

Personal Growth UPDATE

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from the desk of . . .

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If there is any **single key** to successful relationships, it is communication. Communication is the life-line of business and personal relationships, and the essence of psychotherapy.

Many of the problems between people can be traced to a breakdown in communication. Something that seems crystal clear to you may not be so obvious to others; it's hard to realize that business associates, spouses, children and friends may need clarification or explanation in order to understand your point of view.

Our words and actions may also send **mixed messages**, creating confusion instead of clarity. Saying "I'm glad to see you" with a frown sends conflicting signals.

Like the tango, successful communication takes two. Since we move back and forth from speaker to listener many times in a conversation, this issue of **PERSONAL GROWTH UPDATE** contains information to help improve both your speaking and listening skills.

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Communication

Keeping the Lines Open

Most of us assume that if we can speak and hear, we can communicate. In fact, it's not nearly that simple. What we say verbally constitutes only **3%** of all that we communicate. The other **97%** is made up of how we look and sound and feel, plus all the interpretations of what others say—as well as the setting in which it all occurs!

We communicate not only with words, but through gestures, body language, tone of voice and facial expressions. The timing of what we say is as important as the words we use, and what we *don't* say often has as much impact as what we *do* say.

So if I speak and you listen, I'm transmitting information, but that may be all. But if I speak, you listen, and we *understand*, then we are communicating.

WHAT GOES ON

Communication is not just an event, but a process—one that requires cooperation and understanding from both parties.

This communication process consists of:

- what you **mean** to say: the message you intend to send;
- **how** you say it: non verbal cues such as tone of voice, facial expression and body posture that accompany the spoken words;
- how the listener **interprets** what you have said.

When there is a conflict between the verbal message and the nonverbal signals, the nonverbal will dominate. A "**No . . . ?**" delivered hesitantly and in a soft tone of voice, for instance, is heard as a "maybe," but "**No.**" stated firmly with direct eye contact is more likely to be heard as a definite refusal. "**No!**" means "Absolutely not—And don't ask again!"

WHERE WE GO ASTRAY

Too often, we assume that others will understand more than we actually say to them. For example, we may expect people close to us to be able to "read our minds" because they know us so well. "She ought to know how I feel," you think, even though you've only hinted at your feelings.

Business associates who work together closely also fall into this trap, thinking: "He knows how important this project is, so he understands that I need his data as soon as possible."

In other situations, our words are misinterpreted because they reflect our **emotional state** more than our intended message. For example, a pressured manager asks his assistant for sales data necessary for an important presentation the next day. He means to convey that the project is absolutely top priority. But he frames the message, "Don't leave today until those figures are on my desk."

His assistant, responding to the *impatience* in his voice, interprets: “Why is he mad at me?”

On other occasions, the distortion comes from the **listener’s emotional state**. For example, a wife tells her

children not to bother their father. She means to convey to her husband, “I’m protecting you from being disturbed.” Her husband, sensitive to his children’s shyness around him, interprets, “There she goes again, making me a bad guy to the kids.”

What’s the Key?

The key to closing the gaps between what you *meant* to say, what you said, and what is *heard* is **empathy**: understanding others’ perception.

Each of us has an internal psychological **filter** through which we process information. This filter consists of prejudices, past experiences, hopes and anxieties. Everything we hear, see or read is interpreted through this filter; the farther we go through life, the more clogged that filter gets. Regardless of what we *intend* to say, what is ultimately heard depends on the listener’s filter. If your filter contains many painful past experiences, you may perceive hurt where there is none. If it contains a reservoir of unexpressed anger, you may hear anger in what others say, regardless of their intent.

Empathy might be thought of as *the ability to understand the filter of another person*: to understand the attitudes the other person brings to the situation and to anticipate their effect on communication between the two of you. The more you can empathize with your listener, the better you’ll communicate.

Words & Images

Part of the “filter” that all communication goes through is the mental image that we form about what someone is saying. When someone mentions a table, you may visualize a dining table, a conference table or a coffee table. The table you “see” may be wooden, marble or glass. An accountant may even visualize a “table” of numbers.

These **mental pictures are an integral part of all communication**. The mind takes words very literally, and forms an image of exactly what is being said. This means that if we want to communicate a positive message, we cannot do it by using negative words.

For instance, if I say, “Don’t spill that coffee,” what do you “see” in your mind? Most of us form a picture of *spilling coffee*. If, on the other hand, I say, “Be careful with that hot coffee,” you image *carefulness*. Try it—it works!

Sex Differences

ManTalk/WomanSpeak

It’s true. **Men and women speak different languages**. So different are our communication styles that it’s almost as though women speak French and men speak Spanish. Each knows a little of the other’s language but not enough to really converse.

Here are some of the sex differences that social psychologists have found in language and communication style:

MEN . . .

- Talk about **sports, money, facts, business** and events
- Use **commands** to get what they want
- Use and respond to **actions** when communicating
- Communicate to **persuade, argue, control** or **impress**
- Use **factual** and **action-orientated** language
- **Emphasize talking** rather than listening in conversations
- Use **pauses** in conversation for emphasis
- Speak mostly in a **monotone**
- Display feelings **indirectly**
- **Interrupt more** in conversation
- Speak **authoritatively** regardless of subject

WOMEN . . .

- Talk about **feelings, relationships, people** and **psychological states**
- Use **requests**
- Rely on and respond to **words** when communicating
- Communicate to **share, inform, support** or **ingratiate**
- Language is **emotional** and **evaluative**
- Emphasize listening** and sharing in conversation
- Use **intensifiers** like *really, terrifically, tremendously*, for emphasis
- Use a variety of tones of voice to convey emotion and meaning
- Verbalize feelings **directly**
- Are interrupted** more
- Speak in **tentative** terms, such as *maybe, sort of, or I guess*

By understanding one another’s “language,” men and women can communicate more easily and effectively.

Therapy Aids Communication

Therapy has been called **listening with the third ear**—listening not just to the words that are said, but to the hidden meanings—the things we are afraid to say but nonetheless hope will be understood.

By watching for repeated *patterns of feelings* in our interactions, we begin to understand how past events and relationships color our current communication. For example, a man who as a boy could never seem to please his father decides to show his affection for his wife by building bookcases for her. When she asks him how long it will take, his stored-up anxiety about trying to please his father causes him to distort her message—he hears, “You aren’t doing it fast enough.” He responds to his wife angrily, defending himself against what he hears as criticism. She is puzzled and hurt by what she perceives to be an attack; communication stops.

In another case, a young woman who was never allowed to say “No” to her parents now finds herself unable to say “No” at work. She does the work that no one else will do until she finally explodes: “I’m tired of being taken advantage of.” The intensity of her anger, which has been accumulating since childhood, surprises both her and her co-workers.

These **projections of past feelings onto present interactions** interfere with our ability to communicate. Once we recognize how our communication “filters” are recreating old patterns of relating with new people, we can put old feelings of hurt, anger, guilt or fear into perspective. **Therapy helps remove these barriers** by resolving old conflicts and releasing pent-up feelings so that we can communicate with less distortion. Then we can more accurately hear what people are saying to us.

<u>Guidelines</u>	Speak Up!
Know Your Style	Are you most comfortable talking to someone face to face or over the phone? Are you at your best in verbal communication or do you express yourself more clearly in writing? Knowing your preferred communication style is the first step for successful communication.
Prepare	Much communication is doomed from the start because one party is distracted, busy, or preoccupied with other concerns. Be certain the other person is available to listen before you begin talking: “Do you have time to talk to me?”
Define	Define the issue you want to discuss and stick to it: “I want to talk to you about your mother coming to visit this summer.” Don’t let yourself be drawn into other areas, like what happened the last time she came to visit, or <i>your</i> mother’s quirks and peculiarities.
Say What You Want	State your intentions and motivations clearly and directly: “I’m not opposed to your mother coming to visit; I just want to make sure this visit is more pleasant than the last one.”
Listen	Be an active listener by maintaining eye contact and by reflecting back to the speaker what has been said: “Sounds like you’re saying you would feel guilty if we asked her to shorten her stay.”
Acknowledge	Acknowledge the other person’s contributions to the discussion: “I see your point.” Remember: <i>acknowledgment is not agreement</i> .
Clarify	Don’t assume anything. Clarify anything you are not absolutely sure you understand by asking: “Do you mean . . .?” or, “Are you saying . . .?”
Summarize	Say what you are willing to do and what compromises you are willing to make: “I’m willing to have her visit for a week or 10 days if we can have a vacation alone later.” <i>Do not agree to anything you will later resent.</i>
Praise	For further clarity, briefly summarize the main points of your discussion; “Then we’re agreed that she’ll come for 10 days in June and in July the two of us will go to the lake for a week.” Express your appreciation for the other person’s participation in the communication process: “Thanks for taking time to talk to me” or “I appreciate your being so understanding.”

Communication Tip: You have two ears and one mouth.
Use them in that proportion.

Silence Speaks

Silence can be an effective negotiating tool. In business dealings, the real decision-maker is often the person who says the least. People in power may use silence to **intimidate**, to purposely **withhold information**, to **maintain the upper hand**, or to **gain control** of the negotiation.

In both business and personal relationships, however, **silence can be easily misunderstood**. It may be perceived as a sign of agreement when there is disagreement. Even worse, one partner may assume that there is no need for verbal expression, while the other perceives it as an indication of emotional withdrawal.

Because silence is part of an overall communication style, it's wise to learn just what it means to each individual by asking, "What are you thinking?" during silent moments.

Revealing Words

JUDGMENTAL: Words like *should, ought to, must, right/wrong* reflect a person who is **judgmental** and/or **afraid of being judged**.

AGGRESSIVE: Phrases like *we'll kill 'em* or *I'll hit several places* reflect an **aggressive, competitive approach** to life.

SELF-CONFIDENT: Words like *will, can, build, create* indicate an **autonomous personality**, a "doer." Self-confident people say *I sold 18 units* rather than *18 units were sold*; or *I'm really proud* instead of *things are going well*.

HELPLESS: People who feel **powerless** pepper their conversation with words like *can't, try* and *maybe*. They say *have to* instead of *choose to, I wish I could* instead of *I will*, and *it happened* instead of *I did*.

INSECURE: People who feel **insecure** and are anxious to please others use words like *sort of, perhaps* and *I guess*. They often end sentences with "tag questions" designed to elicit agreement, such as *isn't it? don't you think? Or you know what I mean?* Their conversation is punctuated with "um's," "er's," "ah's," and awkward pauses.

ENTHUSIASTIC: People who are **excited** or **enthusiastic** use emphatic, exclamatory words such as *really, terrific* and *wonderful*, and affirmative words and phrases: *for sure, certainly, great!*

PROFESSIONAL PROFILE

Richard J. Marek, L.C.S.W.

Richard J. Marek, L.C.S.W., is a Board Certified Diplomat in Clinical Social Work. He is a New Jersey state licensed Marriage and Family Therapist as well as a state licensed Clinical Social Worker. A psychotherapist for 29 years, he has been in private practice for 26 years, counseling adults, adolescents, couples and families.

He specializes in marriage and divorce counseling, stress management as well as issues of personal growth and fulfillment. He is experienced in the diagnosis and treatment of depression, low self-esteem, phobias, anxiety, and problems with relationships, intimacy and achieving in life. In addition to couples counseling, he offers group and individual psychotherapy.

Mr. Marek completed his Masters of Social Work at Marywood College in Scranton, PA, and his Bachelor of Arts at Maryknoll College in Glen Ellyn, IL.

His post-graduate work includes Menninger Foundation training for **Fami-**

lies of Divorce; a 3 year certificate program in **Group Psychotherapy** from the NJ Academy of Group Psychotherapy; training in **Family Systems** with the Ackerman Institute in New York City; and training in **Short-Term Dynamic Psychotherapy** with Habib Davanloo, M.D.

He was a member of the Planning Committee of the Family Service Association of America Tri-Regional Practice Institute, which honored him for outstanding service.

His prior experience includes serving as liaison for employee assistance programs. Mr. Marek also had extensive experience as a senior staff therapist and Assistant Executive Director of Family Service Association in Summit, NJ. In addition to his private practice, Mr. Marek has given workshops, and has appeared on local radio and cable television, speaking on such issues as **Stages of Divorce, Loneliness, Teenage Suicide and Parent-Child Communication**.

Mr. Marek is very concerned about **confidentiality**, privacy, freedom of choice, continuity of care, and non-interference in the therapist-patient relationship. He actively works to restore these values to the field of mental health and the practice of psychotherapy. He has served on the Boards of the NJ Coalition of Mental Health Professionals and Consumers, and the American Mental Health Alliance of NJ.

Mr. Marek is a Fellow in the **NJ Society for Clinical Social Work** and is a Past President. He is also a Clinical Member of the **American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists**.

Additionally, he has been a past member of the Board of Directors and charter member of the NJ Association for the Advancement of Family Therapy. His other professional affiliations include the National Association of Social Workers, the American Group Psychotherapy Association, and the NJ Group Psychotherapy Society.

If you would like these newsletters sent to someone you know, please call 973-377-3600