

## Communication, Listening, and Conflict-resolution Skills

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Participants in peaceful relationships generally interact in a friendly manner. Their dialogue has smooth laminar information flow. When turbulence or blockages in the flow indicate differing opinions, they engage as partners in shared problem-solving to create positive synergy solutions that satisfy everyone involved.

This chapter details the three key skill-sets for sustaining peaceful interactions: collaborative communicating (talking), listening and conflict-resolution. A conflict scenario between Tom and Bob, post-conflict reconstruction colleagues on a difficult data-gathering mission, illustrates these skills.

### **Communication Skills**

Communication is information-sharing. When communication is cooperative, participants experience themselves as partners, not as adversaries. Principles for sustaining cooperative communication include:

1. *Say it* (Heitler, 1997). Effective communication requires open discussion of sensitive issues. *Blockages* in information flow occur if no one launches the topic, someone withdraws, or participants hint rather than speaking forthrightly.

Problematic: Tom, hints “Looks like it’s getting a bit dark out.”

Helpful: Tom says “The work we had in this village took longer than our schedule allotted. Once it’s dark robbers make it unsafe to drive back to the hotel. I’d like to leave now and return tomorrow.”

2. Deal with problems; don’t deprecate people (Fisher & Ury, 1981). Criticism and blame invite defensiveness and counterattacks.

Problematic: Tom complains, "Your interviewing style is too slow, Bob!"

Helpful: "The interview protocols take longer than the time we allotted."

3. Offer insights, not crossovers (Heitler, 1997). Crossovers, often called *you-*messages, guess others' thoughts and feelings or tell them what to do. Crossovers offend because they are invasive, crossing the boundary between self and other.

Problematic: Bob replies, "You think my thoroughness isn't important."

Helpful: Bob replies, "I do want my interviews to be thorough."

4. *Ask good questions*: Instead of crossovers, interpreting others' thoughts and feelings, ask questions. Good questions begin with *How* or *What*, *Who* (and occasionally *Who*, *Where*, or *When*) (Heitler, 1997). These open-ended question-starters invite more informative answers than yes-no questions.

Problematic: "Bob, *are you* going to be finished soon? *Can you* finish now?"  
*Do you ..?*" "*Don't you* think that ...?"

Helpful: "*How soon* can you finish?", "What's left for you to do?" "*What's* your reaction to returning to this village tomorrow morning?"

5. Communicate in *would likes* rather than *don't likes* (Heitler, 1997).

Problematic: "I *don't want* to return tomorrow because this village is the opposite direction from the others we're going to and our schedule is tight."

Helpful: "I *would like* to stick to our schedule. This village is in the opposite direction from the others we're going to, and the schedule is tight."

7. To discuss upsetting past events Use "*When you... I ...*". By referencing the specific difficult moment with "*when you*" and then making the subject of your sentence "*I...*", you offer insights about yourself instead of criticism of others.

Problematic: “You didn’t listen to me at lunch, Bob, when I said the interviews were taking too long.”

Helpful: “At lunch, Bob, *when you* didn’t seem to hear my comment that the interviews were taking longer than we’d planned, *I* dropped the issue instead of explaining my concern about driving after dark. I see now I needed to give you more information.”

8. Focus on present and future problem-solving rather than on regrets or anger about the past. Look back only analytically, to plan improvements for the future.

Problematic: “Tom, I shouldn’t have taken so long on my interviews.”

Helpful: “I’d like to discuss prioritizing the interview questions and maybe even cutting some so the interview protocol is shorter.”

9. Think about and communicate what *you* could do, rather than what you want *others* to do (Heitler, 1997). Use “I would like *to...*,” rather than “I would like *you to...*”

Problematic: “I would like *you to* be patient while I finish.”

Helpful: “*I would like to* check if we can stay here overnight, in the village.”

10. *Express feelings* via words, not in tone of voice or behavior.

Problematic: “Stay here overnight?!” Tom said with agitated annoyance.

Helpful: “I feel uncomfortable about staying here overnight,” Tom explained, “because I’ll be a wreck tomorrow if I can’t sleep well on their cots. Besides, my wife planned to call me tomorrow in the early morning at the hotel.”

10. Use *climate control*, i.e. emotional self-regulation. Emotions have *attitude* (positive or negative) and *arousal* (low to high in intensity). Agreement, interest, and

humor are positive attitudes. Frustration and anger are negative. Pleased is low intensity pleasure; thrilled would be high. Irritation is low intensity anger; rage is high.

Negative attitudes sound attacking and invite defensiveness. High arousal levels increase crossovers, block listening, and diminish creative problem-solving.

Problematic: Bob groaned, rolled his eyes, and responded sarcastically “Ugh...” as if to say, ‘How ridiculous!’ Tom retorted angrily, “You’re the slow-poke!”

Helpful: A positive attitude with arousal levels in the low to moderate range, e.g., interested and calm. “I’d like to find a solution that works for both of us.”

11. *Early exits*: When emotions become negative or hyper-aroused, step back from the discussion. Pause by changing the topic, or physically exit.

Problematic: Continuing in a dialogue with a negative or elevated emotional tone. Following after or blocking others’ exits: “Don’t walk out on me when the problem isn’t solved yet!”

Helpful: “By the way, did you meet that cute kid with the radiant smile?” Or “Excuse me; I’m getting a drink of water” as you stand up and exit. Reset your emotional climate, and then return.

### **Listening Skills**

Listening is information uptake. Effective listening registers information into the listener’s data base and confirms the data deposit with feedback to the speaker.

1. *Receptive listening stance*: Listen to learn (Heitler, 1997).

Problematic: Focus on what is wrong in what you hear. “No, the problem on the roads isn’t robbers. It’s political extremists that control the countryside at night.”

Helpful: “Yes, getting attacked on the roads is unappealing to me too.”

2. *Digest aloud* (Heitler, 1997). Comment on the speaker's specific key words, phrases, or ideas to convey what you have heard and your reaction to the information. Digesting aloud also enhances registration into memory.

Problematic: No comment. Or disagree.

Helpful: Start by agreeing. "Yes Tom, I heard talk at the hotel about extremists stopping cars at night and killing people for their money ...."

3. Add your viewpoint, linking with conjunctions such as *and* or *and at the same time* (Heitler, 1997). Avoid *but* a backspace-delete that negates whatever came before.

Problematic: "*but* I still want to complete our work here before we go."

Helpful: "Yes Tom, I heard scary talk at the hotel too, *and at the same time* I do want to complete our work here before we go."

4. *Positivity* in listening responses facilitates constructive dialogue.

Problematic: "So you want to finish all the interviews ..."

Helpful: Respond with positive words such as "Yes...", "I agree that ...". E.g. "I'm sure impressed with your dedication to carefully finishing all the interviews."

5. Aim for bilateral (two-sided) listening (Heitler, 1997), with equal volume for your concerns and the concerns of others. Summaries help clarify bilateral listening.

Problematic: "I just want to leave now," Tom reiterated.

Helpful: "I do want to avoid driving in the dark when robbers are on these roads," Tom began, "to be in the hotel when my wife calls, and to get a good night's sleep. And at the same time I agree that finishing the interviews in a thorough way is important, returning tomorrow is unrealistic, and our remaining schedule is tight."

### **Conflict Resolution Skills**

A conflict is a situation in which seemingly incompatible elements exert force in opposing or divergent directions (Heitler, 1990), turning collaborative participants into adversaries.

The negotiation literature characterizes two modes of conflict-resolution. *Positional bargaining* is adversarial, resolving conflicts via power struggle, a tug of war to determine who wins and who loses. Parties argue for their proposal, and against the views of their opposition. *Interest-based bargaining* is collaborative, aiming for win-win outcomes by exploring the “interests” that “lie behind positions” (Fisher & Ury, 1981).

Conflicts usually arise from one or more of three triggers: upsetting past incidents, differing ideas for a present or future plan of action, and/or communication, listening or conflict-resolution skill-glitches.

The following guidelines enable conflicts to move to resolution.

1. Recognize immediately when negative emotions (e.g., irritation, tension) or increases in emotional arousal signal a conflict.

3. Proceed through the three main steps of the *win-win waltz* (Heitler & Hirsch, 2006). 1) express initial positions, 2) explore underlying concerns, and 3) create win-win solutions.

*Initial positions:* Tom wanted to leave immediately; Bob wanted to stay in the village until he could complete his remaining data-gathering interviews.

*Underlying concerns* are motivating factors to which the initial positions were possible solutions (Heitler, 1990): Tom and Bob’s concerns included safety, completing the data-gathering in a thorough way, a tight schedule, sleeping well, and being available to receive Tom’s wife’s phone-call.

*Solutions* are plans of action. Bob and Tom could leave immediately and forego the remaining interviews. They could return another day to complete the data-gathering. They could complete the interviews, overnight in the village, and drive on in the morning.

4. Immediately upon recognition of conflict, shift from promoting initial positions (step one of the win-win waltz) to (step two) exploring underlying concerns. This down-shift is the critical maneuver that converts an adversarial tug of war conflict into cooperative shared decision-making.

4. Follow the guidelines for collaborative communicating and listening, including climate control.

6. Resist the four negative pathways that each lead to specific psychopathologies: a) fight to win, which invites anger, b) give up, leading to depression, c) sustain awareness without addressing the topic, producing anxiety and tension, d) escape from the problem via addictive or other obsessive-compulsive distractions.

7. List both participants' underlying concerns on one shared "*our* concerns" list. Any concern of one party is by definition a concern of both.

6. Create a *solution-set*, a multifaceted plan of action with elements responsive to every concern on the list. The solution-set may be an augmentation of one of the initial positions, or based on a new solution idea altogether.

7. Solution suggestions often raise additional concerns. Back and forth movement between concerns and solution-building is helpful. Bob's suggestion to overnight in the village prompted Tom to add his concern about the phone-call from his wife.

8. When the concerns list includes multiple factors, build the solution initially around the most important concern(s). Augment this basic plan with additional elements responsive to each of the other concerns until all the concerns have been addressed.

9. Focus on identifying what *you* can offer toward the solution, not what you think others can do.

10. When a solution-set appears complete, ask, “Are there any little pieces that still feel unfinished?”<sup>1</sup> Augment the plan with elements responsive to these last concerns, concluding with full satisfaction and mutual goodwill.

Bob suggested, “Let’s stay until I finish my interviews, then drive back on main highways. They go out of the way, adding an hour or two of travel time, but we’ll be safe. You’ll sleep in your comfy hotel bed, and be in the hotel for your wife’s call.”

“Great plan!” Tom replied. “Are there any little pieces that still feel unfinished?”

“I’ll drive,” Bob suggested, “so you can sleep.”

“Fantastic!” Tom concluded enthusiastically.

In sum, peace goes beyond a static state of tranquility. Truly peaceful relationships handle conflicts collaboratively, creating solutions responsive to all the concerns of all the participants.

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<sup>1</sup> The Power of Two

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**Additional Resources:** [www.therapyhelp.com](http://www.therapyhelp.com) and [www.po2.com](http://www.po2.com) for free articles and skill-building games.

**Key Terms:** Crossovers, open-ended questions, climate control, bilateral listening, win-win waltz, positional bargaining, interest-based bargaining, underlying concerns, solution-sets.

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