

Stroking: The Power of Validation and Respect

What is "Stroking"?

In the 5 Secrets of Effective Communication, "Stroking" is the practice of conveying warmth, respect, and positive regard to another person, even in the heat of a disagreement. It is the verbal and non-verbal way we tell someone, "You are important to me, and I value our relationship."

While it involves giving compliments, Stroking goes much deeper than surface-level flattery. When done genuinely, it creates emotional safety and opens the door for profound connection.

Here are the key elements to effectively use Stroking in your communication:

1. The Anatomy of a Meaningful Compliment

A genuine compliment is most impactful when it is followed by an explanation. Simply saying "You're great" is nice, but it lacks depth. By attaching the *why* to your statement, you show the person that you truly see them.

- **Example:** "I really appreciate you, *because* you always take the time to listen to me when I've had a hard day."

2. Focus on Core Character vs. Surface Traits

In general, compliments carry much more weight when they highlight something that is harder to change about a person (their character, their values, their heart) rather than something easy to change (their clothes, their haircut).

- **Surface-Level (Easy to change):** "I love your new jacket."
- **Character-Level (Hard to change):** "I deeply admire your resilience and how kind you are to others, even when you are stressed."

3. Using Positive Reframing

One of the most powerful ways to Stroke someone is to find the positive value hidden beneath a negative emotion or struggle. If someone is expressing a difficult feeling, look for the underlying core value that makes them feel that way.

- **Example:** Imagine a mother who is highly anxious about her daughter going on a field trip for the first time.
- **The Reframe:** Instead of telling her not to worry, you can highlight what her anxiety says about her character: "*Your worry just shows how incredibly much you love your daughter and how deeply you care about*

her safety. You are such a protective and loving parent."

Connecting their struggle to their deeply held values validates their experience and helps them feel understood.

4. Connection vs. Cheerleading

Stroking is not about trying to magically make the other person feel better or "fixing" what they are struggling with. Instead, it is about highlighting the important, positive things about them that might be the very reason they are suffering in the first place. There is a fine line between genuine connection and "cheerleading."

- **Cheerleading** is trying to quickly bypass their negative mood by hyping them up (e.g., "Don't be sad about the test, you will definitely do better next time!"). This can inadvertently feel dismissive of their pain.
- **Stroking** sits with them in their reality and connects their pain to their core values. For example, you might say: *"It makes complete sense that you are so sad right now. You poured your heart into this because you genuinely care about doing excellent work. I deeply respect your dedication and the high level of integrity you bring to everything you do."* This validates their experience while reminding them of the positive character traits that are driving their emotions.

5. The Barrier of Self-Belief

Be cautious and patient: if a person has low self-esteem or is highly self-critical, it will be hard for them to accept your compliment if they do not believe in themselves. They might dismiss your kind words or argue with you.

- If they deflect your Stroke, do not force it. Simply offer it as your own honest perspective. You are planting a seed of positivity, even if they aren't ready to water it yet.

6. Honesty and Authenticity

Stroking will only work if it is 100% honest and genuine. If you do not truly mean what you are saying, the other person will sense it, and trust will be broken. Never invent a compliment just to smooth over a conversation. Find the truth of what you respect about them, and speak from that place.

7. Assertiveness vs. Manipulation

Just as with "I feel" statements, the difference between assertiveness and manipulation lies in your intention.

- If your goal is to use a compliment to flatter someone into doing what you want, or to control a situation unfairly, that is manipulation.
- If your goal is to communicate honest appreciation to build trust and safety, that is a genuine Stroke.

8. The Power of Body Language

Words only make up a small percentage of our communication. Through your body language, you show the other person that they truly matter because you are physically present and entirely focused on them. Your physical presence must match your words to convey genuine respect and care.

- Maintain gentle, focused eye contact and an open, relaxed posture.
- Keep your tone of voice warm and sincere.
- **Physical Touch:** When appropriate and welcomed, physical touch can be a profound form of Stroking. A hug or a reassuring hand on the back physically demonstrates that you are right there with them in their hard time, offering comfort beyond what words can say.