Referring to one's self in the third person

Dear Alice,

Why do some people refer to themselves in third person view? Like they'll say, "Bob likes that" instead of, "I like that."

Sounds wacky to me,

?confused

Answer

Dear confused,

Well it sure isn't easy to know exactly why anyone would talk about her- or himself in the third person. Could "Bob" be a member of the Royal Family? "King Bob is not pleased with the Prince's escapades." Maybe he has a pretend friend, also named Bob, whom you and the rest of us can't see. Or, what if like Cher, Janet, and Madonna, Bob is both an official first-name only human being and a well-known product, making it perfectly acceptable to use one's own name in this way? If we could get Madonna on the phone, she might say, "Alice, the Madonna shows in New York were brilliant, except the ones that Madonna cancelled." Wait a minute; could it be that, similar to Alice, Bob is an information giver who talks in the third person because so many other people make his work possible, that for him to say "I" all the time would be selfish and inaccurate? How about the fact that a great deal of writing in academia is done from the third person perspective (?this researcher? or ?this writer? etc.)?

You might start by considering the relationship you have with ?Bob.? Is this someone you just met? Someone you see often? A boss? Someone you?re dating? By looking at the connection you have with the person and the situations in which the use of the third person occurs you might start to gain some insight. It?s also possible that if you aren?t particularly close to the individual that you can mark it down to a fun quirk and move on. If you aren?t required to spend time around the individual then, perhaps, you can just make sure to not be around her/him. Of course it you are more closely connected then you have an opportunity to ask the question about why s/he refers to her- or himself third person. If you do have this conversation, be sure to focus on the behavior, not the person. Perhaps have an example or two ready to share. And be prepared for any possible outcome ? s/he might agree, may not understand, may tell you it?s only ?Bob?s? business, etc.

Now it might be that people who say their first name a lot are pretentious and grandiose ? you
know, full of themselves. On the other hand, saying "I" can be more intimate, so if Bob were to find intimacy challenging, "Bob" could be a wee bit easier on the brain. "Bob really likes you and hopes you don't find his way of speaking too wacky." Could Bob be uncomfortable in his own skin? so much so that he's talking about himself as if he were someone else? And although it's extremely rare, such talk could occur in people with psychological disorders and illnesses that have speech abnormalities and changes in personality as consistent and long-term symptoms.

These are probably more explanations than you expected or wanted. If it really bothers you then it's up to you to decide how to move forward. What's wacky to you might be endearing to another. Any way you look at it, each person is unique and that keeps our days interesting.

Alice!

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