

ATTITUDINAL COMPUTING

One of the worst condemnations a teacher could hurl at me as a student was this: "You've got a bad attitude" or "You've got a real attitude problem." Today that assault has been abbreviated to simply, "You're copping an attitude."

I never liked people who used these phrases. Maybe it's because the charge was too vague. Did they dislike my attitude because it differed from theirs, or was it intrinsically misguided or illogical?

Had they said, "You're approaching this situation in a way that will not produce the results you want," I might have paid more attention. Or had they said, "With your present point of view, it will be difficult for you to see the Big Picture," I might at least have wondered what they thought the Big Picture was.

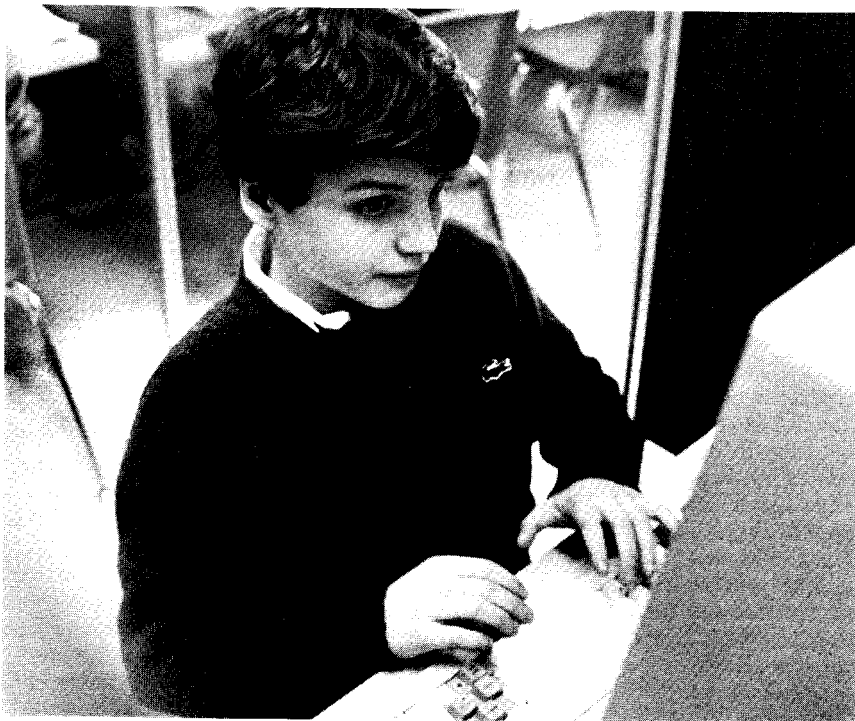
So if you're intimidated by computers, I'm not going to tell you, "You've got a bad attitude." Rather, I'll use one of the longer phrases above and then try to explain myself (something my teachers never got around to doing).

In order to succeed with computers you need to approach them with a certain smugness, believing that you're smarter than they are. They may be a whole lot faster and a bit more accurate, but never forget—they have the IQ of a carrot.

In fact, most of your difficulty in relating to computers will result precisely from the fact that they are dumber than you are. They have a much smaller vocabulary. They are incredibly limited in their ability to understand what you try to tell them. Your biggest frustration will result from learning to communicate in computer baby talk.

How do you talk to a toddler? To achieve any success at all, you'll need to use one syllable words spoken slowly and succinctly in short sentences. If you say, "I want this room clean by the time I get back," and then walk away, you'd better check your health insurance before you cross the room again.

A more successful approach might be to say, "Pick up your green ball." Then watch to see whether this simple command is understood before you say,



"Now, put it in your toy box over there" as you point in the general direction of the box. Use the same technique for talking to your computer.

As fundamentalists, we are very well versed in the concept and practice of awe. It's appropriate to have a healthy respect for the wonder and the power of the Deity. However, the same attitude toward computers results in wasted energy and misguided effort. Computers are too dumb to know or care whether you stand in awe of their vast accomplishments and power. So don't be intimidated by such statements as, "This computer can do in one and a half seconds what it would take 30 men 20 years to do."

Viewing a computer in this way places a barrier between you and the computer. It's far better to think, "If I whisper the right nothings into its electronic ear this computer can do for me in the next second and a half what I would have to pay 30 men to do over the next 20 years." Think of the computer as an extension of yourself—a willing worker, a happy servant, a genie waiting to do your every bidding.

Finally (and this is really giving the computer the benefit of the doubt) think

of the computer as *wanting* to do what you ask. It's like a game show where behind one of the doors waits wealth, power, and fame. The only penalty for opening the wrong door is that for the moment you stay poor, powerless, and obscure. The way to open doors is to learn computer baby talk.

Think of the computer as a powerful baby that can make you powerful too if you're willing to get down on your hands and knees and learn to talk on its level. Probably a more appropriate analogy is that of a baby the size of King Kong. If it moves the wrong way it can knock over buildings. But since most of the buildings are made of paper, your damage is limited to how many boxes of continuous form paper you have and the condition of your ribbon.

The computer will listen to you and try to do what you ask. It *wants* to be your friend. Who was it that said, "To have friends, one must show himself friendly"? Little did they know they were teaching the way to thwart a bad attitude toward computers.—Dave Ruskjer. □

Dave Ruskjer is President of Touch Talk Technologies, Mayo, Maryland.