

SUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATION

We all have had to face situations we did not want to deal with, but have had to. We have tried to "talk it out", but we just seemed to put our foot in our mouth; and our trying to communicate only made things worse. We have been told that "Honesty is the best policy" and that "It never helps to hold things in", but our attempts at communication have fallen flat. This has left us with feelings of despair, guilt, irritation, self-condemnation and hopelessness.

There probably are not theories that work every time, but there are some principles of communication that can help us do what we have to do.

One principle of communication is: To decide what your goal or aim is before you talk with a person. This is especially important if the situation is a difficult one, and also because the goal you have, determines how you go about your task. Some aims of communication are:

- To communicate facts
- To express a frustration
- To change behavior
- To humiliate a person
- To embarrass a person
- To solve a problem
- To get co-operation
- To alienate a person

Some of the items in this list may shock you. It seems startling, for example, that the purpose of someone's conversation could be the embarrassment or the alienation of another individual. The intention becomes irrelevant when an approach is used that embarrasses or alienates; the result is the same. So in difficult situations, it is wise to ask yourself: What do I really want to accomplish as I talk? This requires your becoming aware of your emotions and needs. For example, the emotion of anger may result in a need to "get even." You should not be surprised when your conversation starts an argument which achieves nothing positive.

One of the advantages of becoming aware of your feelings and needs is that it enables you to deal with a troublesome emotion in such a way that it does not cause more trouble. Becoming aware of troublesome emotions also helps ease them.

Another principle of communication is becoming acquainted with the approaches that block communication. Some of these are:

CALLING NAMES: "You blockhead," "You idiot!". Who wants to talk with a person who calls him a name?

JUDGING ANOTHERS ACTIONS: "That was a very bad thing to do." It would be easier for the other person if you would say you are unhappy with what has happened.

ATTACKING ANOTHER'S PERSONALITY: "You are impossible," "You don't have any sense." It is better to deal with the issue, rather than to engage in a character smear. Good communication is like a good newspaper, in that it attacks the problems, not the personalities.

GENERALIZING: "All Republicans are alike," "You women drivers", "Kids are all alike." Generalizing is an easy escape. It puts an individual in a group so we do not have to listen to him or deal with him as a person. If we dealt with him as an individual, we might have to change our ideas.

SARCASM: "That is what I call a really clean room." "You must have been using your head when you did this." This humiliates the person and makes him angry.

PRE-OCCUPATION: Husbands and wives easily get into the habit of being with, but not paying attention to, each other. Parents turn off children in the same way, making them feel unwanted. If you cannot listen because of other concerns or problems then say so, and make arrangements to talk later.

JUDGING ANOTHER'S EMOTIONS: "You shouldn't feel that way," "You have no right to feel that way," Saying this is a crime against the emotions. A person has the right to feel any way he feels. He does not, however, have the right to take his feelings out on others. If you listen, instead of judging or "preaching" you may help a person to change his emotions.

PREDICTIONS: "You are heading for the State Pen." "If you don't end up being a prostitute it'll surprise me." This kind of talk either sets up a person for this kind of future, or causes him to "make good" just to spite you. The later is not healthy motivation.

PROBING AND ANALYZING EMOTIONS: This is offensive. If a person needs psychotherapy he should get it in its proper setting and from someone with whom he has an agreement to receive therapy.

DEMANDING AND BULLDOZING: There are times when one must be firm, but running over another's rights and feeling is over-doing it.

PUTTING A PERSON ON THE SPOT: "You were dead wrong when you did that," "Why did you do that?" An alternate approach is the "Problem Centered" or the "Task Centered" approach discussed below.

The above list suggests some ways communication is closed. The following indicates some approaches that help open communication.

GIVE YOUR ATTENTION TO THE OTHER PERSON. Be "present" with him. Listen to him and respond to him.

BECOME CONSCIOUSLY AWARE OF YOUR EMOTIONS, or distracting sensations. If it is appropriate, let the person "in" on what you are experiencing as you talk. For example, if you have to talk but are extremely tired, let the person know this. If you yawn, then it is understandable. If you are unhappy about something being discussed, then say so. Instead of making judgements about what another is doing, tell him how you feel about what is going on. This conscious awareness of emotions takes some time and effort to develop, but it is helpful.

KNOW WHAT YOU NEED AND WANT. An awareness of your emotions helps you to know what you really need and want. Instead of telling a person what he can and cannot do, tell him what you want and need, what you can and cannot do.

BEING WILLING TO LEARN FROM ANOTHER OPENS COMMUNICATION. People are more willing to talk with a person who is receptive and willing to learn. Everybody is a teacher and a learner.

BEING PROBLEM OR TASK CENTERED INSTEAD OF ATTACKING ANOTHER'S PERSONALITY. Ask, what is the problem and how can we solve it? What needs to be done and how can we do it? Determine the goal or aim and focus on it, not on the personality or the failure of the person involved. Example: "The room did not get cleaned up." (Task centered) "You are a messy person, you did not clean up your room." (This is an attack on the personality putting the person on the defensive.) Being task centered enables both of you to focus your attention on the job to be done.

APPROPRIATE COMPLIMENTS AND EXPRESSIONS OF GRATITUDE ARE NOT ONLY NEEDED BY EACH OF US, but are also great helps in fortifying ourselves when we do not live up to our own expectations or the expectations of others. Some people do not think they need compliments, probably because they are embarrassed by them and so reject them.

RESPITE: Sometimes a period of rest helps clear the air and enables communication to be restored.

A FINAL PRINCIPLE OF COMMUNICATION IS THIS: Be patient with yourself. Throughout our lives we have developed habits that prevent our functioning as we would like. It takes time to learn about how we defeat ourselves. This kind of learning is a life-long process, so be patient, because even if you follow all the "rules," communication can not always succeed. Keep trying.