

What did I Say? What did I Mean? What did they hear?
A “How-to” for Creating More Effective Communication with Any Species
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The times when things seem the bleakest gives us the opportunity to take a deep breath, let go and reflect on our accomplishments. Emotionally and physically, it more healthy for our well-being to focus on what we learn in the process of journeying through life, rather than dwelling of what we haven't achieved.

Try this exercise: Make a list of your accomplishments and add a note to each one about why you think they worked and how you felt about it. Now, take a deep breath, give yourself or your dog a hug. It is okay to take credit for a job well done whether a project, grocery shopping, big or small goal. This list proves that you have been doing things you love and enjoy. Was it you who planted that seedling tree 15 years ago, that now provides shade from 15 feet above?

As intuitive, knowledgeable, experienced caregivers, educators, managers, health care professionals, parents (and more), we have the ability to teach, and share our experience with others. If your goal is better communication at work, with family or friends, or with your dogs, we can all practice how to engage in more effective communication. Some savvy, especially in the world of internet communication (i.e. e-mails, text-messaging) can enhance daily connections.

Personally, I enjoy and value the internet as part of managing two small organizations, but it leaves a lot of room for misinterpretation. Whether on the internet, phone, face to face or with a different species (i.e. our dogs), communication can only be effective if it clearly conveys our message and in a language that the other party understands. If they do not, that is okay, as long as we (and they) ask questions to clarify our meaning. BTW (by the way) is part of the issue. Lots of people are sending text messages. This is fine, except that whether communicating in the professional business world or with friends, it is a good idea to rank the priority of your message, and know whether or nor the receiving party will understand what LOL or BTW means. If it is high priority, then it needs to be conveyed in a way that the receiver understands. Okay, let's explore ---

My background is in organizational management, psychology and behavior. I have transitioned over the years, with an insatiable curiosity for behavior, patterns and paradigms. I am grateful for my computer experience. I enjoy teaching compassion, empathy, kindness and respect for all beings. Whatever you do or would like to do, whether online, in a home business or in corporate America, you will undoubtedly need to communicate effectively to reach your goals.

Becoming a more effective communicator is what many of us desire. For our own survival and the success of our programs and projects that hold our passion or lifeline, effective communication is essential. Every time you send an e-mail or leave a voice-mail, “key” to your message or request should be reflected in the first paragraph, after the greeting.

Are you looking for answers to questions and not getting them answered? Are you expressing your emotions for the day? Expressing emotions is not a bad thing, when directed toward the appropriate receiver (family, friends). If your goal is receiving answers about a subject you interested in, meeting a deadline, or acquiring information, the more clearly you state your request, the more likely you will receive a likewise response.

Exploring Further: What is the Impact you have on Others

What is the impact you have on others through verbal and non-verbal, written and visual communication? The list you wrote in the first paragraph (if you did), will show that the knowledge you possess provides the ability to acquire and accomplish. Knowledge is empowering. It is a key to choices that provide answers. It opens windows of opportunity. Knowledge has an adversary called Ego. Ego is an illusion that distorts things, such as-- there is only one right answer. Some people say they don't “care” and don't have an “ego.” What I have discovered in many years of counseling, mediation and yoga, is that almost everyone has an ego. The key is awareness, so that we know when ego is trying to push common sense and knowledge over the edge. Ego creates fear and conflict that can have a dramatic cause and effect on any outcome. Knowledge does not try to dominate. Ego does. Knowledge is valuable when shared with others in a way that they feel they have a choice.

What is Communication

Communication is the process of exchanging intended information that is conveyed through written and spoken words, tones of voice, and body language according to a common set of rules. To be effective, one must be aware of these rules. Effective communication most often is a two-way process involving reception and transmission of information that includes *hearing and listening*. This implies that one verifies that the receiver has understood the message that was intended and a subsequent response is noted. With a successful exchange of information, the sender and receiver will have a common set of symbols or words that they both attach similar meaning to throughout the encoding, transmission, and decoding of an intended message.

Most important, both parties need to be present in the moment—to successfully encode, transmit and decode the message. Here is one of my “pet peeves” and a--

Real-World Example

“Rocco is a beautiful Am Staff x Labrador Retriever up for adoption.” This statement is not uncommon as a lead-in at many adoption sites and/or newspaper ads trying to re-home dogs. This sentence tells you only two things about this dog: “Rocco” is the name and “Am Staff x Lab” may be the breed. “Beautiful” is in the eye of the beholder!

For more effective communication, one might write: “Rocco is an even-tempered neutered male that we believe to be part Am Staff and Labrador Retriever. He is determined to be about 4 years old. He is black with white markings on his legs. He has been evaluated over a period of several months and has a wonderful temperament and disposition. He is good with older children and cat safe.

Choose which description gives you more information. The first description leaves a lot to the receiver/reader’s imagination, based on the sender’s knowledge, not yours. The second description paints a picture with more detail, conveying what seems to be an honest assessment of information that is currently available.

Techniques – Active Listening, Paraphrasing, Clarifying and Reflecting

In effective communication the sender and the receiver need to be “present” and “focused”. There are several ways to enhance communication and listening effectiveness, especially in an emotionally charged exchange whether it be via e-mail, phone or face-to-face. A fundamental technique is "**Active Listening**" with its four basic components:

- 1) Clarifying.** Asking the other party to provide more information, to elaborate upon their statement, requests, goals, or answer specific questions. Clarification questions can seed an idea or offer suggestions in a non-threatening way.
- 2) Paraphrasing.** Repeating the other person’s message in their words or your own, to affirm, "message sent is message received."
- 3) Reflecting Feelings.** Inquiring about or acknowledging overt or underlying feelings that are attached to the other party’s communication-- a tentative or tactful approach is often best: "I know you are on board, still it sounds like you have some frustration with the decision. Care to discuss it?"
Regarding the emotional component of messages: both listening and looking for verbal and nonverbal cues - voice tone and volume, facial and other bodily gestures, eye contact and physical distance - will facilitate more accurate reflection.
- 4) Summarizing and Feedback.** Reviewing and pulling together such problem-solving elements as mutual agreements, outstanding differences - factual as well as emotional - action plans to be executed, time frames and follow-up.

Being specific will help to explain who, what, where, why, when or whatever is relevant to the situation being communicated. The focus should be on comprehension and managing the direction and the amount of information. Too much information might overwhelm a receiver. Not enough information could leave the receiver confused. Feedback should be timely and non-judgmental.

A word on being non-judgmental: As a yoga enthusiast, educator and lover of dogs, I try to suspend judgment when trying to communicate or teach. I honor “the beginners mind”. Many spiritual people are trying hard to be non-judgmental. We’ve recognized (globally) how our judgments separate us, and it can be painful.

In trying to be nonjudgmental, it is possible that we are only cutting off the part of ourselves that is judgmental. We can’t make it go away. A defensive reaction has to do with something we’re afraid of, something that we don’t understand yet, or the times when we haven’t expressed ourselves in some way.

Trying to be nonjudgmental is just a way of repressing a part of ourselves. We are actually being judgmental of our judgmental self! Instead, try recognizing and accepting the judgmental part, then look underneath it to see what’s causing it to come forth. Let it go--

Being aware when “ego” wants to take over and control communication takes practice, but you usually know when-- because the other person (or even our dogs) will zone out, and/or not respond. During feedback it is the sender’s turn to take a deep breath and listen, with interruption.

Foundations for Communication

Awareness: One of my favorite words whether communicating via e-mail or training dogs. What are the thoughts, needs, feelings, the dynamics of communicating? What are the basic skills required to accomplish the idea(s), to help the listener (any species) understand what it is you seek?

Thinking Clearly: Brainstorming (exchange of ideas) with self or others helps with clarifying. We think in both conscious and unconscious levels. What happens to us on Sunday, although we might not be thinking about it, will affect how we encode 40 e-mail messages on a Monday morning. Keeping it in perspective, and not taking every message personally, helps. Prioritizing our messages into an A. B. C. list is the best way to maintain sanity while effectively communicating, especially via e-mail. Delete junk mail. It’s empowering. Junk mail is as junk mail does.

Willingness to Dig Down—Get the Essential Information: Remember the good old excuse, “the dog ate my homework.” Well, it holds true today with e-mails. If you don’t open, prioritize and read your e-mails, then it is a good idea to with-hold complaints about not receiving information. We can only know what we attend too. We need to dig down beyond the surface of denial, blame and excuses, asking our selves why we avoid e-mails and/or pretend to be “semi-aware”.

Ability to state what you need clearly and directly understanding that resistance may be important. If you really are passionate about a project, goal or concern, skirting around the issue hoping the other party will figure it out will likely lead to frustration for both the sender and receiver. Is it really a priority?

An atmosphere of respect: Strive for respect rather than conflict. Avoid misunderstandings by restating, paraphrasing or clarifying. In mediation we learn BATNA (best alternative to a negotiated agreement). This does not mean you have to cave, when you have a goal in mind. It does mean that if there is no “wiggle” room, then say so, letting the other party know that you are open and flexible in other areas. Win-win is always the best way to effective communication and/or achieving mutual goals.

Empathetic Listening Skills: Listening with empathy is a powerful communication tool. It allows you to listen with your heart and put aside your values, preferences and needs for the moment, to sense what the other might be thinking, feeling, needing and perceiving.

Helpful Steps for Effective Communication

1. **State one idea at a time and keep things simple.** Ask one or two questions at a time? Know your receiving audience. Keep text messaging in context. Not everyone knows that BTW means by-the-way. This avoids confusion. Most people need time to digest information. In essence, you are reading between the lines, and trying to understand the person or audience you are communicating with. This is true for the sender who has inquiries. If you send an e-mail filled with your “story” in the first 2-paragraphs, then ask your question in paragraph 3, you may not get an answer!
2. **I don’t know:** Saying I don’t know is an acceptable way to let someone know that you need clarification, as long as it is genuine. Saying, “I don’t know to avoid a “sticky” subject or as an excuse

to not take on a task is a cop-out. A better approach would be to honestly say something like “I’d like to learn, and/or, I don’t have time right now, but get back to me in the future.”

3. **10/5 Rule of Respect:** At 10-feet be aware of what is going on around you (and especially if you are in a new place, with a dog or children). At 5-feet respect other people’s space, and ask permission before getting closer, especially with a dog.
4. **Make eye-contact.** Whether speaking or being spoken to, looking into the eyes of another person, in a non-threatening way, can make communication more successful. Cultural diversity needs to be respected, as does spatial respect. Eye contact conveys interest and encourages others to be interested.
5. **Be aware of body language:** Our body language speaks volumes. An open stance and arms relaxed to the side conveys that you are approachable and open to ideas. Crossed arms and hunched shoulders might suggest disinterest or unwillingness to communicate. Walking away without saying anything is rude. Often, communication can be stopped before it starts. Having good posture and an approachable stance can usually make even difficult conversations flow more smoothly, as is a willingness to listen to the other person’s thought or opinion.
6. **Speak loudly enough to be heard.** When saying what you think, have confidence to say it loudly enough to be heard (without screaming). Appropriate tone and volume will show you mean what you say and it is worth hearing, which decreases room for misunderstanding.
7. **Timing:** Timing can make or break a deal. It can be what bridges the gap between getting your goals met and questions answered. Whether e-mailing or at business meetings, choosing the right time is essential. In the middle of an event or meeting, it is not a good idea to hammer someone with non-specific topics or 10 questions that aren’t relevant to the given “focus” of all. If it can wait, write it done, and re-visit the issues at a better time. You’ll get your answers more quickly, and avoid ticking people off. A good thing to remember: **10 / 10 /10** Will this be as important 10 minutes, 10 weeks or 10 months from now? Ask yourself, can it wait?
8. **Practice:** Change is not easy. We are habitual creatures. Practicing communication skills every day in a variety of social and professional settings, on e-mail, the phone or in person, can be fun and creative. It is a useful, lifelong set of skills. These simple behavior tips can open up new opportunities beyond current limitations. New skills take time to refine, but each time you use these skills you will find the opportunities. Connections will begin to open up.

In summary, effective communication, with any species, is interactive, dynamic, contextual, irreversible, flexible and continuous. Discussion will help remove unwanted perceptions, and identify barriers that may exist. Creating a mutual understanding will help bridge the gap when reaching for a desired outcome. We may have different causes, but usually there is a common goal; that is being able to convey our message, be listened too, respected, appreciated and accepted.

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