

Effective Communication Techniques

Created for Thoughtful Engagement

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“The purpose of communication is the response you get. If you don’t like the response, change your communication.” The Center for Attitudinal Healing

We all have struggled with aspects of the communication process in our day to day experiences. Communication breakdowns happen with our children, our partner, friends, family members, or loved ones with or without cognitive impairment. Communication is the most important skill required, yet it is rarely taught. I do not remember ever having taken a communication class in my k-12 school years and certainly not in my higher educational pursuits until graduate school. To that point, this blog is dedicated to communication.

Experts note that the three most common barriers of effective communication include emotions, word meaning, and environmental. We all have experienced emotional barriers – we are upset and say things that we didn’t mean or shouldn’t have said, or we were on the receiving end of such communication. Emotionality happens. However, understanding when to leave an argument is important. One of my colleagues succinctly noted, “You don’t have to go to every argument you are invited to.” Brilliant words! If you or the person you are communicating with is upset, take a break. Give each other space until each feels calmer.

Communication has two parts: speaking and listening. Most practice the speaking part, yet rarely do we listen as closely as we could. Typically, when another is speaking we are busy formulating our reply. Reflective listening helps to rectify this often overlooked part of communication. The use of reflective listening provides a platform to de-escalate an emotional situation. Reflective listening asks the person who is receiving the emotional communication to stop and listen and then reflect back to the speaker, as best as possible, what they shared. This involves repeating back to the speaker their own words, not our version of what we thought they said, but what was actually said. We are tasked not to add our judgement to what they spoke, just what was said. This fills the need of the speaker to be heard. We all want to be heard. Again, you do not need to agree or disagree with what the speaker is saying, you just need to reflect that you are listening. What does this simple technique do? It helps the speaker feel heard and can de-escalate an argument. Reflective listening does not work to solve the problem, it is offered to de-escalate the emotional situation. Discussing the problem utilizing appropriate communication can take place after emotions are recognized.

This leads us to the second communication barrier: word meaning. Once the words leave my mouth and enter another’s ears something profound happens – the meaning of my words become changed to that of the receiver. To put this in context, consider each of us reading the same book. Each of us will form different visions of the hero or heroine, the topography of the landscape or architecture of the buildings, basically anything left to our own imagination. We do the same with word meaning. Many times I have said something that I deemed innocuous yet the recipient of my communication interpreted the word meaning differently. To help with this problem, after reflective listening (repeating back to the speaker what they are sharing) I ask the speaker, “Did I understand correctly?” This provides the opportunity for clarity of word meaning. Asking for clarification on word meaning allows for smoother communication.

However, both reflective listening and asking for word clarification can backfire if environmental barriers exist. Environmental barriers happen when we do not plan ahead for effective communication. Imagine you are at work and are entering the elevator. Your supervisor is standing in the elevator. Seeing your supervisor jogs your memory that you have something very important to ask him/her. However, without your knowledge, your supervisor is heading into a meeting where s/he expects great difficulty. After you share your need to speak with your supervisor you are met with a sharp retort that “this is not the time”. This is an environmental barrier. Although it seems harmless, it can create tension and has the potential to close down communication. If you have something important to share with another person, it is imperative to set up the time to do so. This small task will allow the opportunity to be present and heard. Just like you would schedule a meeting with your supervisor, you can schedule family meetings to discuss important details.

These techniques can feel scripted and restrictive as you practice them. After practiced, they do become second nature. Remember, it did not feel comfortable the first time you drove a car. You had to practice to learn to drive and offering effective communication techniques is the same.

Resources:

<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/relationships-communication/effective-communication.htm>

<https://medium.com/design-ibm/taking-responsibility-for-our-communication-b677100d61f5>