

Module 2 - Part 3

Communication for many people seems like an impossible task. Many of my clients come to me confused about how to be a better communicator in general. Everything has a process or pattern to how it works and communication is no different. Once you have some basic rules or understandings, it becomes easier to master.

Fact #1 - No one in the world communicates the same that you do!
There, that was easy. Now you know why most people feel misunderstood. It's because they are misunderstood.

We all interpret information through our own specific set of filters which include our own unique experiences, our own unique meanings of words and our own unique stories. So now you can imagine how different we all are and how it impacts our understanding of each other.

Verbal communication is the most inaccurate way to communicate. Words are powerful and yet, words mean different things to different people. If I were to ask you to tell me what one word comes to mind when I say the word "dog", what is it?

I've done this exercise within a room of 50+ attendees and out of 50, not one person repeated the other person's word and especially their meaning of that word. What word came to mind for you? Most likely it's not the word

Jean Luc. That's the name of our French Toy Poodle. But that is the first word that comes to my mind.

So in a room of 50 people, we have 50 different and separate meanings of just one word. Now let's start stringing together more and more words to form sentences. Then paragraphs. And oh my, maybe a whole story! As a human species, how have we been able to communicate over our entire existence?

Well one way is to be able to figure meanings of words through context of the story or conversation. That does help tremendously. But here are my top three ways to improve your chances of effective communication within your relationships.

Step #1

Engage active listening.

Active listening means just what is stated. You actively focus more intently on the conversation at hand. Your goal is to listen without feeling that you have to answer back. Most people lose focus in under 8 seconds, which is worse than the focus of a goldfish (which is a whole second longer than people's focus). When we spend our time wanting to reply within a conversation, we miss most of what someone else is trying to communicate. No wonder we think communication is hard. We think it mostly means us talking. If you take a clue from our creator, He gave us

two ears and one mouth for a reason, which is to listen twice as much as we speak!

The only sounds that are coming out of our mouth should be short phrases that tell the speaker that we are truly listening and engaged. Phrases like, “I see”, “I hear you”, or “I feel it” or even a “huh-ha” is acceptable. This is especially important to master with people whom we have a relationship with personally or professionally. One of my clients actively adapted just Step 1 into her communication practice. She began to incorporate active listening at home with her husband and at work in the office. In just a very short time, she got promoted to a management role because as she reported back to me, she gave everyone a sense of leadership and she had great insights. Well all she did was listen. But that was so missing within their office that it stood out immediately. At home, her husband surprised her with a weekend away. He said to her, “I don’t know what it is, but lately I feel closer to you and know how much you enjoy going on weekend trips together”.

In both cases, my client did nothing but listen more and talk less. She was missing out of a whole new world that she over-talked. She’s excited to proceed to her next step, Asking Questions.

Step #2

Asking Questions is the next step in active listening. The purpose of asking questions is to clarify what the speaker is saying. By asking specific questions, you are actively showing the speaker that you are listening

intently and that your questions add to their statements, not change the subject or interfere with the message.

An example might be if the speaker asks you to call her someday to get together. You might respond with, “specifically what day?”

Or the speaker might say to use a dog on the logo to attract pet owners. You might respond with, “what kind of dog?”

If your husband or wife says that you don't clean the bathroom often enough, a fair retort would be, “how often should it be cleaned?”

The key to using this technique is to clarify what the other person is saying so you understand fully what they are meaning to say. Be aware not to use this as an opportunity to be sarcastic using the same words but in a tone that is not supportive. This is worse than just not listening fully at all.

On the flip side of the technique, if you have shared this communication process with your significant other, accept those questions in the spirit they were meant to be viewed, as a way to fully understand your point. Within relationships, it's so easy to just be flippant because you're in a hurry to blast out your “orders” to another with the attitude, “shut-up and just listen, don't ask any questions!” You've got to be patient and understand that verbal communication is not a very accurate way to exchange ideas unless you use these tools in a supportive environment. When my husband Jim and I were discussing what state we'd like to move to next, he was getting impatient with me and just blurted out, “let's just go to a nice place to live, we don't have to discuss it anymore!” So I pulled out a Forbes magazine's Best Places to Live article and pointed to the number one ranked state of Iowa without saying a word. He looked at the article and smiled and said,

“Well, maybe not just any place. I’m sure Iowa can be nice for some, but that’s not what I was thinking about.” To which I said, “What states were you thinking about?”. We then resumed our discussion peacefully and more easily noting that Iowa was not on our list of possibilities and this time. Questions can do more than just clarify what someone else is saying. Questions can illustrate to the speaker how unreasonable they are being. When you ask the question back to an unreasonable request, you are clarifying the message sent just the way that you heard it so the speaker can hear how unreasonable it really sounds to others. So you do get clarification but you’re also teaching a valuable lesson to your speaker so maybe they won’t communicate like this again.

Step #3

Storytelling is the next level of deep communication. First of all, let me share with you a few facts about stories. When we listen to a story, our neural activity in our brain increased fivefold. Our brain runs on electrical impulses and when we hear a story, our brain lights up. Stories do another thing: They trigger the release of this neurochemical called oxytocin, which is known in some circles as the love drug. So when you ask the question, “Would you like to hear a story?”, that statement will freeze people right in their tracks. This will pause them long enough for you to tell your story and make your point.

When you tell a story, the natural barrier of the brain, to block out unknown information is centered in the reptilian part of the brain. Stories then engage the left temporal cortex, which is receptive to language and lights up the whole cerebral cortex which includes the amygdala, where memory, decision-making and emotional responses are made.

So what this all means is that when you ask to tell a story, the emotional walls lower and listening goes up fivefold. If your story is in response to what the speaker just communicated, you are responding with a unique technique that through storytelling, cuts through the resistance and softly makes a suggestion without sounding like a suggestion.

Let me tell you a story, I'm a very social person. It's probably due to one of my top ten values of inclusiveness. Rarely do I turn down an opportunity to go out with another couple. My husband Jim, on the other hand, is social, but compared to me, he thinks more practically than I do when it comes to planning time and set results that we look for in our life and business. So when we were invited out during the work week, I'll bring this up to Jim and instead of his usual answer of "no", followed by some gibberish about getting our projects complete on schedule, instead he shared the following. "If going out mid-week is a good idea to you, that's fine. Could I share a quick story with you first. Do you remember the last time that we were invited out for an evening with another couple? Do you remember what a great time that we had for that moment? Do you remember how tired you and I were the next morning when you had to do your podcast and we only had 3 ½ hours sleep?" He actually incorporated both stories and questions technique with me and it worked. Without ever saying yes or no, I realized

that this was not a good idea and told him that we'll reschedule at a more opportune time for all of us. He made his point without ever saying it. You can do this too. Just pay attention to the need, listen intently and you'll be a master of these great communication tools too.