



## Two Churches, One Marriage

### Communication: Opening the Door to Understanding



### Education

**The Anatomy of Communication**  
**Communication Skills for the Speaker**  
**Communication Skills for the Listener**  
**Other Skills for When Conflict Arises**

### The Anatomy of Communication

Most people give little thought to how people communicate since it is such a common and everyday occurrence. In reality, communication is actually a complex process. Imagine for a moment two people conversing (see Figure 1). One individual, the sender, has a message that he or she wants to communicate to another individual, the receiver. The sender must first decide what message he or she wants to communicate to the partner (step one). The sender must also decide how to send the message (step two). The sender, for example, must decide which words to use to communicate his or her message.

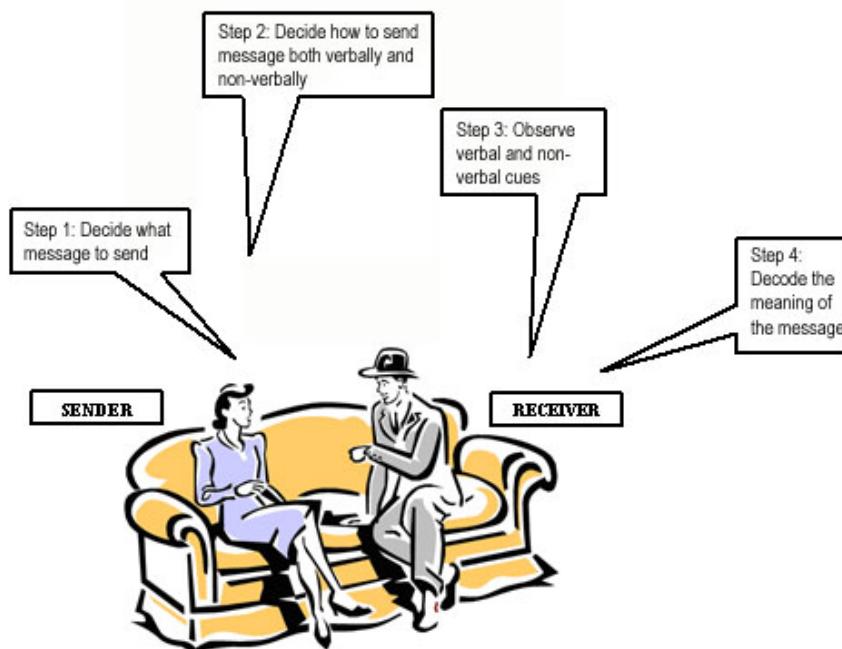


Figure 1

Sending the message is only half the process. The receiver must also receive the message (step three). Receiving the message means accurately hearing everything that is said, as well as



## Two Churches, One Marriage

observing non-verbal signals. The receiver must then accurately interpret the meaning of the message based on both the verbal and non-verbal information. The verbal message “What are you doing?” could have multiple meanings depending upon the tone of the words when spoken or other non-verbal signals. Does it convey genuine curiosity about the receiver's actions, or is it spoken like a command to stop, much like what an angry parent would say to a child that has just misbehaved? These decisions often happen outside our awareness due the rapid nature in which these decisions are made.

Unfortunately, communication can break down at any one of these four steps. The sender, for example, may not be clear on what message he or she wants to send, creating the potential for a mixed message. Or, the sender may have a clear intent, but may not effectively translate that intent into a clear message to the receiver. One partner, for example, may clearly communicate both verbally and non-verbally that he or she is angry, but may fail to clearly articulate with whom or why he or she is angry. Or, the sender may present the information in a confusing manner.

A breakdown in communication can also happen on the receiving end. The receiver may not be paying attention, and may miss important verbal or non-verbal parts of a message. This could impact how the information is interpreted. Even if the receiver attends to all the verbal and non-verbal parts of the message, he or she may still not accurately decode the intended message. Individuals often use their prior knowledge about their partner or situations to help interpret the meaning of a message. This prior knowledge can actually distort the decoding of information if it is based on biases or erroneous assumptions. A wife who is accustomed to hearing critical comments from her husband may assume that his current message is also a criticism, even when that may not have been his intent in this particular instance.

As a result of these potential sources of breakdown, it should come as little surprise that the message the receiver “hears” is often much different from the one intended by the sender. In fact, it may be a minor miracle that we communicate with one another as effectively as we do given the multiple opportunities for communication to break down. The following sections provide several steps that both the sender (or speaker) and receiver (listener) can take to improve the communication process.

### Communication Skills for the Speaker

***Take Responsibility for How You Feel:*** Use “I” Statements - Several communication experts recommend that individuals use “I” messages when communicating with others. “I” messages begin with the individual stating an emotion he or she feels, and then describing the behavior or event that triggered the individual's feelings. A husband might state to his wife, for example, “I am mad because you did not call me to let me know you would be late coming home from work.” Thus, a formula for making “I” statements could be as follows: I feel (emotion) because (describe trigger event or behavior).



## Two Churches, One Marriage

“I” statements can be helpful because they encourage the speaker to take responsibility for how he or she feels. This may, however, be contrary to how many people think. Many people believe that others “cause” us to feel a particular way. This is often reflected in our speech, when we say, “You make me mad when you don’t call when you are late.” In reality, it is the meaning that we attach to the event that causes us to respond or feel a particular way. If a husband complains to his wife about being late, her feelings will depend upon the meaning she attaches to his comments. The meaning she attaches to his comments, in turn, could depend upon a number of other factors. Previous experiences with her husband, for example, could influence the meaning she attaches to his complaint. If he has been controlling in their relationship, she may resent his comment since she sees this as another example of him being controlling. Or, if her husband has generally been considerate or protective, she may interpret his complaint as a sign of caring because underneath the anger, she suspects that he was really worried about her welfare. Other factors outside the relationship can also impact the meaning we attach to events. The wife, for example, may have had a very stressful day at work, which delayed her departure from work. The husband’s complaint, therefore, is seen as another demand on her already depleted resources.

Taking responsibility for our feelings through “I” statements may reduce the chance that the listener will respond defensively to our statements. In contrast, blaming others for our negative emotions often creates resistance on the part of the listener to our message. Blaming often takes the form of “you” statements, such as “You make me mad when you come home late without calling.” Although there is no guarantee that “I” statements will eliminate all defensiveness on the part of the listener, using “I” statements in place of “you” statements certainly improves your chances of the listener being more receptive to your message.

***Focus on behavior rather than character when complaining*** - Inevitably our partner will do something that displeases us. Our typical response is to ask our partner to change his or her behavior. These requests for change can be met with defensiveness. Here again using “I” statements can be helpful. Defensiveness on the part of the listener can be reduced if the sender describes the trigger event using specific, behavioral terms. In contrast, using negative personal characterizations are often very inflammatory and reduce the listener’s receptivity to your message. A partner will generally respond better to the statement, “I am upset because you left your dirty clothes on the bathroom floor this morning,” rather than “I am upset because you are such a slob.” Attributing negative motives to our partner’s behavior can also elicit defensiveness, such as stating, “I am mad because you are selfish.”

***Share Your Deeper (Vulnerable) Emotions*** - In addition to using “I” statements, the sender should carefully explore which emotions he or she is experiencing. Our emotional response to an event can be quite complicated. We can have surface emotions, which are often more easily accessible to us. Underneath these surface emotions, however, may be deeper emotions. To illustrate this, let’s go back to the man who was upset that his wife did not call when she was late arriving home from work. His initial emotion was anger that she did not call. If he looked beneath the anger, however, he might discover that his deeper emotion was fear or concern that his wife might be hurt. Or, the husband may have been hurt that his partner did not take the time to call him, which he perceived as personal rejection.



## Two Churches, One Marriage

Often individuals are only aware of or communicate to their partner the surface emotions. Communication, however, is generally better served if the deeper emotions are communicated. The most common surface emotion is generally anger. Individuals generally respond to anger in one of two ways, either to fight anger with anger, or to withdraw. Although anger is a legitimate and valid emotion, it is a difficult emotion for most people to deal with constructively. In contrast, deeper emotions are typically fear or hurt. Individuals usually find it easier to deal with an individual who expresses fear or hurt, and generally desire to soothe or comfort the individual. Therefore, if an individual is willing to share his or her deeper emotions of being hurt or fearful, then he or she is more likely to get a positive response.

Sharing deeper emotions rather than surface emotions can be difficult for individuals for at least two reasons. First, individuals may have difficulty getting in touch with their deeper emotions since they can be masked by other surface emotions such as anger. Second, sharing a deeper emotion such as hurt or fear may require the individual to be quite vulnerable. Individuals may not feel safe in being vulnerable to others (or even themselves) in this way. Men, in particular, may have difficulty with this because men are socialized to be tough and fearless. The adage that “men don't cry” illustrates, for example, the pressure men sometimes feel to be tough or emotionally unaffected by sadness. Anger is the one emotion that men are given permission to have, perhaps because it does not communicate vulnerability in the same way that being hurt or fearful does. Thus, feelings of hurt or fear often get channeled through anger for men. This can also be true of women, despite the fact that women are generally socialized to suppress rather than express their anger. Those willing to take the risk of sharing their deeper emotions, however, are often surprised by the compassion their partner has for them. Also, when one individual takes a risk by sharing his or her deeper emotions, the other partner often responds in a similar manner, opening the door to a much deeper and intimate dialogue.

### Communication Skills for the Listener

***Listen to your partner; be curious*** - Listen to your partner. Although this seems obvious, in reality many individuals have difficulty listening, particularly in the midst of conflict. Rather than listening, individuals can become focused on defending themselves, or planning their next response. Some individuals may even interrupt their partner in their eagerness to make their point. Being curious can help make an individual a better listener. It moves the listener from being preoccupied about his or her own experience to focusing on what may be going on with his or her partner. Expressing curiosity as to why your partner thinks and feels the way he or she does is also a non-judgmental way to explore an issue. Being curious can often lead to new information being shared that keeps a dialogue moving forward rather than remaining stuck. Too often couples move into a problem-solving phase before they fully understand each other's perspective, or the factors that shape or influence those perspectives.



## Two Churches, One Marriage

**Confirm understanding: Use active listening skills** - Many communication experts recommend that individuals practice active listening when dialoguing about an important topic. Active listening skills are sometimes called reflective listening skills. In general, active or reflective listening requires that the listener play back the message that the sender sent to insure that it has been accurately received. Playing the message back helps insure that you have accurately received the message. As stated earlier, it is easy for the intended message to become distorted through the communication process. Playing back the speaker's message allows the speaker to confirm that the intended message was accurately interpreted. This in turn may reduce the potential for conflict by reducing the number of misunderstandings. There are different strategies for playing back the speaker's message:

**Tape recorder method** - One approach is to simply repeat as closely as possible what the speaker has said. The listener is almost like a tape recorder repeating back word for word what the speaker has said. This can be difficult to do, particularly if the speaker talks for an extended period of time. Therefore, the speaker should break his or her message into smaller chunks so that the listener can have a better chance of accurately replaying the message. Another potential disadvantage to this approach is that the speaker may not like his or her message "parroted" back.

**Paraphrasing method** - Another approach is to simply paraphrase what the speaker has said, attempting to capture the essence of the speaker's message. This is less artificial to many, and allows the listener to be more parsimonious in restating the message. The potential downside, however, is that the listener is more likely to introduce his or her own commentary when paraphrasing the message.

**Empathic listening** - Another approach is to replay and deepen the speaker's message. Deepening the speaker's message can result when the listener completely adopts the speaker's frame of reference, and can even restate aspects of the message that may not have been explicitly made. This approach, however, requires great empathic skill. A risk to this approach is that the sender may resent the listener trying to read the partner's mind, particularly if that interpretation is not on target or introduces the listener's agenda.

It is important to acknowledge that practicing active listening skills may feel artificial or even cumbersome at first. Indeed, the reader may resist using active listening skills believing that they are not practical for everyday use. In most everyday conversations, it will not be necessary to have the listener reflect back everything the speaker is saying. Practicing and using these skills, however, is crucial when tackling any issue that may be sensitive for the couple. Using the skills during these times will help the couple reach a better understanding of each other, and will help avoid destructive behaviors that can erode good will in a relationship. Like CPR skills, they may not be put into practice all the time, but they are important skills to have when the need arises.

**Look for cues that the speaker does not feel understood** - Regardless of what approach is being used, the listener needs to be attentive to cues from the speaker that the message is not being fully understood. Often the speaker will state this opening, such as saying, "No, that is not what I am trying to say." The speaker, however, may give more subtle cues that the message is



## Two Churches, One Marriage

not being accurately received. When a speaker begins to repeat him or herself, this is usually an attempt on the speaker's part to clarify the message. Therefore, the listener may need to modify their understanding of the message based on what the speaker is repeating or amplifying.

***Don't confuse active listening with agreement*** - A key point for both partners to remember is that when a listener accurately reflects back a message, this does not mean the listener necessarily agrees with the speaker's message. The goal of reflective listening is to simply assure that the message from the sender has been accurately received. Whether or not there is agreement regarding the message is a completely different matter.

***Let your partner know you are listening*** - Taking the time to play back the sender's message has another advantage. It also communicates to the sender that you are attentively listening to him or her. This, in turn, demonstrates that you care about your partner because you are taking the time to listen to his or her thoughts and feelings. There can be other ways to communicate to your partner that you are listening. Many individuals feel that making eye contact is one way to convey that you are paying attention and listening. Regardless of what approach is used, it is important that the speaker knows that the listener is paying attention to what is being said.

***Assume a neutral or positive intent*** - Communication can also be facilitated by assuming that a partner's message has a neutral or positive intent. It may be helpful for a couple to separate intent from impact. An individual may communicate a message with a neutral or positive intent, but it may have a negative impact on the listener. In some cases, experiences within the relationship (or even prior to the relationship) may create filters that impact how an individual interprets messages around certain issues. If a couple's interaction around a specific issue has been conflictual, there may be a tendency to interpret a partner's message in a negative light even though the comment may have been benign. Couples in distress are also more likely to interpret messages in a negative manner even when the intent is neutral or positive. When conflict arises, it may be helpful for the couple to clarify the speaker's intent and reasons why the message had a negative impact on the listener.

## Other Skills for When Conflict Arises

***Recognize when flooding is occurring*** - Couples may find that when they discuss sensitive topics, the discussion can become heated or lead to an argument. There may come a certain point where continuing to talk about the topic may be more destructive than constructive. This point can occur when one or both individuals become emotionally and physiologically "flooded." During flooding, individuals experience strong negative thoughts and feelings. The body can also become physiologically aroused or agitated during flooding. The individual can move into a "fight or flight" response.

Those who have the "fight" response may verbally (or in some cases physically) attack their partner. Negative comments or criticisms made out of contempt can be very damaging to the partner and ultimately to the relationship, and should be avoided. Becoming physical with one's partner in any way during an argument is also a serious concern; physical violence strongly



## Two Churches, One Marriage

indicates the need for professional help. Others who become flooded may shut down or withdraw because they adopt the “flight” response.

The couple's pattern around conflict will depend upon each individual's preferred response when flooded. Couples where both partners adopt a “fight” response may mutually escalate a conflict through increasingly negative cycles. In other couples, one partner may withdraw or take flight, while the other individual pursues the issue with the partner. The more the one individual pursues the issue, the more the other withdraws. The partner's withdrawal, in turn, leads the pursuer to pursue even more. This vicious cycle is common among couples, and has been called a distance-pursuing or demand-withdraw cycle. In most (but not all) relationships where this pattern exists, the male is typically the withdrawer and the female is the pursuer. Other couples follow a third pattern where both partners mutually withdraw when they become flooded. These latter couples are frequently conflict-avoidant.

***Take a time out when flooding occurs*** - When one or both partners become flooded, it would be wise for the couple to take a “time out” or break from discussing the topic. Either individual can request a time out. Whoever requests the time out, however, is responsible for re-initiating the discussion at a later time when both individuals are ready to resume the discussion. Couples need to be careful not to start talking about issues too soon after either partner is flooded. It typically takes at least twenty minutes for an individual to physiologically calm down from being flooded. When the couple resumes talking about the topic, they need to be especially vigilant about practicing the skills (see below).

***Slow down when addressing conflict*** - If an issue creates flooding for you or your partner, it is best that both you and your partner practice using both “I” statements and active listening when discussing the topic again. Some communication experts recommend that individuals take turns being the speaker and the listener. The person designated as the speaker gets an opportunity to talk about his or her perspective while the other uses the active listening skills. After an agreed upon time, the individuals will switch roles, with the other individual getting an opportunity to share his or her perspective while the other uses the active listening skills. Using both sets of skills in this manner slows the process down. Slowing the process down reduces the likelihood that things will escalate to the point where flooding occurs again. If a couple continues to have difficulty discussing one or more topics without experiencing flooding, then it would be appropriate to seek out professional help to work on the issue(s). Usually, the sooner a couple seeks out help on a particular problem, the easier it is to work out and resolve the issue.