety program will make a difference to your children.

Your job opportunities will be greater because of the economic impact of this decision.

Your family will have access to better choices. Their benefits will grow in the future.

Using “you” and “your” (or “they” and “their”) in your interactions is a game changer. Constituents, stakeholders and even fellow legislators will listen better when you frame your message from their perspective.

Like anything, this adjustment in focus will take time. If you practice, you will see a difference. Use constituent-focus in emails, subject lines, newsletters, conversations and the speeches you deliver. It will change the way people see you. It will change your impact on their lives.