

A Way of Communicating

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This guide provides information about a way of communicating that promotes understanding between people and reduces conflict. Although on the surface it is about communication skills, if the information is applied consistently over time you may find that it can have a profound, transformational effect on our experience of the world and lead to far greater intimacy and closeness in relationships. Although focussed on development of skills, the skills serve the deepest goals of promoting understanding between people, enhancing the self-esteem and self-concept of both people, and promoting personal awareness, interpersonal sensitivity, and responsibility. Simply through conscious, disciplined effort to apply the skills described, these deeper benefits are an inevitable, if gradual, outcome. The skills are, in principle, simple. However, they require practice and most people do not find them easy to master. Indeed, it is always possible to develop greater ease with these skills, and the benefits continue to increase with practice.

The following information has been brought together from a variety of sources and the skills presented here have been demonstrated to be effective ways of improving communication. This way of communicating is based on a desire to promote a genuine understanding between oneself and others such that we are most likely to actually understand another person's experience, and the other person is most likely to be able to understand ours. If our intention is other than this, such as to get our way with others or to control others, then this way of communicating will not be of much use. It has benefits for our communication with everyone but is particularly valuable for more intimate relationships such as among family members or between friends. It is particularly beneficial when the two people who are communicating share the perspective described here but it is valuable even if the other person does not. I believe it is quite appropriate and useful to apply the principles described here in relatively non-close relationships, such as with co-workers or even with strangers, although you will have to adapt the particular words used to suit these less intimate situations.

Our Intentions:

Although I will be describing the practical "how to do it" aspects of communicating, and these are important, the most important aspect of communicating is really our intention. Why are we communicating with this person and what are we intending to achieve? We don't tend to give this much thought and it requires reflection and honest self-examination to find out. There is often a surface intention, such as giving the other person information, but usually also a deeper intention, such as wanting the other person to behave differently. Since others are often aware of our deeper intentions and react to what they perceive our intentions to be, communication difficulties are often related to us believing that we are communicating one thing and the other person perceiving something quite different. A first important step in communicating is therefore to be clear ourselves about our intentions. We will often not take the time to reflect on this in the moment, so it is valuable to reflect on it at other times as well. If you are reading this with the intention of improving your communication within a particular relationship, consider what you most want to achieve through your communication with this person. Are we trying to be open and honest with the other person, revealing our thoughts, feelings, and true intentions, or do we have ulterior motives and are actually trying to provide misleading information or to withhold information in order to achieve some desired effect on the other person? Are we trying to get them to do what we want? Are we trying to get them to feel guilty? Are we trying to get them to like us? Are we trying to say something hurtful in revenge for feeling hurt ourselves? Ultimately, clear communication starts with self-honesty about what we are really trying to achieve when we open our mouths, and this usually proves to be the most challenging aspect of all. I emphasize that almost any motives that we have in our communication are acceptable. There is nothing wrong with wanting someone to do something for us, to like us, or to stay with us. It is also quite normal to want to hurt others with our words, to want them to feel guilty or afraid, or to want them to feel jealous. Healthy communication just involves being more honest with ourselves and others about our intentions.

Below is the first of several exercises. Although you may be tempted to skip over them, I encourage you to give them a try. Communication skills are *skills*, and like all skills need to be practiced to get better. Communication

tends to break down most frequently when we are in emotionally charged situations – not ideal circumstances for us to be trying something for the first time. Reading this guide and then waiting for a big fight to begin using the skills would be like having your first driving lesson during rush hour in a big city. Make it easy for yourself and practice the skills during non-stressful times. The more these communication skills are practiced and become automatic or second nature, the easier it will be to use them when you most need them.

Now back to the exercise regarding “our intentions”. Pick a person with whom you would like to have better communication and answer the following questions. My usual intentions behind my communication with _____ are:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

Consider, in general, what you most want to achieve through your communication in your relationship with _____.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

There is nothing more to be done with this information other than being aware of it. If what you most want to achieve is different than what your usual intentions are, then you can be more aware of this when communicating with that person.

You may or may not choose to share your intentions with others as part of your communication. Here are some examples of how intentions can be shared.

Jessica: This may sound nosy, but I really want to get to know what's important to you.

Rachid: I just want to vent for a minute.

Casper: I don't like to admit it, but I really want you to feel guilty.

Harvey: I'm telling you this 'cause I really want you to stop doing it 'cause I'm beginning to think you're a jerk.

Mary: I REALLY much want you to tell me I'm right on this.

We don't need to share our intentions in every conversation. If you want someone to pass the salt a simple request will do and a deep discussion of your intentions would be pretty pointless. HOWEVER, there is a lot of room for us to make simple expressions of our intentions in everyday conversations in ways that are appropriate and sound natural. Again, the first focus needs to be on us becoming increasingly aware of our intentions, but as we become more skilled at this we can begin to include brief statements about them in our everyday conversations. A statement at the office like, "You screwed up on the Robinson file." (which of course is only intended to provide the person with information!?), can instead be, "I'm feeling really frustrated that you forgot the numbers in the Robinson report and I want you to know that I don't want this to happen again."

Responsibility for Our Experience:

This way of communicating also involves us taking responsibility for our experience and feelings. Here, "responsibility" just involves the awareness and acknowledgement that whatever we communicate comes from us, and it has nothing to do with blame. It begins with the recognition that what you are communicating is *your* experience, *your* beliefs, *your* feelings, *your* perceptions, etc. I will begin by discussing responsibility for our perceptions, attributions, impressions, interpretations, etc., and then discuss our responsibility for our feelings.

As much as we might like to believe that our views reflect some ultimate reality, we can never be 100% sure of this. We can, however, be sure about *our experience* of the world and this is what we can communicate with others. Healthy communication therefore involves taking responsibility for one's statements, often involving the use of "I" statements. "I think...", "For me...", "My impression...", "I believe...", etc. (The use of "I" statements has benefits beyond communication, since just using the words gives us a clearer sense that it is *us* who is doing these things.)

Rather than, "That's a beautiful painting."
Instead, "I think that's a beautiful painting."

Rather than, "You should be more careful when you are lighting a fire."
Instead, "I think that you should be more careful when you are lighting a fire."
Or, "I'd feel better if you made sure the children were further away when you are lighting a fire."

Rather than, "The team's old uniforms looked much better than their new ones."
Instead, "I liked the team's old uniforms better than the new ones."

Rather than, "It's stupid to focus on that issue."
Instead, "For me, I'd rather focus on another issue."

Rather than, "You're lying."
Instead, "My impression is that you're lying."
Or, "I think you are trying to mislead me."
Or "I don't believe that."

We are generally more comfortable using "I" statements regarding matters of opinion and feel more entitled to make our pronouncements about matters that seem to us to be matters of fact. "It was raining all morning." "Grandma is coming for dinner." "Whales are mammals." We are much less likely to get into communication difficulties when discussing matters of fact that most people agree on, and it can get ridiculous to try to turn everything into an "I" statement. However, there are times when what may seem to be a clear fact to you may not appear to be a clear fact to someone else. Further, even when others disagree with us, they will be less defensive if we have expressed

information as our opinion rather than stated it as a fact. If we have acknowledged in our words that our view is only our opinion, we leave room for others to have their opinions, something that is missing if our statements come across as proclamations. As my writing of this illustrates, it is not necessary to use “I” statements with every sentence, but the more we use them, the more that we will experience our responsibility in how we experience the world, and the more constructive our communication is likely to be.

Try making the following statements more responsible:

“He’s the best one on the team.”

“You’re just trying to make me feel guilty.”

“The green one should go next to the blue one.”

Responsibility for Our Feelings:

The next principle of healthy communication is the acceptance of responsibility for our feelings, a concept that can be difficult to grasp. When someone hits us, we feel pain. When someone we love dies, we feel sadness. It is therefore not a big leap to conclude that the other person or the event made us feel as we do. The problem is that there is an intermediate step, the “us”, that we are not taking responsibility for. Consider that even if 99% of people in that situation would feel the same way that you do, there is still the other 1%. If another person, even one other person, would feel differently in that situation, it illustrates that you must play some role in developing your feelings. No one can “make” us feel anything without our cooperation. Also consider that regardless of how “normal”, “healthy”, or “predictable” your reaction is, that it is *your* reaction. Responsibility for our feelings involves us

realizing that when we feel something that it is *us* who are feeling it and that someone else in the same situation may feel differently. Of course this also involves realizing that others are responsible for their feelings, that although we may want another person to feel something and we may behave so as to promote this feeling in them, we can't *make* them feel anything.

Accepting responsibility for our feelings eliminates a whole lot of statements that get us into communication difficulties. "You made me feel..." statements are a common example. "You make me so angry." "Stop making me feel guilty." "You're hurting my feelings." Healthy communication requires that we not attempt to blame others for our feelings, however tempting this may be. Responsible communication involves simply stating the relationship between some event and your feelings, such as, "When you... I felt...", or actively stating our responsibility such as, "When you... I make myself feel..."

Rather than, "You're making me feel guilty."
Instead, "I feel guilty."

Rather than, "You make me mad."
Instead, "I get so mad when you don't tell me where you're going."
Or, "I make myself so upset and angry when I don't know where you are."

Rather than, "You scare me."
Instead, "I find your laugh a bit frightening."
Or, "I get scared when you laugh like that."

Rather than, "You're hurting my feelings."
Instead, "I feel really sad when you talk to me like that."
Or, "I feel really sad when you talk about feeling disappointed with me."

Rather than, "You are so irritating."
Instead, "I am feeling very irritated with you."
Or, "I'm finding myself feeling very irritated when you talk during the show."

Rather than, "You make me feel so happy."
Instead, "I am so happy being with you."
Or, "When I'm with you all my worries seem to go away."

Rather than, “Stop bugging me.”

Instead, “I’m finding that really irritating and I want you to stop now!”

Or, “ When you keep pushing me for an answer I feel very frustrated and I want you to stop now or I’m going home.”

As I hope is apparent in these examples, healthy communication is not about being “nice”, but rather about being responsible and honest. If we don’t like something about someone, healthy communication isn’t about sugar-coating it, but about accepting responsibility for the fact that it is us that doesn’t like it, recognizing that someone else might.

Blaming others for our feelings, or otherwise placing the source of our feelings and impulses outside of ourselves, is contributed to by a lack of self-esteem. It also perpetuates a lack of self-esteem. If we have a deep, inner conviction that our feelings are always acceptable and “OK” (the core of self-esteem or self-acceptance), then we are more inclined to just accept and express what we feel, without a need to justify it in terms of what happened to us. If our self-acceptance is more shaky then we become more prone to looking for a solid justification to rationalize our feelings: “I’m angry because you...” Conversely, the more that we practice just expressing our experience and feelings without defending or justifying them, the more we will gradually convince ourselves that our feelings and impulses are alright. It sometimes helps to realize that feelings are always valid, acceptable, and OK, although what we choose to do with our feelings will have consequences (positive or negative) for both ourselves and others.

Try making the following statements more responsible:

“You’re frightening me.”

“You’re hurting my feelings.”

“Stop making me mad!”

Feelings and Beliefs:

It is important for clear communication to know the difference between our feelings and other aspects of our experience. Our feelings refer to emotions and motivations such as feeling angry, sad, surprised, scared, embarrassed, hungry, sexually aroused, happy, thirsty, elated, etc. Feelings include feeling we like something or don't like something. Our feelings are ours and are never right or wrong, they just are. If I feel hungry, it is pretty ridiculous for someone else to agree or disagree with whether I am or not, although this certainly does happen: "You're not hungry, you just ate an hour ago!". Only you can know your internal experience, which is what feelings refer to.

The confusion between feelings and beliefs or judgements becomes a problem when we make a statement about our beliefs and disguise it as a statement about our feelings. "I feel that you were inconsiderate." is not a statement about a feeling but rather a belief or judgement about another person. "I feel this is a bad idea." reflects beliefs about the idea being a poor plan." This type of feeling/belief confusion muddies the waters in our communication because someone who disagrees with our belief is put in the position of appearing to disagree with our feeling.

Rather than, "I feel that you're a jerk." (*a belief, not a feeling*)

Instead, "When I found out that you had left and hadn't told me I thought that you had been quite inconsiderate of my feelings (*responsible statement of her belief*) and I felt furious (*responsible statement of her feelings*)."

Rather than, "I feel this is a bad idea." (*a belief, not a feeling*)

Instead, "I have a bad feeling around this idea but I can't put my finger on why." (*responsible statement a gut feeling where specific beliefs aren't clear*)

Or, "I think this is a lousy plan and I think we're going to regret it big time." (*responsible statement of his beliefs*)

Although our feelings and our interpretations/judgements are two different things, they are related. Our feelings are affected to a large extent by the interpretations we make about events in our lives. Particularly in relationships, the attributions we make about the behaviour of others, including what others say, have a major impact on our feeling reactions. If I think that John is telling me about a problem in my work so that I can avoid the problem next time, I'm likely to feel appreciative of him. If I think that he is telling me about a problem in my work so that I'll feel embarrassed or inadequate, I'm likely to feel defensive and angry. So the interpretations and attributions we make about the events in the world and the behaviour of others can have a strong impact on our feelings.

Make up some statements that improve upon these feeling/judgement confusions.

"I feel you should go."

"I feel that our company will do well this year."

Beliefs About Others:

This brings us to the next issue, how we deal with our beliefs about others. By "beliefs about others" I mean our attributions, judgements, interpretations about others' statements and behaviour. We are always trying to make sense of the behaviour of others, doing much of it automatically without much thought and, as just noted, these beliefs affect our feelings. The first step is to realize that we are constantly making up stories to account for the behaviour of others, that this is a normal part of being human, and that there is nothing we could ever do to stop it. A man is driving a car quickly and we assume that he is in a rush to get somewhere. A woman is looking adoringly at a child and we assume she feels affection for him. Although we will always make our

attributions to account for the behaviour of others, there are a couple of ways that we get into trouble with them (and even more ways we get into trouble with them once we open our mouths). The first is that we attach a moral judgement to their behaviour, judging it as being good or bad, and I discuss this later. The second is that each of us is consistently mistaken in our judgments about others. The interesting thing is that each of us is consistently mistaken in our own unique way. It's all due to the fact that we can only make sense of our current experience based on what we have learned in the past, and each of us has a unique past that we use to make sense of the present. Although we are usually unaware of it, we tend to see events in the world and the behaviour of others through the lens of our past experience. When it comes to our relationships with others, our perceptions are affected profoundly by what we experienced during our earliest relationships with others, usually our parents. If our parents were mean to us we tend to anticipate others being mean to us. If our parents were considerate of our feelings we may anticipate others being considerate of our feelings. If our parents were rejecting towards us we anticipate others leaving us. If our parents got angry often we tend to anticipate others becoming angry easily. So it is first important to realize that each of us is inclined to expect certain behaviour from others, and we will at times expect it when it isn't really there. Indeed, it is often when we are most certain about why a person has done something that we are most wrong. We feel as if we know in our bones that Jane did something for a certain reason, but it turns out that this strong feeling is related to past events that had a major impact on us and are colouring our experience of the present.

The next challenges come when we open our mouths. How can we communicate our beliefs and judgements about others. Realizing that our beliefs about others may be mistaken need not paralyze us. Indeed it is extremely valuable to be able to state our beliefs and to check them out with others. Stating our beliefs about others is best done at the same time as checking out those beliefs, both to provide us with additional information and to give the other person the opportunity to respond to our statements about them. This is important in a relationship because it promotes the other person realizing that you are interested in their perspective and it gives them an opportunity to express their experience. The first half of this skill, stating our beliefs, works best if we use the skills noted already, including being clear about our intentions, the use of "I" statements, and not confusing feelings and judgements.

Rather than, "I feel that you're a jerk..."

Instead, "From the way you talked to him about me I gather that you wanted me to feel badly about myself..."

Rather than, "You are such a bitch!"

Instead, "I feel furious that you took my car without telling me and figure that you just don't give a damn about my things!"

Rather than, "You are so inconsiderate!"

Instead, "When you were late I thought that you didn't care about keeping me waiting."

Rather than, "Man, that's an ugly sweater!"

Instead, "When I saw you wearing that sweater my judgement was that your fashion taste sucks."

The second half of expressing our assumptions and beliefs about the other person is checking them out. Much difficulty in relationships occurs due to our rather arrogant beliefs that our perceptions, interpretations, and judgements are correct, and that there is therefore no reason to get the other person's perspective. We carry on, having our feelings and behaving without considering that perhaps we were mistaken, or at least that there may be additional valuable information. There is *always* valuable information to be gained from checking out the other person's perspective, even if it only confirms our perceptions and judgements (which it rarely will).

Rather than, "Why do you treat me like crap all the time?"

Instead, "When you call me names I feel lousy and assume that you want me to feel lousy and don't really care about me. Is that what goes on for you?"

Rather than, "You're always such a grouch."

Instead, "You seem pretty angry?"

Rather than, "I've told you a million times to do it this way but you're so pig-headed you won't listen to anyone."

Instead, “I’m feeling really hurt and frustrated that you again didn’t do what I asked. Is it that you forget, that you can’t stand not to do it your way, or what?”

Rather than, “You selfish bastard!”

Instead, “You don’t seem to care about what I want?”

Or, “What was going through your head when you took the last piece of cake?”

This rather simple step of checking it out is both extremely important and extremely difficult. It is extremely important because the difficulties that we have in relationships are largely due to our unique patterns of persistently judging others in the same mistaken ways. As discussed above, the deeper roots of this relationship difficulty are in our early experiences of the world, usually with our parents, and we quite unconsciously continue to make judgments about others based on the expectations we developed in childhood. It is only through persistently checking out our judgements that we will ever be able to correct these mistaken judgements about others. Unfortunately, we are least inclined to check out the judgments we most persistently make, both because they are so automatic that we are least aware that we are making the judgements, and because we often don’t really want to have our negative judgements confirmed. Believing that someone we care about is inconsiderate or otherwise doesn’t care about us is painful. To have it confirmed would be that much more painful. It would, however, be rather important information to have.

Try to imagine some ways to improve upon these statements, including responsibly stating your beliefs and checking them out.

“You’ve never liked me so why don’t you leave.”

“You’re just trying to make me feel guilty.”

“You always think you’re better than everyone else.”

“Just the Facts Ma’am”

The higher the level of conflict in a relationship, the more that communication needs to have a basic foundation upon which each person agrees. This can be challenging because, as I discussed above, there are no pure facts and two people can disagree about some event they have each just witnessed. However, there are some types of statements that are more likely to be agreed upon than others. Particularly when communicating with others in conflicted situations, it is valuable to begin with statements that are fairly close to your sensory experience (your five senses: sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch). Begin by stating what you saw, heard, smelled, etc. with as little interpretation of the event as possible. “I thought I saw you take my beer.” “I believe you said that you wanted me here by eight o’clock.” “I’m smelling something rotten.”

Rather than, “You are a selfish pig.”

Instead, “When I saw you take the last piece of cake (*what he thought he saw*) I figured that you weren’t thinking about the rest of us...(*his belief or judgement*)”.

Or, “When I saw you take a piece of cake (*what he actually saw*), which I assumed was the last one, (*his interpretation*) I thought that you weren’t thinking about the rest of us (*his belief or judgement*).”

Rather than, “You don’t love me anymore!”

Instead, “I heard you get out of bed early (*what she thought she heard*) and I imagined that you wanted to get away from me (*her interpretation or belief*).”

If we begin with statements that each person is most likely to agree as being “the facts”, from here we can each discuss our different interpretations and feelings about an event. Staying close to sensory experience is valuable because it gives us a shared foundation upon which to base our communication. We may not agree that I am a selfish pig, but we are more likely to agree that I took the last piece of cake. However, realize that all of our experience is individual to us, and that even basic sensory experience may

be open to interpretation, as athletes and referees can attest. Even in the first example, we may be surprised to find out that it was not the last piece of cake, that there are more pieces of cake in the kitchen.

Communicating Understanding:

Thus far I have been focusing on responsibility and honesty in expressing our thoughts and feelings to others. The other major aspect of communication involves how we respond to information from others. If we wish promote understanding and foster intimacy with others (intimacy in the sense of a deeper knowing of each other), it is very valuable to tell others that we have understood what they have said or indicated. A tremendous amount of communication difficulty is related to one person believing that the other person did not hear or understand what they said. This is a problem whether or not we actually did understand what the other person said and is easily remedied by making a point of letting the other person know what we believe we heard. At it's most simple, this involves simply repeating back what we heard almost word-for-word.

Jane: I'm fed up with you leaving your clothes and garbage around the house.

John: I get that you're feeling fed up with me leaving my clothes and garbage around the house.

Raj: If my teacher picks on me once more I'm never going to school again.

Mom: So if your teacher picks on you anymore you're never going to go to school again.

This word-for-word repeating back what the other person said is valuable in relationships in which there is a lot of conflict and misunderstanding because in repeating back what the other person said so accurately, there is little room for misunderstanding. However, this can also sound quite stilted and silly in relationships in which the level of conflict is lower and in situations in which communication is likely to be clearly understood. "So you'd like me to pass the sugar." is rather unnecessary. In lower conflict situations it makes sense to simply paraphrase what you have heard, trying to capture the essence of what the other person has said, particularly their feelings.

Jane: I'm fed up with you leaving your clothes and garbage around the house.

John: I get that you're annoyed with my messiness.

Or, John: Finding my stuff around really bugs you.

Raj: If my teacher picks on me once more I'm never going to school again.

Mom: So you're feeling pretty bad about your teacher picking on you and don't want to have to deal with it anymore.

Or, Mom: I imagine that going to school feels pretty lousy when you get picked on.

Or, Mom: You're feeling pretty bad about school, hey?

As these examples illustrate, there is not one correct way to capture what you imagine the other person is experiencing. The important thing is the genuine intention to do so. Indeed, it doesn't even matter if the other person sometimes says that you haven't captured their experience, since it gives them an opportunity to clarify it for you, and over time the person will be able to see your positive intention. The positive intention is one of empathy, an attempt to see the world through the eyes of others, to take a walk in their shoes. If we merely parrot back what another person has said without empathy, it will be apparent in our tone and body language and the other person is not likely to experience us as understanding them. Often, it is appropriate that along with stating what we think we heard that we communicate in our tone that we are checking out with the other person whether we got it or not. This will be reflected in some tentativeness or questioning in our tone.

Wanting a sense of connection with others is a fundamental human desire reflected in our wanting recognition and acknowledgement from others. We can offer others this recognition and acknowledgement through this type of communication of our understanding of their experience. People are often astounded at how positively others react to simply having their experience mirrored back to them in paraphrased statements. Indeed, it reduces defensiveness dramatically and promotes others sharing their experience much more openly. It may be easier to appreciate if you put yourself in another's shoes and imagine how relieving it would feel to have an expected combatant transformed into someone who actually is capable of seeing the world through your eyes. This is a crucial aspect of intimate communication and one that occurs in an ongoing way, not just at times of potential conflict. The "Conversation" at the end of this booklet illustrates this.

Empathizing with the experience of others through capturing it in a paraphrased reflection back to them is an endlessly difficult skill that we can always improve on. If your desire to understand the other person is greater than your ego (a tall order for most of us), there is no statement that cannot be met with an empathic reflection of the person's experience. Indeed, it helps to slow down our responses a bit so that we consider the other person's perspective rather than simply react defensively.

Sarah: I think you are a bastard and I'd like to kick your head in.

Fred: I realize you're so angry at what I've done that you really want to hurt me.

In the next exercise, practice indicating that you have understood what the other person is expressing, first repeating back almost word for word, and then paraphrasing to capture the essence of what was expressed.

Mary comes home from work exhausted and says, "I can't take that job anymore. If I have to go in another day I think I'll lose it with my boss."

Shahir just won the lottery and you are the first person he tells, looking stunned but elated. "I can't believe it. After ten years of buying tickets I actually hit the jackpot."

You are late getting home and your partner has been at home taking care of the children. Now your partner is going to be late for an important meeting. Your partner says, "Where were you? You left me high and dry and now I'm going to blow this account and we won't have enough money for our holiday."

Against your wishes, your teenage daughter has a party while you are away and there is a few hundred dollars worth of damage. She tells you, "I'm really sorry about the damage but there was nothing I could do. It was Jimmy Parker who did most of it and he was really drunk and wouldn't leave."

Your five year old son comes in crying and tells you that his friend hit him. “Jessica hit my arm really hard. She’s mean. I’m never playing with her again.”

Wrapping It Up:

If our communication with others provides us with new insight or clarity as to how what we say or do affects them, and how what they say or do affects us, we may wish to change our behaviour, and if so, it makes sense to wrap up with letting them know. We may or may not decide to alter our behaviour in a way that the other person is more comfortable with. We may want to let the other person know that what they have done is not acceptable to us and that we are going to do something to deal with it (such as us leaving, not taking them to that place again, going to lock up our things, getting some advice from a lawyer). Alternatively, we may tell the other person that we do not like something they have or haven’t done, and that *if it happens in the future* we intend to do something. In this latter case, it is important that this communication reflects a sharing of our experience and letting others know what our limits are, and it should not be expressed as a threat.

Adam: Thanks for being clear with me. I’m going to take some time to think about it and I imagine that I’ll speak to Jane.

Celeste: Wow! I think that’s so great for you. Thanks for letting me know. I’ll make sure I tell you about these opportunities more often.

Franco: I really get how hard that was for you. I sure didn’t know that you’d feel that way, but now I’ll make sure to check it out with you before I do it.

Elaine: I hate that you did that and it's not acceptable to me. I want you to do what you need for yourself, but I want you to know that if it happens again I will leave immediately.

Some Final Pointers:

Keep it brief. When communicating around conflict, keep your statements relatively brief. It often takes more words to be clear and responsible but if we go on and on then the other person will have difficulty remembering all the points we are making and we are not giving them an opportunity to respond.

One issue at a time. Particularly in higher conflict situations, we can be tempted to bring out a trunkload of past resentments or evidence to bolster our case. It's hard enough to communicate well around one issue or event and near impossible to cope with a barrage of them. Keep it simple.

Stay connected, even at a distance. At times we may not be able to compose ourselves enough to think straight or to communicate responsibly. At these times it is reasonable and advisable to take a break, a time-out until you are ready to re-engage. However, just walking away in a huff is not a responsible way of taking space, and it often trigger's our partner's anxiety over being abandoned or anger over being rejected. Quite simply, leave some type of verbal lifeline that indicates you are taking time out but intend to reconnect. "I'm too upset to talk about this now. I'll be back in about ten minutes (or an hour, or ten hours) and we can talk then." Or "I want you to know that I love you but I just don't know what to make of all this and I'll need some time alone to sort it out. I'll call you tomorrow."

Putting it All Together:

1. Be clear about your intentions. Why are you about to say what you are?
(e.g. I want him to know that I'm feeling hurt and I want to know why he did it.)
2. Particularly in situations of conflict, begin with statements about the event that are as close to sensory impressions or "matters of fact" as possible.

(e.g. I *saw* you move..., I *asked* you to)

3. Communicate your views or interpretations of events responsibly using “I” statements to indicate that these are *your* interpretations, impressions, assumptions, judgements, attributions, etc.

(e.g. *My impression* was that you didn’t care.)

4. When communicating your feelings, make sure it is a feeling and not a belief or a judgement, and responsibly acknowledge that it is *your* feeling without blaming it on the other person.

(e.g. I felt really sad when..., I’m furious about this.)

5. Check out your judgements/ interpretations with the other person.

(e.g. Does that fit your experience? What was going on for you?.)

6. In response to communication from others, communicate your understanding of what they have said. Sometimes, such as when conflict is high, it works best to repeat back what others have said almost word for word, and at other times it works best to paraphrase, capturing the essence of what was said.

(e.g. When Sarah was late again you felt like screaming at her. Or paraphrase: Sounds like you were furious with her.)

7. After you have reached clarity about the other person’s experience, you may choose to state what you have learned and what you intend to do.

(e.g. Now I know you like chocolate ice cream so much I’ll buy it more often.)

Relationships are each like a dance, and even once we know the moves and steps we still need to adapt them to suit us as individuals. I believe that communication works best when we develop the skills described here and apply them in our relationships, but each of us has to find a way of applying them that feels most natural for us. Ghetto slang and an aristocratic manner of speaking are pretty different, but these communication skills can be applied in each case without sounding stilted or awkward:

“Yo baby, touch my wheels (*statement of what he saw*) I figure you bin dissin’ me (*responsible expression of attribution based on observations*). Feel I could blow (*responsible expression of feelings*).”

“Arthur, your familiarity with the Duke this evening (*statement of what she saw, some interpretation included*) struck me as unseemly and ill mannered (*responsible statement of judgment*). I felt most embarrassed (*responsible expression of feelings*). Please explain yourself (*checking out other person’s view*).”

Initially these skills will feel somewhat awkward for most people, but with practice the words will come more easily, even in conflicted, emotionally charged situations. The rewards of better understanding, more closeness, and getting more of what we really want will make your practice well worth the effort.

A Conversation

Jerry: I am fuming so bad my head may explode. When you took my car through that cruddy carwash at the garage it scratched the paint all to heck. I told you never to use that thing and now the paintjob I just did last month is ruined. I figure that you just don’t care about things that are important to me. Give me a minute to calm down and then I want to know why you did it.... Okay, go ahead.

Sasha: Jerry, I get how furious you’re feeling. You’ve just finished putting all that work into your car and now it seems ruined. I’m really sorry that the paint is scratched. I remember you telling me not to take the car to the carwash at the station but I thought that you meant the one down by the supermarket and I took it to the one up by the highway. I actually thought that you’d be pleased to have your car washed.

Jerry: I hear what you’re saying, but I could have sworn that I mentioned Smith’s service station. I don’t know. It just seems to me that my things keep getting ruined, broken, or misplaced.

Sasha: I get that you thought that you mentioned Smith's station, but I don't remember hearing it. I realize that you often seem to feel as if I don't care about your things, and all I can tell you is that I care about you and your feelings, and I realize that your things are important to you.

Jerry: I feel relieved hearing that. I realize that I should know from all the things that you do for me that you care about my feelings. I've always been sensitive about my stuff, as far back as I can remember.

Any conversation can go many different ways. Why would one that starts off with as much conflict as this one go like this and be positively resolved? Let's take another look.

A Conversation: Slow Motion Replay

Jerry: I am fuming so bad my head may explode (*responsibly expresses feelings*). When you took my car through that cruddy carwash at the garage it scratched the paint all to heck (*statement of facts, could have been much closer to sensory experience*). I told you never to use that thing and now the paintjob I just did last month is ruined. I figure that you just don't care about things that are important to me (*responsible statement of attribution about Sasha*). Give me a minute to calm down and then I want to know why you did it)... Okay, go ahead (*checks out his judgements*).

Sasha: Jerry I get how furious you feel (*acknowledgment of Jerry's feelings*). You've just finished putting all that work into your car and now it seems ruined (*empathic paraphrasing of Jerry's concerns*). I'm really sorry that the paint is scratched (*responsible expression of own feelings without taking on blame*). I remember you telling me not to take the car to the carwash at the station but I thought that you meant the one down by the supermarket and I took it to the one up by the highway (*responsible expression of Sasha's interpretation of events*). I actually thought that you'd be pleased to have your car washed (*responsible expression of her attributions about Jerry's feelings*).

Jerry: I hear what you're saying (*a minimal acknowledgement of Sacha's statements, in this case adequate*), but I could have sworn that I mentioned Smith's service station (*further responsible expression of his experience*). I don't know. It just seems to me that my things keep getting ruined, broken, or misplaced (*responsible expression of his experience*).

Sasha: I get that you thought that you mentioned Smith's station (*paraphrasing Jerry's experience*), but I don't remember hearing it (*responsibly expressing her experience as contrasting with his, not trying to claim either was right*). I realize that you often seem to feel as if I don't care about your things, and all I can tell you is that I care about you and your feelings, and I realize that your things are important to you (*validation of Jerry's general experience of the world and responsible expression of her attitudes and feelings towards him*).

Jerry: I feel relieved hearing that (*responsible expression of his feeling*). I realize that I should know from all the things that you do for me that you care

about my feelings (*further responsible reflection on his experience*). I've always been sensitive about my stuff, as far back as I can remember (*some degree of realization that he tends to persistently experience the world in a way that can be mistaken*).

Exercises:

Putting together all of the skills that you have learned, put yourself in the following scenarios and practice this way of communicating.

- You find that your partner has taken a dessert that you had made for a party out of the fridge and left it on the counter. Now it's ruined. You spent hours making it, you don't have time to make another.
- For the fourth day in a row your child leaves for school without clearing up breakfast dishes.
- Your mother comes over for dinner and tells you that the food was too dry, that you should have listened to what she taught you, and that your brother's food is always cooked to perfection.

If you and someone else are working on developing these skills within your relationship you will benefit from systematically applying these skills to issues in your relationship. I encourage you to agree to sit down and discuss one issue while applying these skills. To start, choose an issue that is not too "hot", one that you could likely discuss without much conflict. Apply the model but do not try to correct the other person during your discussion. After your discussion, you may ask each other for feedback about other ways you could have applied the skills.

After this, it would be valuable to repeatedly practice discussing issues that are important to you at times when you are not "in the heat of the moment".

And now, you are ready for the exercise called life. These skills can help you build closer, more intimate relationships with others and help you to negotiate conflict smoothly. I encourage you to apply these skills in as much of your life as is appropriate. Remember: they get better with practice.

Some Final Reflections:

A have described this way of communicating mainly in terms of skills, but embedded in it are some principles that I think are worth making explicit. One principle is that you are being encouraged to start with yourself as the foundation for your communications. You are encouraged to speak about your intentions, your beliefs, your experience, and your feelings. This is not a matter of selfishness, but one of responsibility and honesty. Further, as you will find as you try to apply these skills, it involves revealing ourselves in ways that we often feel vulnerable. Even just the change from “That hurts” to “That hurts me” or to “I feel hurt” usually leaves us feeling more vulnerable since we are honestly acknowledging ourselves in our statement. Much of everyday communication is striking for the obvious avoidance of taking responsibility for our experience. For example, people often use “you” when they are obviously meaning “I” or “me”. “Joyce left my place in a huff the other night and boy you feel bad when that happens.” As we increasingly begin with ourselves as a foundation for our conversations, we are at the same time developing a clearer self-concept, a stronger self-identity, and higher self-esteem. We are essentially educating both ourselves and others about ourselves, and giving ourselves a persistent subtle message that what we believe, experience, and feel is important.

Of course, this way of communicating places equivalent weight on the beliefs, experience, and feelings of others. It facilitates us discovering what is going on for others and why they do what they do, and us being responsive in communicating our understanding. It is profoundly respectful of the experience of others, never dismissing it as wrong, but only different from our own. We may believe that others are mistaken and even tell them that we believe that they are mistaken, but we are encouraged to be responsible in acknowledging that it is “*me*” who believes they are mistaken. This way of communicating is similarly respectful of others in not blaming them for our feelings. It is also respectful of others in seeing others as responsible for their own feelings, and though we may try to provoke feelings in other, we cannot make them feel something either. As a result of these factors, we facilitate others developing a clearer sense of themselves and we encourage their acceptance of their feelings and experience as being valid. So in our communication we are promoting the self-concept, self-identity, and self-esteem of others, just as we are for ourselves.

Finally, we are promoting healthier interpersonal boundaries. By promoting our own definition of ourselves and what we like or don't like, and promoting the same for others, we become more able to come together as autonomous, individuated people. In this way we are able to truly get to know each other, allowing for greater intimacy, without the enmeshment or co-dependence that comes from needing each other to share the same beliefs and feelings, or expecting others to read our minds and cater to our desires.