

# Reducing Conflict 90 Avoid Using Absolutes

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You will experience less conflict if you avoid using absolutes when addressing people. Absolutes are terminal words like “never,” “always,” or “none.” In this article, I will describe the implications when you use absolutes. I also will suggest some alternative phrases that are less dangerous. There is a choice of how you phrase things.

## **Avoid using absolutes to maintain credibility**

When you use an absolute to describe a situation, it often ends up a challenge to credibility. Let me use an example to show the impact. Suppose a supervisor is tired of asking an employee to clean up his workstation. He says to the employee, “Mike, you never leave your workplace clean and tidy.” The word “never” is an absolute that sets up a kind of loop in the mind of the employee.

After thinking about it for a second, the employee fires back. “Oh yeah? Last Friday I cleaned up my entire area and helped Frank clean up his bench.” The supervisor is proven wrong because of how he worded the challenge. If he had avoided the absolute, he would not have been caught. Try using, “Mike, I wish you would take the time to clean up your area more often.”

## **Absolutes imply a challenge**

The use of absolutes to describe a situation focuses energy on the wrong thing. The person on the receiving end spends more energy proving the other person wrong than correcting the problem. Eliminating the absolute will allow most of the energy to go into a solution. Let’s look at another example.

## **Be accountable**

Your coworker says, “You were supposed to bring snacks for the group, but there are none.” You open a drawer and pull out an old bag of chips left over from last week. The coworker used an absolute (none), so you had the chance to prove him wrong. In fact, there were “some” snacks, just not enough for the entire group.

Your coworker fell into the trap of using an absolute. A better way to focus attention on the real issue is for the coworker to say this: “I don’t see many snacks for the group here. Did you forget it was your turn to bring them?”

## **Avoiding absolutes works to maintain trust**

When you use absolutes with someone, it lowers trust because you appear to be judging the person. The other person can feel harassed and persecuted. The person may feel an urge to defend himself, which works against a culture of trust.

## **Why avoiding using absolutes works**

All of the examples above show how absolutes can trap you in a direction you don't want to go. By using more moderate speech, you reduce the potential for a snarky response. This principle applies no matter how critical the situation is. If the error is about a security issue or a safety protocol, you may prevent a dangerous situation.

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