

Basic Reminders for Effective Conversation

THINGS WE ALL NEED TO BE REMINDED OF BECAUSE WE ARE HUMAN

A lecture or a long story or even a rant or a tirade are all examples of communication. Most often not particularly effective communication, but communication nonetheless. When there is a need for two or more people to communicate interactionally, that is conversation. Here are just a few things to keep in mind (and be willing to be reminded of) if you are wanting to practice good conversational skills.

A conversation involves at least two people. (There are exceptions to this rule but we'll get to that later.) Both people need to agree to stick to some basic guidelines while in conversation. One example of a list/description of conversation guidelines can be found in the next session, Communication 101. But let's begin with some even more basics for building a strong foundation for effective communication.

Basics

A conversation is not the same as a debate. A conversation is not so much about convincing someone of something as it is about conveying your perspective --- the way you are perceiving something and the ways you are feeling about something.

Even if you are needing to solve a problem in your conversation, it is not necessary that the two of you agree on everything related to the subject matter. In fact there is much room for disagreements when you can avoid defining every disagreement as a conflict. All conflicts involve disagreements but all disagreements do not need to be conflicts. Short version of this one: agreeing about everything is highly over-rated.

Similarly, respect does not have to be based on agreement or shared perception. We have the ability to have effective conversation with people with whom we disagree as long as we can learn to practice respectful communication. All this requires is that you acknowledge and accept that the other person in the conversation is *not you*, is a separate human being who has a right to their own feelings and thoughts.

And keep in mind: the purpose of a good conversation is not to make the other person more like you. (That may seem silly or obvious --- but put it in your back pocket. It is an often-needed reminder.)

If there are problems to be solved in a conversation in which there are disagreements, it will mean that both people will need to accept some compromise. Otherwise, the conversation just becomes a futile exercise of stonewalling – or worse, of bullying. (btw Bullies don't have conversations, they push people around, threaten, intimidate, try to control. Everyone of us is capable of doing that. It can be quite subtle and still be bullying. Best advice here is: don't be a bully AND don't be arrogant enough to think that you cannot be a bully.)

The above public service announcement on bullying is brought to you by something we should all consider essential to being capable of good conversation. And that is genuine humility.

Humility in effective conversation is not just something expressed with words. We can all sound humble; it's not that hard. Genuine humility means that, even when I am absolutely sure of what I think about / believe about a particular situation or particular person, there is always the possibility that some additional information could have the effect of amending my perception – even completely changing my mind.

There will never be a shortage of these basics that are foundational to quality, productive conversation. In fact, as you read through this material, do some highlighting or underlining. Decide, for your own personal benefit, what you will use as your most important basics. It helps me to bring this work into daily practice by keeping it as simple as possible. So each morning when I get out of bed, stumble to the coffee pot, and attend to the menagerie that lives with my wife and me, I speak aloud three words: *gratitude, humility, kindness*. It is sort of a stumbling-to-the-coffee-pot meditation. I will repeat those three words over the course of the next few minutes until I can actually feel them in my body. In that simple practice, I am making a commitment to myself (and to everyone I will encounter that day) that I will do my very best to put those three attributes (my top 3 basics) to work in everything I do.

Let's move on to something with a bit more structure, something with tangible tools that can immediately begin to improve your conversational skills.

Communication 101

BASIC TOOLS FOR CLEAR, EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Do you remember what it's like to learn to drive a standard shift car? Or to play a musical instrumental? Or ride a bicycle? At first the task seems impossible, far too complex to ever be coordinated from your one body and one mind. But with encouragement and lots of clumsy practice, we do begin to learn.

Even with our 20/20 hindsight we cannot identify exactly when we cross that invisible line from practice into knowing. But we do. We learn. And one day we recognize that what once seemed impossible has become natural, even automatic.

Learning communication skills is no different. Keep in mind that as we learn to act and speak differently, we are also learning to think differently. And that is much more difficult than driving a standard shift car.

Begin with Commitment

Mastering new relationship skills is not for the faint of heart. Effective communication --- especially in times of conflict --- calls for a focused dedication and repetitious practice. It calls for honest self-evaluation, humility, a sense of fair play, and a willingness to change according to the needs of the relationship. And it takes (at least) two.

Changing out-dated, ineffective communication patterns involves a great deal of "unlearning," a much greater challenge than simply filling in the blank slate. (Ever try to ditch a bad habit?) In a word, learning effective communication skills calls for commitment --- commitment to yourself, to your partners in communication, and to the relationship as a whole.

Communication Starter Kit

What follows are 7 important tools to help build effective communication. As with any tools, the first challenge is to learn how and when to use each tool. (A hammer is very important, but I don't want to use it to repair my eyeglasses.) And keep in mind that this is only a starter set. You will hopefully be adding to this collection of tools for the rest of your life.

The Tools:

1. Take Turns. Two separate agendas can seldom be accomplished at once. Establish some ground rules that will insure that you will take enough time for each of you to talk while the other is really listening.

2. Give Information. State your perceptions and your feelings concisely and respectfully. Avoid “selling your side” as the gospel truth, even when it feels that way to you. To resolve any conflict, room must be made for at least two different perspectives. And remember that emotions are subjective information, not open for debate (i.e. “you shouldn’t feel guilty,” or “you have no right to be angry”).

3. Gather Information. You have a responsibility in communication to do your share of listening, being receptive to what your partner is saying, without immediately judging and categorizing. Ask questions with curiosity, like a good interviewer. And --- here comes the radical part --- listen to the answers. Too often we ask questions not to gather information, but to make a point.

4. Problem Solve with Benevolence. Be certain to clarify your intention (especially in conflict communication) as seeking a satisfactory outcome for both of you. Find common ground on which to base your communication (i.e. “We each want to be heard completely and accurately,” and/or “We need to make a decision about”) Avoid seeking agreement about perceptions or feelings as a communication goal. There must be room for both of you to win.

5. Future Orient to Problem Solve. Those who forget the past are, in fact, doomed to repeat it. True. But those who won’t let go of the past may also be contributing to its repetition. In conflict communication it is best to state complaints about past behaviors clearly and concisely, and then to “future orient.” That is, sink most of your energy into describing and/or requesting what you want or need from your partner beginning now. You must be willing to take the chance that your partner wants to and can change along with you. (If you are not able to muster any faith that your partner is willing and/or capable of change, you are probably not working on the most serious problem in your relationship. Get some help.)

6. Take Breaks. Each of you must have the authority to call time out. And each of you must learn to respect time outs when they are called. Call time out when you recognize old, dysfunctional patterns of communication taking over. (They seem to have a life of their own.) When you call time out, it is imperative that you later initiate a time to talk again. Don’t just leave it hanging.

7. Backtrack. This is my favorite tool, probably because I have had to use it so often. All progress is not forward. Sometimes the best you can do is stop mid-mistake, apologize and ask for an opportunity to try again (“do overs” I believe we used to call them). But be careful to not ask for that chance if you do not think you can follow through with some new and improved communication. If you are not ready yet, try apologizing and step back to step 6: take a break.

Keep this collection of tools handy, and make use of them the next time you experience a communication problem. Better yet, use them before you experience a communication problem. And remember: You cannot solve many problems from adversarial positions. Work to stay on the same side of the problem, and practice having conversations to *convey* rather than to *convince*.

Couple's Request

FOR THERAPY SESSIONS AND WORKSHOPS

Working with couples using the Communication 101 tools, these four (4) requests seem to come up on a regular basis. Of course there will be many more, depending on individuals. If you have a request that you think would be a good one to add to this list, I would love to hear from you.

1. HEAR WHAT I AM SAYING ALL THE WAY THROUGH.

It really does a lot to improve communication when each of you can trust that your partner is genuinely interested in what you are saying --- and not just waiting for his/her turn to talk. Even if it feels corny or clumsy, slow down before you speak; be sure you have left room for your partner to be heard.

2. DON'T FIX; DON'T CRITIQUE.

Most everyone knows about this one. It is usually described as a predominantly male tendency (to instantly evaluate and problem solve) but either gender can have a problem with this one. The technique for this one is simply this: the person speaking is responsible for knowing the difference between just wanting to be heard and asking for opinions and advice. If your partner tells you that he/she is not asking for your opinions right then, do your very best to shift into listening mode. It is important that you understand that being asked to not fix something does not mean your input is not valued. It simply means that now is not the time.

3. STOP IF I ASK YOU TO STOP.

No matter how smart, wise or on-target you may be, there will be times when you are simply not being helpful. I ask that you respect me when I ask you to stop talking. This one can be very difficult to pull off, but it is very important that you learn how to do it. The trap that you may fall into, with good intention, is to want to keep talking – as in, “Okay, but let me just say 2 more things first.” Of course, your partner is responsible to ask you respectfully, but even when that is the case, you may feel insulted. I promise that in time, as you both build safety and respect in communication, this is not going to be a problem.

4. TRUST MY EXPLANATION AND REASONING EVEN IF YOU THINK THERE IS MORE TO IT.

It is not unusual for any of us to think we know more about what is going on with our partner than he/she does. And sometimes that is true. But that is not the point of this request. There may well be another time when you sharing your insights about him/her will be appreciated, but if you are being asked to accept an explanation or rationale without tossing in your two cents, respect the request. Keep in mind that being a good listener and accepting what someone is saying without taking exception to it are not the synonymous with agreeing with what is said.

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