

From “I” to “We”

From “My” to “Our”

There are some lessons that come from a classroom, some that come from a book, and some that come from simply sitting around a table with other people and having a conversation.

Sometimes those conversations give us something to think about long after the meeting is over.

That happened to me recently after returning home from a VFW National Council meeting. One of the conversations centered around the idea of replacing “I” with “we” and “my” with “our.”

At first, it sounds simple. Just a couple of words.

But the more I thought about it on the trip home, the more I realized that those two small changes can have a tremendous impact — not just on leadership, but on how we work, communicate, build relationships, and live our lives.

Ownership is not possession

There is nothing wrong with taking ownership. In fact, good leaders should take responsibility for their decisions, their actions, and their mistakes. We should be willing to stand up and say, “I’m responsible for that.”

But there is a difference between taking responsibility and taking possession.

That distinction can sometimes be difficult to recognize. We hear phrases like:

“My position.” “My idea.” “My team.” “My organization.” “My way.”

We hear, “I did this,” or “I made that happen.”

None of those statements are automatically wrong. The problem comes when our language begins to reveal a mindset that says everything belongs to us. When “my” becomes more important than “our,” we can unintentionally create distance between ourselves and the people we are supposed to be working alongside.

Leadership isn’t about possessing a position. It is about serving a purpose. And that purpose is almost always bigger than one person.

The mission is bigger than any one person

The strongest teams are not necessarily teams where everyone agrees. In fact, disagreement can be one of a team’s greatest strengths.

People bring different experiences, personalities, backgrounds, knowledge, and perspectives to the table. Those differences can create better ideas and better solutions — if we are willing to listen.

If everyone thinks exactly the same way, we don't necessarily have a strong team. We may simply have an echo chamber. An echo chamber doesn't challenge us. It doesn't force us to look at a problem differently. It doesn't make us question whether there might be a better way.

Good leadership requires something different. It requires listening. It requires giving someone else credit. It requires being willing to consider an idea that didn't originate with us.

And occasionally, it requires saying something that can be difficult for any leader:

“Your idea is better than mine.”

That isn't weakness. That's leadership.

The goal isn't to prove that I am right. The goal is to make sure we get it right.

That is a completely different mindset.

What happens when something becomes “ours”?

Think about the difference between saying “This is my organization” and saying “This is our organization.”

The first statement can create the impression that one person owns the organization. The second creates shared ownership. When people believe something belongs to all of them, they become more invested in its success.

They bring ideas. They solve problems. They volunteer. They mentor others. They accept responsibility. They begin thinking beyond themselves.

That is how teams become stronger. That is how businesses grow. That is how volunteer organizations continue to serve. That is how families become stronger. And that is how we develop the next generation of leaders.

People don't simply want to be told what to do. They want to know that their contribution matters.

Changing one word can sometimes change the entire atmosphere of a room.

Sometimes “we” requires letting go

Moving from “my” to “our” isn't always easy. Sometimes it means letting go of our way of doing things.

Maybe we've done something the same way for twenty years. Maybe a younger person walks into the room with a completely different idea. Maybe someone from a different background sees a solution that we never considered.

Our first reaction might be, “That isn't how we do it.”

But what if we asked a different question?

“Tell me why you think we should do it that way.”

That question opens a door. It doesn't mean we automatically accept the idea. It means we are willing to listen before we decide.

That is teamwork. That is mentorship. That is leadership. And it is one of the most important ways we move from “I” to “we.”

What are we leaving behind?

None of us will hold our current positions forever. Jobs change. Organizations change. Responsibilities change. People change. Eventually, someone else will sit in the chair we occupy today.

The question is: what will we leave behind?

Did we make the team better? Did we help someone else grow? Did we bring people together? Did we solve problems instead of creating them? Did we develop someone who could eventually do the job better than we did? Did we leave the organization, business, family, or community stronger than we found it?

Those questions provide a much better measurement of leadership than a title ever could. Because leadership isn't about building something that has our name written all over it. It is about building something that can continue without us.

The Coffee Cup Challenge

So this week's Coffee Cup Challenge is simple. For the next seven days, pay attention to how often you use the words “I” and “my.”

When you catch yourself using one of them, stop for a moment and ask yourself:

“Could this be a ‘we’?”

Instead of “my team,” try “our team.” Instead of “my idea,” ask, “What's our best idea?” Instead of “my problem,” ask, “How do we solve this together?”

The point isn't to eliminate the words “I” and “my.” The point is to become more aware of the mindset behind them.

Because sometimes, changing one little word can change an entire conversation. And changing the conversation can change the culture.

Bigger than ourselves

At the end of the day, leadership isn't about how much attention we receive. It isn't about having our name attached to everything. It isn't about making sure everyone knows what we accomplished.

True leadership is about making the people around us better. It is about creating something that is stronger because we were part of it — and capable of continuing after we are gone.

So as we go through this week, let's challenge ourselves. Let's move away from "I" and toward "we." Let's replace "my" with "our."

Let's listen a little more. Let's give credit a little more freely. Let's make room for somebody else's idea.

And let's remember that the mission, the family, the organization, the community, and the people we serve are bigger than any one of us.

Because the greatest things we accomplish may never belong to us individually. They belong to all of us.

**Keep your coffee hot. Keep your heart humble.
And keep building something bigger than yourself.**

One Person. One Conversation. One Cup.

COFFEE CUP CLUB

Episode 10 Workbook

FROM “I” TO “WE”

FROM “MY” TO “OUR”

A seven-day look at the words we use — and the mindset behind them.

This workbook belongs to: _____

Date started: _____

The Purpose

This week's lesson challenges us to look at the words we use and, more importantly, the mindset behind them.

"I" and "my" aren't bad words.

**The question is whether we are using them to accept responsibility
or to claim possession.**

Use this workbook to think about how your words influence your team, family, workplace, organization, and relationships.

Part 1 — Think About It

1. What does “I to we” mean to you?

In your own words, explain what this phrase means.

2. What is the difference between responsibility and possession?

Think about a position, job, organization, team, or relationship where you have responsibility. Are there times when you have treated responsibility like ownership?

3. Where do you hear “I” and “my” most often?

Check any that apply.

- ☐ Workplace
- ☐ Family
- ☐ Volunteer organization
- ☐ Military / veteran organizations
- ☐ Sports / team activities
- ☐ Friendships
- ☐ Community activities
- ☐ Other: _____

What effect can that language have on the people around us?

Part 2 — Change the Conversation

Rewrite each statement from an individual mindset into a team mindset.

“My team.”

Our team:

“My idea.”

Our approach:

“My problem.”

Our solution:

“My organization.”

Our organization:

“I know how this should be done.”

A better team-focused approach:

Part 3 — Are You Listening?

Good teamwork doesn't require everyone to agree. It requires people to be willing to listen. Think about a recent disagreement or discussion.

What was the other person's perspective?

Did you genuinely listen before responding?

☐ Yes ☐ Somewhat ☐ No

What might you have learned if you had listened more?

Could their idea have improved your original idea?

Part 4 — The “Better Idea” Test

Think about a time when someone else had a better idea than you.

What was the situation?

How did you respond?

What did you learn?

Would you handle it differently today?

Part 5 — My Seven-Day “I to We” Challenge

For the next seven days, pay attention to your language. Each day, record one time when you caught yourself using “I” or “my” and intentionally changed the conversation.

Day	What I said	How I changed it	What happened?
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			

Part 6 — Building Something Bigger Than Yourself

Think about one area of your life where you currently have influence. It could be your family, workplace, organization, community, team, or another group.

What are you currently building?

What would happen if you were no longer involved tomorrow?

Have you developed others who could continue the mission?

☐ Yes ☐ Somewhat ☐ Not yet

Who is someone you could begin mentoring or developing?

What is one thing you could teach them?

Part 7 — The Legacy Question

Take a few minutes with these questions.

Did I make the people around me better?

Did I bring people together?

Did I listen to ideas that weren't mine?

Did I give credit to others?

Did I solve problems instead of creating them?

If I left tomorrow, would the team be stronger because I was here?

Part 8 — My Action Step

This week, I will intentionally replace “I” with “we” when:

I will replace “my” with “our” when:

One person I will intentionally listen to this week is:

One person I can encourage or mentor is:

One thing I can do to make my team, family, organization, or community stronger is:

Coffee Cup Reflection

Complete this sentence.

“If I want to build something bigger than myself, I need to...”

My Commitment

This week I will remember:

The goal isn't to prove that I am right.

The goal is to make sure we get it right.

My commitment for the next seven days:

**Keep your coffee hot. Keep your heart humble.
Keep building something bigger than yourself.**

One Person. One Conversation. One Cup.