

## COMMUNICATING MORE EFFECTIVELY

Effective communication is a key ingredient in professional success and personal fulfillment. We all need to effectively communicate our thoughts and emotional reactions to co-workers, friends, or others. Because our educational system does not provide any direct guidelines for teaching communication, we usually end up with hit-or-miss communication; sometimes we get our point across but many times we don't. We also tend to forget that communication is a two-way street: A complete communication cycle includes both the ability to clearly express a message and to accurately understand the messages of others. Communication researcher Dr. Paul Waltzawick says in his book, *The Language Of Change*, that human communication has three major characteristics: (a) We cannot not communicate - even silent persons are communicating something about themselves through the silence. (b) Human communication is multileveled - your words could be saying one thing but your body language or clothing could be communicating another message. (c) The message sent is not necessarily the message received - because of the different angles each person uses to interpret information, you cannot assume that what you meant has been understood by the other person.

Psychological research and clinical experience have enabled us to determine 11 important qualities of effective communication:

1. *Respect*. Communication usually improves in situations where people show consideration for each other's choices and viewpoints, even when they may personally disagree with a given viewpoint. For example, your teenage son will be more receptive to your comments about his low school grades if you express your feelings about the situation without blaming or accusing him ("I am sad because I want to help you succeed, but I don't know how"), thus making it possible for him to respond positively.
2. *Empathy*. By actively listening to what is going on with the other person and feeding back to him or her your understanding about what you just heard, you are recognizing that person's feelings and experiences. For example, in response to his daughter's excited comments about her recent job promotion a father might empathically say, "This promotion means a lot to you, doesn't it! It makes you really happy to be recognized for the good work you do."
3. *Concreteness*. Communication cannot be productive unless it goes beyond vagueness and zeros in on specifics. Feeling bored during an interaction is usually a sign that the communication is too general and, therefore, cannot hold one's attention. For example, a manager cannot expect "higher productivity" from his employees unless he concretely defines what he wants, such as (a) showing up to work at exactly 7:30 a.m.; (b) turning out 10% more of a specific product within a period of 6 months; (c) giving X shares of company stock to those employees who achieve and maintain (a) and (b) within the next 6 months.
4. *Immediacy*. Communication is more relevant when it focuses on present reality. For example, instead of reciting all the past hurts or anticipated fears relating to her

relationship with her boyfriend, a woman might choose to limit the expression of her hurt to the present instance: "I feel sad and undermined right now because you're telling me that you're canceling our weekend plans so you can go watch the game at your friend's house."

5. *Warmth*. This includes all verbal and nonverbal cues by which we can show positive concern in our relationship with others. A person can express warmth by maintaining direct eye contact and sitting face-to-face during communication, being mentally available to what the other is expressing, noting positive things about the other person ("I like the colors of your dress," "I appreciate your courteous ways in dealing with other people," etc.), and making encouraging remarks about plans and projects which are important to others ("Did you obtain approval for the loan to buy your new house?" "Your good grades in college should help you gain admission to law school," etc.). Along the same lines, sending a "thank you" note to a gracious host or to a supportive co-worker would also represent an appropriately welcome expression of warmth.

6. *Genuineness*. This means a person truly believes what he or she is communicating, and that the person's actions are generally consistent with what he or she says. The genuine communicator is open and candid but gentle and compassionate; there are no hidden meanings behind what is being said. For example, parents are not very convincing when they preach to their children about the benefits of physical exercise if they refuse to make time for exercise in their own lives.

7. *Self-Disclosure*. Communication is facilitated when a person is able to share with others the relevant incidents from his or her own life. Because we all share similar fears and needs and a common core of biological, developmental, and social experiences, it is inevitable that disclosing personal information would bring two people a little closer. For example, a father would be much closer to his adolescent son if he shared some of his own adolescent experiences related to finding his identity, discovering sexuality, rebelling against rules, and so on. Using the "I" format in conversation, instead of the impersonal or accusatory you, is another aspect of self-disclosure which shows that you are "owning" your feelings. "You always ignore my opinions" might become "I fear that my opinions are not that important to you."

8. *Interpersonal Patience*. It requires time and effort to really listen to another person. Because different individuals have different levels of expressiveness, it is important for communicators to pace themselves with each other's expression, instead of imposing their own style upon others. In conversation, it is helpful to decrease signs of impatience ("Ya, ya, I know what you mean," tapping on a desk while talking, fidgeting with objects), increase signs of active listening (a nod of the head combined with an "urn hmm," "Yes," "I follow you," "I see your point"), and check to see if the other person is still listening ("Are you with me?" "Am I making any sense to you?" "Is this clear to you?").

9. *Confrontation*. The content of communication is not always emotionally neutral or necessarily pleasant to another person's ears. There are times when we need to

confront or question differences between what someone says and actually does, or what is fantasized and what really happens. Confrontation is also used to express disagreement or to let others know where you stand on important issues. It is often difficult to confront because most of us react defensively when we feel criticized. Consequently, confrontation is practically ineffective without affirmation. It is useful to associate affirmation (the expression of constructive aspects in others) with confrontation so that the confrontation can be digested, leading to a productive outcome. Care should also be taken to assure the person you are confronting that you are not questioning his or her personal worth, but rather a specific action or behavior - confrontation should not be confused with rudeness, explosiveness, or the expression of dogmatic views. For example, if a husband puts his wife down in front of guests. she might confront his behavior by saying. "You know, I really appreciated your tenderness and support 2 weeks ago when mother passed away. But I feel you are being callous and distant when you put me down in front of our guests I am hurt by the rise and fall of your caring about me."

10. *Social Assertiveness*. This behavior is an alternative to passivity and aggression in social interactions. You are not being socially assertive if you sulk, swallow your reactions, act like a persecuted martyr, expect others to read your mind and then feel disappointed when they don't fulfill your needs, or *always* place other people's priorities before your own. Neither are you being assertive when you demand instead of request! violate the rights of others, act like you own the planet, blurt out your feelings without regard for how they might affect others, and constantly force other people's hand to get what you want. Both approaches lead to broken or disappointing relationships and avoidance. On the other hand, you *are* being assertive when you can request and refuse, stand up for your rights, not feel guilty when you say "No" (to what you don't want) or embarrassed when you say "Yes" (to what you really want), deal with problems when they come up instead of ignoring them, take risks in expressing yourself honestly, and make your needs known in a social context. For example, when a nonsmoking employee is asked to share an office with another employee who smokes, he can assertively tell his associate, "I am bothered by cigarette smoke because it makes my eyes red and gives me a sore throat. Since this office has no windows, would you mind taking your smoking break at the employees lounge?" If the employee does not obtain satisfaction with his associate, he could then approach the supervisor about sharing an office with another nonsmoker.

11. *Humor*. Humor, according to Victor Borge, is "the shortest distance between two people"; it is the spice of communication, a powerful way of breaking defensive barriers, and a refreshing means of conveying information. Getting your point across with humor can be much more effective than using a solemn or scathing approach. It often works to introduce humor to interactions by using self-directed or situational humor - humorous aspects about your life or about the circumstances under which an interaction is taking place. Later, unobtrusive other-directed humor (humorous aspects of others' lives) can be used when the ambience becomes more relaxed. For example, an excellent teacher I once had began his classes by saying, "I have a lot of things to teach you! I'm a garbage can of knowledge!" Once everyone was relaxed and laughing, he would then

go to the heart of his lecture, using humor along the way to convey material in a stimulating format.

All the above characteristics, when understood and applied, lead to effective communication. The rewards of effective communication are a sense of personal fulfillment and a substantial enrichment of interpersonal relationships. I now encourage you to step back, take a good look at your communication patterns, and see where you need to make changes. Then you can start integrating the above suggestions with your own style in a personally relevant manner.

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