

Mindsets Make a Difference
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“When the trust account is high, communication is easy, instant, and effective.” — Stephen R. Covey

Frequently, people will tell me they want to improve their ability to communicate with a family member, spouse, co-worker, or employer and they're looking for tools. They may have previously attended classes where they were taught reflective listening skills, avoidance of mind-reading, the importance of making clear requests, keeping the tone civil and the decibel level low, avoiding words like “always” and “never,” assertiveness without aggressiveness, and agreeing to disagree. I've taught all of those skills. But missing one vital ingredient, they collectively fail.

You see, we seldom have trouble communicating. We often have difficulty not communicating. We've effectively transmitted messages since infancy. By adulthood we can articulate facts and opinions, can express feelings of tenderness and empathy, and can convey urgency, fear, anger, sadness, disappointment, boredom, and love. It's what we're unconsciously communicating that's often the problem—what we maybe didn't intend to say that was heard loud and clear.

Attitudes don't require any practice to be conveyed. We can often tell when a person's being sincere, or not, whether a person is interested in us, or not, whether we're being blamed, or flattered, or pandered to. The words may say something else, but the attitude trumps the verbiage. A person can carefully paraphrase what was said, using respectful language, and still care nothing about what the other person is actually saying. A person can have a very controlled tone and voice and nonetheless manage to convey anger. A person can listen with good eye contact and still express to someone that his needs and ideas were dismissed before they were heard.

It's all in the attitude. Attitudes get reflected—one way or another. That's because attitudes generally choose our tone, our words, our approach, and our facial expressions. We can try to cover up our attitudes with properly phrased expressions and good posturing, but our sentiments tend to leak out anyway. That's why the first step in good communication is to get our mindset straight.

How do we straighten out our mindset? First, we must get out of our own way! How did we get in our own way? Through self-absorption. It is as though we have a list of our own concerns, interests, and desires perched just inches from our noses. It's pretty hard to see around that in order to see what or who is right in front of us. It's understandable that we want to focus on and promote our own agenda. But self-absorption, as natural as it is, does not lend itself to effective communication or successful family, work, or friendship relations.

From a self-absorbed position, anyone who is not advancing my personal agenda is a barrier—an object that must either be ignored, removed, or otherwise bypassed. Of course, in order to

live with my conscience, I must come up with rationalizations and justifications for having mentally or verbally tossed someone aside. This justification process usually requires some kind of internal distortion, either leading me to think my perceptions are more astute than they are, imagining myself more well-meaning than I am, or leading me to paint the person I've just tossed off as more insensitive, unwise, or undeserving than he or she is.

To get out of our own way, we must stretch ourselves to see others' legitimate individual interests, needs, and challenges. Doing so is about as easy as touching and hanging onto your toes. From this mentally stretched position, people are not seen as obstacles or stepping stools. Seeing them clearly is the goal. They remain people, even when they cross us or interfere with our goals for unfettered ease and tranquility. That spouse who keeps pestering for something to be done, has his/her own wants, problems, challenges, and difficulties. That teenage son who just left without finishing his chores and without saying a word about where he's going or with whom, has his own dreams, insecurities, and confusions. That boss that just piled more jobs on, has her own stresses, fears, and personal issues. By extending ourselves to try to understand, as much as we can, their hopes, worries, and challenges, we become more aware of how we can assist them and develop a more trusting and collaborative relationship which also helps us.

I'm not suggesting that parents shouldn't set limits or enact consequences. We just need to make sure we're seeing beyond our own convenience and desires as we do so. That son is more likely to understand and even trust us if he feels we understand him. As an employee, I may need to assertively inform my boss that my non-work hours are not at her disposal. But before doing so, I need to make sure that I'm seeing more than just my needs and desires—that I've gone the extra mile to understand my boss's pressures and situation. If I have, I may have a better vantage point from which to see how I can modify what I'm doing to better support her and help her meet her goals. If I can see beyond the fact that my pestering spouse is interfering with my own projects, perhaps I can see what it's like for her to keep asking for something she can't do herself and have it repeatedly ignored.

Communication isn't only about what we're saying. It's also about what we're not saying that is, nevertheless, conveyed. Being preoccupied with our own concerns and failing to see or understand the reasonable concerns of others will frequently set us on a path of conflict—not because our words aren't being heard, but because our mind-set needs some work. When we are seeing beyond ourselves, our phrases, gestures, and tones will fall in line and easily and effectively be relayed in a way that tells others we care about them and their concerns. And that's great communication.