

Learning to Be Heard and Understood



By: Shelley Roy

Most peoples' frustrations with relationships stem from getting others to listen and from being understood. The good news is you can get others to listen to you. The bad news is that you will most likely need to change HOW you deliver information. You can't make someone listen; you can change how you express yourself. The question you need to ask yourself is, "Do I really want others to listen?" People who are into the blame game speak and act in ways that disengage others. When someone doesn't listen to you, it is a lot easier to blame that person than to take responsibility for your actions. Another strategy blame gamers use is to not speak up when they feel strongly about an issue. Not speaking up is a form of passive aggressive behavior, a way to coerce someone else to get what you want by keeping silent. Once you decide you really want the other person to listen to you, the next step is to learn to speak in a way that will engage the individual in paying attention to the message. The process is rather like being in a foreign country trying to figure out how to communicate.

I've traveled to many places where the locals do not speak English, and somehow I always seem to figure out how to communicate so that they understand me. However, I watch other travelers who think that everyone can understand English. They repeat themselves over and over, thinking that repeating what they said again or speaking more slowly, or louder will help the other person understand. You may do the same thing, especially with family members; you may repeat the same thing over and over, getting louder with each delivery. Face it; we don't all speak the same language even when we are all speaking English. Nevertheless, just as I do when traveling to a foreign country, you can learn to communicate with anyone, including your teenager, if you really want to.

Here are a few keys to getting others to listen to your message.

Choose your words carefully: Even though only seven percent of the meaning of a message is derived from the words we speak, some words and phrases carry more weight. What happens when you use words like *you, should, but, no, always, need to, have to*? What happens when you drop the 'F bomb'? The focus shifts to those words and away from the message. The listener doesn't hear anything else you have to say. Maybe that's what you want; Maybe you want the other person to get distracted so the focus shifts and the conversation heads in a new direction. Teenagers are especially adept at shifting the focus away from one topic to another one, by using language they believe will irritate an adult. As the speaker your job is to use words that are more likely to be heard and understood.

Be neutral: Delivery is everything. You can figure out your natural tone by sitting in a chair, bending over while you say something, and listening to your delivery. When we are upset our vocal chords tighten and

our pitch is higher. Sarcasm shows in your tone and is a big no-no. Face it; you don't like it, neither do others. The message gets lost, and it affects your credibility.

Ask don't tell: Asking places the burden of thinking on the other person. First, try to understand the other person's point of view. Remember, you have two ears and one mouth, so listen more than you speak. When you think you understand, ask, "Anything else?" In fact, if more people would do this, others might listen more. Once you have listened to and understood the other person, that individual is more ready to listen to you. If the two of you are having a discussion, come with ideas not solutions.

Own your own stuff: Speak for yourself by using "I" statements. This helps you keep your power rather than giving it away to others. "They," "them," "everybody," and "we" produce resistance. "You" statements kindle anger. "No one" sounds wimpy and victimizing (poor me) is cynical. Blame, shame, excuses, and apologies are ways you avoid taking responsibility for your behavior because they send a message that you are not in control of yourself.

Own your perceptions: State the sensory information, what you saw, heard, tasted, touched and smelled, and then share your thoughts and beliefs about the sensory data. Facts first; thinking second. Assumptions dilute your message. Remember what's happening is just information; no two people watching something happen will see the exact same thing. All good cops know that no two eye witnesses will testify to the same exact thing.

Say what you want: Be clear and specific about what you want to happen next. Say what you want for both yourself and for the other person and your relationship. Ask the other person what he or she wants. It is best if your wants are unconditional. Unconditional wants are not tit-for-tat. If you want to be respectful, it cannot be contingent on someone showing it to you first. It is often difficult to have unconditional wants for others.

Tell the truth! It may seem easier to lie or leave out some important piece of information, but as Sir Walter Scott wrote, "Oh what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive." It always comes back to bite you! This includes keeping your promises. *Under promise and over perform will get you a long way.* This includes being sincere; intent shows.

Be in the present: Talk about the here and now. Bringing up the past or trying to predict the future is very risky. You cannot change the past, and you cannot predict the future. The only moment you have control of is right now! What you say and how you say it in this moment and will lay the groundwork for your future relationship with this person.

Be a mirror: Use the other person's language. Let the other person lead. Pay attention to what's working and do more of that. When two people are really connecting, they will naturally mirror body language. Choose your words carefully, and avoid "street lingo" and slang. Just as you want to be respected and have your ideas considered, so does the other person want to be respected by you. The vast majority of people equate language with respect.

Be about you: Keep your message about yourself as much as possible. Tell others what you want without telling them what they are doing wrong. Remember that confidentiality is vital to long term relationships. Gossiping destroys relationships. Another person's business is that person's story to tell, not yours.

When you learn to talk to others so they are more likely to listen and understand, you reduce your own frustration while maintaining an effective relationship. Having good relationships is a win-win. Being neutral, asking not telling, owning your perceptions, saying what you want, telling the truth, being focused in the present, mirroring and being about you are all healthy ways to build and maintain healthy relationships.