



COMMUNICATING CAREFULLY

by [Claudette Coombs](#)

Welcome back to our series on Improving Relationships. This article focuses on developing a better understanding of how communication can enhance or hinder harmonious relationships.

Communication is a multi-step process occurring between the sender, who has a message in mind and uses a combination of methods to send it, and the receiver, who may already have some pre-determined ideas about the message being received and will interpret it according to current context, past experiences and knowledge. Unfortunately there are too many points of interference where the process breaks down and the intended message is never accurately received. To ensure that communications is a tool used to strengthen relationships, we can examine the parts of the process and identify strategies for improvement.

Why Do We Communicate?

Communication meets many personal needs including: sharing information; showing interest; giving attention; or expressing emotion. It helps if we understand why we are communicating: at this time; with this person; on this topic. We also benefit from knowing the response we want, or expect. There is always a purpose behind any form of communication. We greet strangers to acknowledge their presence. We express grief to indicate the significance of a loss. We hug our partner to show love. If we don't know why we communicate, we encourage ambiguity and misunderstanding and we may be ascribed totally inaccurate motives!

This is especially true when the apparent message is not the intended one. For example, we may be hurt by a partner's comments or actions but our reaction is one of anger and blame. Without exploring appropriate ways to express the hurt, or to find avenues to alleviate it, we start a new process of miscommunication. Instead of making the hurt go away we have guaranteed more hurt. Understand why you are reacting to a comment or behaviour, then have the courage and honesty to admit it. Responding with: "Knowing you feel that way about me, really hurts " moves the conversation in a different direction than: "You think you're perfect, well I have news for you "

How Do We Communicate?

To find out the answer to this question, don't just listen -- also observe. When you really "look" at communication, it is not surprising that message delivery really tells the tale. Tone, volume, emphasis and speed give a much stronger message than words alone. Look closer and you see that speaking, even with all the added bonuses, isn't necessary to get a message across. Body language is the real giveaway to deciphering an intended message. Eye contact, gestures, personal space, movement and behaviours combine to give an impression which is quickly interpreted. The body and words might not match in: "No, I am not upset!!!" Think about the following responses to non-verbal communication: "What's wrong with you today?"; "Hmm, seems like you're in the mood for !" Without words, a message has obviously been transmitted and interpreted and has generated a response. Pay attention to body language. Whether deliberate or not, it is giving a message. Verbal and non-verbal information should be consistent and express the intended message.

How Does the Past Interfere?

We can each recall unpleasant interactions. Retaining those memories and attributing the same negative motives to a new person or situation, unfairly sabotages a current relationship. To promote successful, fulfilling encounters it is necessary to accept the uniqueness of each contact. This conversation is not the same as the one last year, last month, or even the one yesterday. New experiences have been added, more knowledge attained and another opportunity is waiting. This relationship deserves the chance to deal with its own challenges, without also having to right the wrongs of the past or pay for someone's earlier mistakes. Remember our ultimate goal of improving relationships by using better communication skills and altering our reaction pattern.

We enter most conversations with an opinion of the topic, messenger and situation. That mental bias interferes with how we listen and interpret truth and significance. We often allow a previous impression to dictate the value of a new situation.

Recognize the past for what it is -- history! We can use history to learn lessons and direct positive outcomes. By changing our role, interpretation and response we can ensure that we don't repeat unpleasant historical interactions -- even when presented with similar situations.

How Can I Better Send My Message?

Message transmission, especially in a potential controversy, can be improved if we: put the message clearly in front of the receiver; remove interference from other issues or emotional outbursts; are specific; and stick to a single message. Other issues must be dealt with -- but not now. Sometimes we take advantage of anger, arguments, or perceived rejection to throw in everything.

Consider this example: In this communication, I want to ask you to help me clean up from dinner. I don't want to blame you for the extra work that I do because you don't help. I don't want to remind you that you haven't helped in the last week, even though you agreed to do that. I don't want to complain about the unfairness and my resentment because you come home and relax while I do the work. All I want to do now, is to ask you to help me clean up from dinner. Are we able to make communication that clear?

Unfortunately, we don't often say what bothers us. Things build up and out comes the overwhelming history on an unsuspecting partner or at an unpredictable moment. The reaction? Surprise. Shock. Embarrassment. Resentment. Anger. Unresolved, undiscussed issues in the relationship will eventually appear in our actions. We know that our partner is upset, furthermore we know that distress is directed at us. But why? Resolving the distress may be an impossible task without verbally clarifying the problem.

When an emotional situation escalates we experience greater difficulty in communicating effectively. Conversation may be peppered with: "You always/never "; or "every time ". Such extreme statements are rarely accurate but they do represent an emotional response and a long standing problem with plenty of accumulated resentment. To minimize complications, deal with one thing at a time, use specific examples, separate fact from fiction, and avoid sweeping claims.

How Can I Send A Better Message?

A clear and consistent message, delivered in a comfortable setting and manner, encourages the receiver to respond honestly. Know your message and your expected response before the conversation. Effective communication presents an easily understood message to a receiver who knows why s/he is involved and feels comfortable in responding.

How Can I Better Receive A Message?

Attentive listening is essential. Common reception problems include: interrupting, leaving the message incomplete and you guessing what was really meant; using listening time to prepare a counter attack; and only attending to the words, ignoring available non-verbal information. When you aren't sure about the message or the expectations being placed on you, ask questions. Do whatever it takes to ensure the message you hear is really the one that is intended.

Common communication problems result from: sending unclear, mixed or incomplete messages; interpreting, judging and responding to messages before receiving all the information; and failing to check the reception. Examine your interactions and design an action strategy to remove the obstacles and enrich your relationships.

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