

Constructive Communication

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Communication plays a powerful role for every essential purpose in life: our happiness, our health, our children's development, our family well-being, and our work effectiveness. This important skill also fundamentally shapes our intimate and social relationships, as it negotiates alliances and status in our interpersonal communities.

Whatever communication's purpose may be, there are many skills and other factors that determine how well it accomplishes its goal. The skills involved in the communication process are numerous, but the essential ones include clarity of expression, listening for understanding, and connecting to your audience through trying to understand them. The intentions that motivate communications and barriers that arise in the process are also important factors that often determine the impact of communication.

Communication Functions

Communication serves numerous essential functions for connecting to other human beings for basic survival and happiness. It is the basic tool we use to: 1) Convey information about large and small matters that affect us, 2) Share feelings, 3) Provide support, 4) Make emotional and energy connections, 5) Set boundaries, 6) Establish power statuses and differences, and 7) Solve problems.

Communication strongly impacts our quality of life through the power it exerts in shaping our social connections – how we support one another, how we negotiate our needs and resources, and how we come into conflict. It is the key element in how we manage differences with the people we're involved with, and how we resolve these differences and other difficulties. Luckily, there are many ways to improve our communication skills in order to enhance our effectiveness in these areas, and to limit unintentional harm when we come into conflict. First, we need to understand how communication works though taking a look at what goes into it.

Elements of Communication

Communication has many elements and layers of meaning. Even professional communicators have trouble managing all of these components and layers effectively much of the time because any of them can profoundly affect your message and how it is received.

1. **Intended Message**, including positive or negative desires from others, respect for them, and power manipulations. Intention also includes reason for the interaction, such as negotiation, intimacy or humor.
2. **Words**, including those chosen for the communication (individual word choice and how words are combined), their meaning (which may differ from person to person) and how clearly they are conveyed.
3. **Nonverbals**, including facial expression, posture, use of space, touch and gestures.
4. **Paraverbals**, means verbal qualities, including loudness and tone of voice.

5. **Behaviors** such as interrupting and making others wait to speak can convey messages in themselves. Behavior also has an impact on communication when it reflects on what you are saying - whether you walk your talk. When you talk about important topics, it matters if you practice the values you are emphasizing (such as honesty) which makes your words more believable.
6. **Context** includes the situation, related history, cultural factors and important environmental influences that set up the stage for each communication.
7. **Listening** shapes communication through how openly all of these are received and how they are interpreted.

Factors that Generate Intentions

The purpose or intention of a communication shapes the meaning we wish to convey with it. Intentions have a great deal of power to shape interactions, and the verbal and nonverbal exchanges that come with them. To understand intentions, we need to look at the three dynamics that often motivate them; needs, feelings and power issues.

1. **Needs.** Needs are often the goal of communication, creating a powerful drive to interact in order to satisfy them. Unfortunately, people are often unaware of their needs and the role they play in relationships, so they communicate them dishonestly, or without consideration for others' needs.

Pioneering psychologist Abraham Maslow considered physiological needs as foremost because of their connection to survival, but also considered emotional needs, such as security, connection, achievement, self-esteem, creativity and fulfillment, to be important to well-being. Other emotional needs that are often considered important include autonomy, play, mental stimulation, meaning, mental health, social support, good work, financial livelihood and education.

When mutual needs are not considered in romantic relationships, frustration often turns to anger that interferes with communication, so shared understanding is lost. Frustrated needs cause misunderstandings in many kinds of interactions, because people generally close down when they are not happy.

When needs are not being met in relationships, or when one person gets their needs met much more than the other person does, then dissatisfaction grows. Frustrated needs may create barriers to future understanding through blocking of messages or infecting interactions with anger and other negative feelings.

2. **Feelings.** Feelings play a key role in social interactions and communication as they both shape what happens and tell us about our internal reactions to them. Emotions signal changes in our tension and stress levels, help to synchronize our energy for social rituals (parties, church services, school), and help us to fit in with the norms of the situation.

Feelings are also ways of signaling whether our needs are met or not, so communicating feelings provides a good way to negotiate and balance needs. So sharing emotions can help us to process these reactions more openly with each other and then to negotiate conditions

for meeting needs cooperatively. This makes it possible to work out more balanced relationships at home and at work.

Remember that emotions shape our state of mind, so be wary of spending much time discussing negative emotions (such as anger, fear and hurt), as they will push your dialogue further into harmful directions. The point is to get information from feelings, not to enthrone them or deny space to others involved until one side is satisfied. Not everyone will become happy through our interactions, but we can develop habits to hear each other and work more effectively towards balance and understanding.

3. **Power.** Communication about emotions often informs us about the power and status of people in the situations we encounter, especially our place in that interaction. Much of our verbal and nonverbal communication is overtly or covertly about power dynamics and the emotions which let us know if we're prevailing or losing status in the power hierarchy (Kemper, 1978).

Power is such an automatic part of communication that it plays a major role in business communication. Studies in organizational communication have studied the difference between upward, downward and horizontal communication, referring to the power positions of the speaker towards the listener. When the speaker is above the listener in the hierarchy, there are many differences found in communication style, especially a lack of respect by higher power people for the lower power person and less attention and openness from those with higher power to what lower power people have to say (Long, 2006). When the speaker is below the listener in the hierarchy, they tend to try to please the higher power person through what they say and limit damaging information (Long).

Power dynamics are behind much negative communication, especially verbal - emotional abuse, criticism and negative labeling. These negative communications are often meant to reinforce the existing power hierarchy, especially to keep lower power people in their place.

Communication also serves to control intimacy distance in a way which reinforces power statuses by giving greater access to those on the same level, and to higher level people we wish to find favor with. People just meeting each other will 'size each other up' by asking key questions about status, and then open or close their intimate space according to the answers.

Negative verbal and nonverbal strategies then serve to push people away from intimate connection. Since our physical and emotional health often depend on social support, lower power people often accept more verbal abuse in order to maintain social connections, despite the damage it may bring.

Barriers to Communication

Regardless of communication skills or intentions, there are numerous barriers that can still block or distort understanding. Here are two important kinds of barriers to remember:

Noise. Noise is a term for all the things that interfere with understanding in communication. These can include environmental interference (loud sounds, bad weather), emotional preoccupation, fatigue, illness, poor hearing, mismatched wording and cultural

misunderstandings. Noise can make it very difficult to hear one another, so there is less exchange of meaning.

Abstract Concepts. The abstract nature of many of our concepts is a common source of misunderstandings and other difficulties in communication. When we find we have a different understanding of an abstract concept such as love or truth, than someone else, we're likely to argue that our view is right and theirs is wrong. Few people realize that their understanding of many things is not the same as how others understand them.

Abstract concepts have conceptual meanings that are often far removed from physical reality. Abstract concepts such as love, truth, death, are not physically palpable, or measurable. They are based on meaning found in our experiences and are mental creations. Unfortunately most people don't realize that their understanding of so many things is personal, not universal.

Because they are individually interpreted, abstract concepts are largely based on culture and background, and there are lots of potential for mismatches. Societies, generations, families, cultures, races, classes, and genders have unique points of view and belief systems, and each is liable to dozens of biases and prejudices that affect each of us. These preconceptions are often impossible to separate when we are talking about matters of values and ethics. Even fundamental values may be interpreted differently by members of the same family.

Language can be the source of misunderstandings when we use words that are above or below our audience's level of understanding. Speakers can make their listeners feel inferior by using words that are too technical or complex. The best communication is matched to the understanding level of those you are interacting with.

Misunderstandings

There are many ways that these elements and intentions can clash with each other and send the wrong message or contradict a positive message that is intended. Problem communication frequently happens in spite of good intentions when the message does not come out as the sender wished because their nonverbal signals are anxious or they use the wrong words. Also, communication can have mixed effects, conveying both positive and negative messages through lacking clarity or conveying tension, which can be very confusing to the listener.

Another complication is that most communication also has multiple layers, including many messages about power, emotional significance and the present environment. Additionally, there are many emotional tones that can flavor an interaction in infinite positive and negative directions.

It's important to remember that nonverbal aspects of communication account for 75% of our messages. This is often where some communication goes wrong, as tension, defensiveness and anger may contradict our words through signals like crossing arms, frowning or making nervous gestures.

The arousal of anger often causes problems when stress chemicals can cause the speaker to regress into self-protective habits of disrespect, blame and negative labels. Defensive and overly needy people may unconsciously strive to undermine power, intimidate and blame their

problems on others. Under threat, our human propensity is often to treat the other person as a thing that we see as a means to get to our goals.

Negative Communication

Communication with a negative emotional tone drives and empowers the negative and fearful side of relationships. Reasonable differences of opinion are seen as threatening when that negative atmosphere is activated, leading to defensive wars of blaming so that every disagreement can become harmful.

Verbal abuse such as angry ranting, harsh criticism, humiliation and name-calling can often result, inflicting a great deal of damage and too frequently leading to escalating harm. Harsh verbal abuse like this also plays a grooming role in physical and sexual abuse, destabilizing the recipient so they feel less worthy and may deserve being bullied and violated.

Much negative communication is not consciously motivated to harm others, as criticism and blaming are usually old habits that are by-products of people's upbringings. Negative communication can also be subtle, often working quietly to undermine others' power and/or self-esteem in individual situations. The motive may be to 'win' recognition or power through that interaction, but there is little awareness of the effects of these put-downs, criticisms and disrespect, as they slowly work to erode the recipient's self-esteem, trust of others and energy.

Constructive Communication

A number of qualities seem to be true of communication that works in positive, constructive ways for relationships. Constructive communication shares clear information, has sufficient detail for full comprehension and builds understanding. Constructive communication conveys that both (or all) perspectives matter by showing a respectful and supportive attitude, and has a goal for all sides to win (win/win). Constructive communication empowers, it leaves space for others to share their side and be heard in order to promote understanding and working together.

Several authors have contributed to our understanding of constructive communication by providing guidelines for communication that works positively in relationships and solves problems. Constructive communication guidelines can help us to help avoid the damage of verbal abuse for those who truly do not intend to hurt those they interact with, but have developed negative habits. Constructive communication can also help those who have mixed intentions towards others, but don't see the ways in which they have been harmful with their words.

Models of Constructive Communication

To use 'constructive' communication means communicating in order to build or strengthen connections and understanding between people. Many good scholars have worked to describe and teach the skills that make communication constructive. Here are five communication models which exemplify some of the richness and depth of what we know about positive communication.

1. Nonviolent Communication. The most widely known model of constructive communication is known as nonviolent communication or NVC, and comes from Marshall Rosenberg (www.nonviolentcommunication.com). According to Rosenberg, all evaluations are harmful (he calls them jackal communications) and the best way to connect with another is through empathy and compassion (giraffe communication).

NVC emphasizes that needs are central to relationships and that the key to avoid destructive conflict is to make requests instead of demands. Criticisms are seen as requests to meet needs at their core, so the key to avoiding conflicts is stating needs positively. When there is a conflict, Rosenberg suggests that you find the feelings and needs behind your reactions while also finding the feelings and needs behind the words of others. He also advocates self-compassion, taking responsibility for your communications and to say things positively instead of negatively (e.g., saying “I want” instead of “I don’t want”).

2. Clean Communication. Clean communication was developed by McKay, Paleg and Fanning as part of their work to help couples deal with their inevitable conflicts. They emphasize the need to ‘keep it clean’ and to avoid ‘dirty’ or harmful messages, such as ‘you’ messages of blame, judgmental labels, old history, negative comparisons, threats, judgmental word and loaded terms.

McKay, Paleg and Fanning also emphasize using whole, clear messages that reflect a positive intention towards your partner. Lastly, they stress the importance of body language, that it must be open and receptive if we want to connect, so that our verbal message agrees with our nonverbal message.

3. Cooperative Communication. Cooperative communication is presented in the downloadable *Seven Challenges Workbook* by Dennis Rivers, which is subtitled “Communication Skills for Success at Home & Work”. This workbook is one of two open-source workbooks (<http://www.newconversations.net/>) published by the New Conversations resource center and network to help people “build a more cooperative life in your marriage, family, workplace and community”.

Cooperative communication emphasizes communication as an open dialogue between two or more people, so it is important to build joint collaboration skills. Cooperative communication guidelines include seven challenges, or steps for building cooperative communication skills and reducing conflict. The seven challenges are, 1) Listen more, 2) Explain your intentions and invite consent, 3) Express yourself more clearly, 4) Translate criticisms and complaints into request for your needs, 5) Ask questions more “open-endedly”, 6) Express more appreciation, and, 7) Focus on learning from mistakes. Each step is described in the workbook includes clear explanations and workshop exercises for practicing and role-playing these challenges.

4. Centered Communication. Carolyn Schrock-Shenk and Ron Kraybill developed centered communication for the Mennonite Conciliation Services as part of their mediation training program. This model’s guidelines focus on whether the communication task is listening or speaking, which are equally important processes to attend to.

Centered Listening means putting aside one’s own agenda and then regarding what others say as equally important to our own needs. This kind of listening requires that we hear the essence

beyond other's words and understand the whole message. Open minded listening communicates respect, and so it builds trust and invites more honesty.

Centered Speaking encourages using "I" messages to share information clearly from a centered understanding of the both (or all) parties involved in a conversation. To do this, centered speaking should be positive in its focus, never criticizing or negating what anyone has to say.

5. Compassionate Listening. Compassionate listening is an approach to conflict resolution and peacemaking developed by Gene Knudsen Hoffman, Leah Green and Cynthia Monroe. This is the second downloadable book from New Conversations (<http://www.newconversations.net/>).

The compassionate listening approach centers on finding compassion and understanding for your "enemy" or anyone who opposes you. They teach how to get past your barriers of anger and denial so you can really listen to those you have difficulty with. They believe lack of listening is the main force behind destructive conflict, so working to listen and understand those around us is the best way to prevent problems.

Core Recommendations of the Five Models

Obviously, there is a great deal of overlap in the strategies advocated by these five models for improving communication and reducing conflict. Their commonalities fall into 3 categories, A) empathy, intention and listening, B) message form and C) the message itself.

A. Empathy, Intention & Listening

- 1. Consider how you would feel if you were in the other person's shoes.** Striving for empathy and understanding of others is one of the best ways to ensure that you are communicating in a respectful, honest way that is likely to be effective.
- 2. Start with positive intentions.** If your intentions for the interaction are positive, such as wanting to reach out, resolve differences, build understanding, and/or share information, others are more likely to be receptive (as opposed to how they would react when you try to change them or tell them how they are wrong).
- 3. Listen to their side and take time to let it sink in before reacting.** Take some time to consider what they are saying and what it means before you share your reactions. Try to hear their side instead of preparing what you will say while they are talking.
- 4. Consider their needs and feelings.** Once you understand their needs, give them consideration, as you would for your own needs. Constructive communication is best accomplished with an attitude of openness and a willingness to take their needs into account, even though they differ from yours.
- 5. Address them respectfully.** Treating others with respect is the best way to be treated with respect in return. Ideally, every person involved in an interaction should feel valued as equals, and that their needs matter. If you desire a change in their behavior, make it into a request instead of a demand, so that you acknowledge their right to choose.

B. Message Form

- 6. Use positive, descriptive language that does not judge, blame, criticize or label.** By describing your perceptions, thoughts and feelings, you communicate information instead of making others feel unworthy or flawed. Blaming, criticizing and labeling cause others to shut down or become defensive. Seeing the positive validates positive actions and motives in the other person, so they are more likely to hear your thoughts, feelings and needs.
- 7. Use “I” messages instead of “you” messages.** “You” messages communicate that the other person is the focus of blame for our discomfort and pain, and this shuts the door on understanding and turns discussions into fights. “I” messages communicate self-knowledge, strength and the intention to share information.

A basic template for saying I messages is “I feel _____ (feeling words) when you _____ (describe behaviors)”. Using feeling words and describing behaviors are tactics that many experts recommend for avoiding blame and judgment.

- 8. Make your body language and your tone of voice relaxed and receptive.** A harsh tone of voice, an angry frown or aggressive gestures can overpower a positive verbal message and appear threatening to your listeners. Since the majority of communication is nonverbal, be aware of what your loudness, tone of voice, gestures, posture and facial expression are saying, and focus on relaxing (tension is a signal of resistance) which signals you are open to their side of the conversation.

C. Message Meaning

- 9. Be clear.** Clearly state what behaviors you have observed and how that relates to your needs. If they do not realize what they are doing that is disrespectful or hurtful to you (or others), they will be more likely to be able to hear and understand you, and consider changing their behaviors if you can describe what they do clearly and objectively.
- 10. Be as open and honest about your feelings and needs as possible.** Expressing your feelings and needs is the best way to let others know where you are coming from and to help them get past their cognitive barriers and understand you. Information about feelings is important data about how a relationship is progressing and how it works for the people involved. Neither side deserves to be hurt or left out, or the relationship is not working and all involved should work to correct things.
- 11. Focus on strengths and positive characteristics more than weaknesses.** Positive reinforcement is the most powerful change technique that we have, so we can help each other to be more empowered by making note of strengths and successes in each other, instead of criticizing and focusing on problems and difficulties. If your feedback attacks or otherwise forces things into a negative frame, they are likely to become defensive and resist hearing you. So, work on creating a positive frame, with a goal to encourage others to move in a better direction.

Attitude Adjustments That Help Communication

Learning Attitude. Every misunderstanding and conflict is a chance to learn and develop better understandings of ourselves and others in our personal and work lives. While the main goal of communication is to connect and negotiate the terrain of living with others in the environment, you can use what you hear to gain a greater understanding of your own habits and life direction. To do this means approaching every trouble in life with a learning attitude.

Listen for feedback that is repeated over time to discover your unhealthy patterns and habits. Any feedback that is repeated is a sign of something you are doing that you don't see, and it tells you how your words and actions affect those you care about or burden them with unreasonable expectations.

When you've identified a problem, then you can begin examining how you might change. Having the strength to look at others' feedback can help you avoid falling into the same communication disasters and give you more skills for facing the inevitable difficulties that relationships and life throw at us all.

It's never too late. Remember you can learn from your worst disaster or your dumbest mistake. The worse the disaster, the more you can learn and raise yourself above it. Remember the learning attitude because mistakes are an excellent way to get yourself motivated to change patterns and try something different.

Gratitude. It is helpful to see that every interaction and every relationship adds greater richness and depth to our lives. Someone cares enough about us to spend time sharing words, so whether they are positive or negative, use them to better yourself.

If there is anything positive about an interaction, be thankful. Be especially thankful to those who love you for their patience and caring. If the words are negative, strive to find something positive within them or in the intention of the speaker. Then thank yourself for being willing to learn from your mistakes and difficulty.

Patience. Changing any habit requires patience, especially communication habits. It takes a great deal of focus to remember to say things differently, and generally we have to practice it several times to make a new habit stick. If you fall back on an old negative communication habit, just re-say it positively, even if the person you're talking to is already gone. The point is to change your thinking patterns.

Dealing with what other people say also requires patience. They may have bad habits, or they may unintentionally say something that pushes your buttons, bringing up high levels of frustration. When that happens, just find some way to hold off, whether by taking a walk or just keeping your mouth shut. Writing down what you want to say may also help you to cool down and think it over before blasting off the wrong words.

New Communication Choices

Choosing to change your communication habits can profoundly improve your life and relationships. Since communication involves ingrained habits that have been with us for most of our lives, it is often tricky to start the change process. Try to remember the following recommendations:

- Instead of trying to change someone, think about your responsibility for your own feelings and what you can do to take care of them.
- Put what you want to say in respectful and positive words.
- Give yourself some time to think it over and take a break (go for a walk), so you can calm down and make your message more considerate and balanced.
- Put your thoughts in writing and wait a day before reviewing them and deciding what should be said.

Connecting and Understanding

The point of communication is to make a connection with others, and that requires trying to have some understanding for who they are, and not just treating them as a means to an end. This means going beyond just hearing their words to also being open to their needs, their feelings and their power goals (for the interaction). For healthy interactions, we must treat those we relate to as if they matter, show concern for their well-being and respect them as a person equal to ourselves.

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