

Improving Communications  
**LOWER YOUR STRESS**  
by Kathy Burford

Communication is at the heart of our lives and necessary in living and working with others. Clear communication can be the glue that keeps relationships with others growing. It is the tie that binds us and helps us to know one another better. It is how we problem solve and co-operate. Through interactions we get to know ourselves better. It helps us to organize our lives. And even with small changes, we can earn big dividends. Good communication takes time and effort and is a continuous process. When communication is faulty, it can keep us separate from others through misunderstandings and bad feelings. Poor interactions create many problems and frustrations within marriages, families and at school. There are steps we can take to improve our communication and, in turn, our personal and work relationships.

Good communication is often just good common sense. There are times, in certain situations, when our interactions are better than at other times. Becoming aware when our communications are satisfying, helps us to identify when we are on the right track. Our goal then is to apply those skills more consistently and on a more frequent basis. We need to also pay attention when communications are not satisfying because we can learn something from that, as well. Think back over the interactions you had today. You might have spoken with family members, friends, colleagues, students or parents, and even someone you didn't know at all. How did it go? Was there anything different with those communications that went well as compared with those that didn't? Looking back on it, could you have tried something different to improve the communication. What about your body language and tone of voice as you were speaking? Did you get the response that you had hoped for?

People usually point to good communication as having some of the following ingredients:

- 1) It is like a dance, each person having the opportunity to lead and to follow. There is a feeling of being listened to and understood with the right amount of time to express just what I wanted to say.
- 2) It is comfortable and respectful. I learned something new and entirely different than what I had expected.
- 3) There is an openness to share and see things from other perspectives. We could see the humour of taking oneself too seriously.
- 4) The conversation was meaningful and it was a precious moment of being together.
- 5) We laughed until the tears rolled down our faces. And then we laughed some more.

As in dancing, good communication has a rhythm and moves the dancers from point A to B. Faulty communication doesn't move anybody. It is like a competition where someone tries to win at another's expense. We've all had experiences like that and they don't feel very good. In fact, no one wins because each person is left feeling upset and with bad feelings. Good communication gives each party the chance to talk and be heard and understood. If you find yourself dominating the conversation, stop, and invite the other person in. If you find someone else dominating the conversation, excuse yourself for interrupting, and take the lead to share your views.

It is also easy to fall into speech pattern traps which muddy what you want to communicate. For example, the simple habit of starting a conversation with a "why" question can put the other person on the defensive. Developing a way of talking that expresses your true feelings can be more important than your words. Your smile can send the message that your teasing is caring, not sarcastic. In other situations, your smile can convey a message of caring and showing that the other person is acknowledged and valued.

Change and conflict are natural stages of people being together over time. Cooperation and compromise are what keep people interacting in a positive manner. If there is tension between yourself and another, say what's bothering you by being specific with an "I" message such as, "I feel upset when rather than a "You" message such as, "You are always ". Listen to the other party without comment, defence or disagreement. Discuss details and avoid old issues. The worst you can do is to keep your feelings bottled up to the point of never sharing what is really on your mind. Instead, seek

resolution to issues and negotiate to agreement, even if it's to disagree. Be aware that you might be misunderstood, particularly when tensions are high. Listen and ask questions to help clarify if you seem to be at different places of understanding. At times, it is useful to repeat back what is said so that you both are in tune. Take a break if necessary to cool off and think about how to take a different approach. Be ready to be wrong or equally guilty and acknowledge it if that is the case.

School environments are a hub of activity and, at busy times, it is easy to forget to take the time to send positive messages to one another. School administrators can create an atmosphere of caring through acknowledging the efforts and initiatives of staff members. Everyone likes to be validated for their hard work and creative ideas. On an individual level, how often have you taken the time to compliment a colleague or even the school principal? Creating a "culture of caring" goes a long way for a school to operate with far less stress.

Verbal communication takes up about 50% of our time. It's easier to send and receive the right message when you understand the effect that your presentation has on others. Professionals in radio and television practice to make their speech patterns friendly and persuasive. So can you. Consider new approaches to improving communications both at home and school. You can start today by sending three positive messages and you may be surprised with the results. Quite likely, both you and the receiver will feel better, and you will have begun to create a "culture of caring."

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If you are experiencing a work-related or personal problem, or would like information about the Employee Assistance Program for teachers, you can contact EAP Coordinators at the NLTA, [Kathy Burford](#) (Ext. 242) or [Claudette Coombs](#) (Ext. 265)