

## Chapter 5

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# Communication



*Most of the time we don't talk  
to understand each other,  
we just take turns talking.*

- Buddha

Communication is the tool that opens or closes your relationship bridge. Openness is the extent to which one is real, honest, genuine, and congruent. An open relationship affords you the opportunity to experience all aspects of who you are and to share that with your partner. The amount of openness in any relationship is dependent upon the quality of communication. Quality relationships are always built upon quality communication skills.

Becoming more comfortable with effectively communicating can create significant shifts in how satisfying your relationships are. That's easy to see why, isn't it? Your most satisfying connection with anybody is built upon your feeling understood as well as understanding your partner. This can only be accomplished by your ability to effectively let yourself be known to your partner as well as using those skills that enable you to better understand your partner.

You see what I am getting at? Effective communication is not the art of persuasion. Effective communication is not the art of manipulation. Effective communication is not the art of debate.

What effective communication simply is is the art of building a bridge of understanding between two people. When we feel understood. When our partner gets the sense that we understand them. Then we have gone a long way to bridge the inevitable differences that exist between any two people. And bridging those differences is the heart and soul of Relationship Bridge-Building.

## Bridge Builder's Tip



*Effective communication is made up of listening ability and self-disclosing skills.*

It is not enough to have one set of communication skills without the other. It is as important to be able to hear what your partner is telling you as it is for you to be able to tell your partner what is important to you.

I am reminded of a story about a man who attended one of my workshops years ago. He never understood his wife's lament of wanting him to be more open with her. In his defense, he cited many examples of how he believed he was contributing to the openness of their relationship. He would talk at length with his wife about events that took place at work, as well as his opinions of how well the Chicago sports scene was progressing. Many of their dinner discussions focused on his thoughts of the news or current TV shows.

I looked at him with a knowing smile and said, "There was a time in my life when my partner would ask me how I was and all I would tell her was how good business was today. I learned openness is not the facts and figures about your life, it is the sharing of who you are with another person."

I gave him three quick pointers on how to change this stale pattern in his relationship.

First, take the time to *clarify* what it is your partner wants from you. Determine whether your partner is seeking random conversation about the latest weather trends or meaningful time spent connecting with you about each other.

Secondly, when you talk with your partner, in order to fortify your relationship bridge, keep the discussion in the here and now. Stay focused on three things 1) yourself, 2) your partner, and 3) the relationship. If you stray from those three areas you will narrow the openness of your relationship.

Don't discuss the relationship through events outside of the relationship and don't talk about things unrelated to the relationship. Keep in mind that the here and now is the nutrient of the relationship—not a recitation of the evening news.

Third, take time to *check-out* whether you're both complete. Has the mission been accomplished? Did you both get what you wanted?

As I rattled these ideas off, I could sense a light go on in his eyes. He looked stunned and said out loud,

“Okay. I can see just talking to your partner is not really relating to your partner!”

The lesson he learned was clear. *Fulfilling relationships are built on how you communicate—not what you communicate.*

The openness of any relationship bridge is best modulated by the effective use of communication skills. I just demonstrated how skills used correctly can open the bridge all the way. Let me demonstrate the most effective way to shut the bridge down.

## Bridge Builder's Tip



*Those feelings that do not get verbalized in a relationship, get acted out in a relationship.*

- How many times have you seen a child throw a temper tantrum rather than clean his room?
- Have you ever let the air out of somebody's tires rather than tell them how angry you are at how they are treating you?
- Have you ever come late to an important appointment because you wanted to show the other person who the boss really was?
- Have you ever seen a child fold his arms and hold his breath when faced with the prospect of being forced to eat his vegetables?
- Have you ever committed to doing something for your partner, only never to follow through on it much to the anger of your partner?

What is the common thread of each of these examples? Well, in each instance, somebody has chosen to act out feelings rather than talk about them. Most of us have been trained to problem solve in our relationships by acting, rather than by talking.

Can you see how any couple who does not effectively work through emotional turmoil will be doomed to cre-

ate more turbulence? It happens every day. A husband who constantly tries to restrict the spending habits of his wife is consistently enraged when his wife continues to max-out the limit on their credit cards. A wife who anxiously tries to limit the drinking of her husband is completely exasperated when he regularly stays out late drinking with his buddies. A parent who tries to teach his child responsibility is consistently irritated by his child's refusal to do the household chores.

These are examples of how people try to solve their problems by acting out their feelings, rather than talking about them. The wife who is told to limit her spending feels angry and powerless. The husband, whose wife tries to limit his drinking, feels he is being treated like a child and asserts himself through his actions, not his words. The child, who will not do his chores, feels bullied, and, in return, pushes back. Each of these solutions is like pouring gasoline on a fire.

There is a better solution to relationship problems.

Sturdy relationship bridges are built on the process of verbalizing your feelings, rather than acting them out. One way or another, what you don't *talk* about, you *act-out* with each other. This tends to irritate and undermine the relationship.

We have talked about how the relationship bridge is connected through the immediacy of the here and now. And then we talked about how the relationship bridge is kept open by verbalizing feelings rather than acting them out. Now let's talk about how the back and forth flow of a relationship can be sustained by developing the skill called *pinpointing the issue*.

## Bridge Builder's Tip



*You can't solve a conflict in a relationship until you understand the real point of the conflict.*

The vast majority of people in conflict address the consequences of the conflict, but not the cause of what is wrong in the relationship. It is critical you learn to pinpoint the issue of any conflict.

Growing and developing relationship bridges need to be dynamic. Conflict is a vital dynamic of any relationship bridge. Conflict is what clears the air, creates change, and initiates growth. All three of these things are vital to the health of a relationship.

However, conflict without resolution is toxic to the continual development of a relationship. That is why it is vital to develop the skill of pinpointing the issue.

Here is a poem that creatively illustrates my point:

*It was six men from Indostan,  
to learning much inclined,  
who went to see the elephant,  
though all of them were blind,  
that each by observation  
might satisfy his mind.*

- Saxbe

You can imagine how the six blind men fared. The blind man who felt only the elephant's leg described a tree. The one who touched only the elephant's trunk

insisted the animal was a snake, and so on. But none of them ever found out what an elephant was.

Can you see how this relates to being able to pinpoint the issue? Ineffective conflict resolution is like two stubborn blind people grabbing hold of two different parts of the elephant. They fight feverishly to describe the *elephant* from their own singular viewpoint. They are not incorrect in describing their *one part* of the elephant. However, they never describe the elephant as a whole.

Until couples learn to describe more than just a part of the relationship issue, they will be like the blind men—grabbing part of the conflict but not being able to see the relationship conflict as a whole. By being able to pinpoint the issue, any couple can problem solve, no matter how right they are about what part of the elephant they are describing. The flow of the relationship bridge will stagnate until both partners talk about the elephant as a whole.

We don't need a vivid imagination to understand what happens to our relationships when we are unwilling to pinpoint the issue. Our relationships become mired in a process of right and wrong, good and bad. We stop listening to each other. Our goal shifts from understanding our partner to proving ourselves right.

Once we lose sight of the process of pinpointing the underlying issue, we lose an opportunity to understand our partner. And when we have lost that opportunity, then we have undermined the effectiveness with which we can communicate with our partner.

## Bridge Builder's Tip



*Problems seldom exist on the level they are talked about when two people are trying to resolve a conflict.*

Imagine a husband and wife sitting at home in a living room at night. They are constantly bickering over who can hold the remote control to the TV set. He likes to channel surf. She wants to focus on only one program.

How about a couple stuck in the trap of infidelity. He provides empty promises of commitment and a future. She tries to enforce the enactment of those broken promises by threatening to leave him or having affairs.

Lastly, picture a date between two people anywhere in America. She sits seething in her car, thirty-five minutes after the time they agreed to meet. He finally shows up, chagrined at the anger that consumes her.

The three couples see these problems in very specific, narrow ways. The first couple see the problem as TV viewing preference. The second couple see it as relationship fidelity. And the third couple see it as tardiness. Hours, days, weeks, and months are lost in the endless cycle of trying to prove who is right and who is wrong. Their arguments and their accusations divert attention from the deeper underlying relationship issues. Can you see how *the way* they choose to define problems diverts their attention from the deeper issues of the relationship?

The first couple, the channel changers, have not learned how to establish a relationship based on cooperation and mutuality. The deeper conflict in the relationship is every event is a

competition and so there must always be a winner and a loser.

The second couple, in their cycle of broken promises and infidelity, are dedicated to maintaining their distance from one another. They have chosen to hurt each other through empty promises and threatening to leave each other. The deeper fear, they don't talk about, is committing to one another in an honest, equal relationship.

The third couple, bickering about tardiness, each believe they must have their own way in a relationship. Their endless dispute never leads to the discussion of give and take and accepting each others' differences.

I am reminded of another couple I counseled years ago, living in this trap of finger pointing, endless debate, and saying "I'm right and you're wrong." Once they mastered the last two tips I have shared with you, they were more effectively able to define, discuss, and solve the issues that caused their relationship to be stuck in the sludge of conflict without resolution.

I would imagine at this point that a lot of what I have been talking about might be feeling rather big and overwhelming to you.

That's okay. Remember, the solution to creating the kinds of changes you would like in your relationships is not being able to generate the insight of an experienced clinical psychologist. I have seen the brightest, most insightful people, who were not willing to risk new ways of relating to each other, sabotage their relationships all the time. Each and every one of you already possess what it takes to implement these principles—a willingness to experiment and take action.

Before we move on to the next section, let me share with you this short poem I discovered years ago. I wish I could tell you who wrote it for they surely deserve to receive the credit for so powerfully capturing the essence of what we all hunger for. Unfortunately, this was something passed along to me without noting who the author was.

*When I ask you to listen to me and you start giving  
advice, you have not done what I asked.*

*When I ask you to listen to me and you begin to tell me why I  
shouldn't feel that way, you are trampling on my feelings.*

*When I ask you to listen to me and you feel you have to  
do something to solve my problem,  
you have failed me, strange as that may seem.*

*Listen!!! All I asked, was that you listen.  
Not to talk or do—just hear me.*

*Advice is cheap; 50 cents will get both Dear Abby and  
Billy Graham in the same newspaper.*

*And I can do for myself; I'm not helpless.*

*But when you accept as a simple fact that I do feel what  
I feel no matter how irrational, then I can quit trying to  
convince you and get about the business of understanding  
what's behind this irrational feeling. And when that's clear, the  
answers are obvious and I don't need advice.*

*Irrational feelings make sense when we understand  
what's behind them.*

*Perhaps that's why prayer works sometimes for people because  
God is mute, and he doesn't give advice or try to fix things. He  
just listens and lets you work it out for yourself.*

*So please, listen and just hear me. And if you want to talk,  
wait a minute for your turn; and I'll listen to you.*

– Unknown

## Bridge Builder's Toolbox

An overriding goal in Relationship Bridge Building is to invite someone from their side of the bridge to your side. In Relationship Bridge-Building, we offer something of ourselves to our partner in order to initiate involvement. This is done with a very specific skill.

The skill I am talking about is self-disclosure. Most of the time, people think self-disclosure is a skill you have to do more of, to do properly. Some people even go overboard.

Self-disclosure is one of the building blocks of interpersonal relationships. If it is done properly, self-disclosure can lead to emotional intimacy. Done improperly, it usually shatters trust and creates distance from others. As with any skill, there are some guidelines and criteria for appropriate and relevant self-disclosure.

Self-disclosure really is not an end in itself. However, it adds to the *emotional climate* of any relationship. Therefore, it is important to establish these guidelines for determining what is and what is not appropriate.

Appropriate self-disclosure has five components. These five components are:

- 1.) *BREADTH*: the amount of information being disclosed
- 2.) *DEPTH*: the intimacy of the information
- 3.) *DURATION*: the amount of time spent in self-disclosure
- 4.) *TARGET PERSON*: who you're talking to
- 5.) *SITUATION*: the conditions under which the disclosure is made

There are appropriate and inappropriate ways to create openness in a relationship. A woman came to me years ago and described a friend who was difficult to be around. "Sometimes my friend just sits there and talks," the woman said. "The things she says are very personal, *very personal*. And they are always about her. Most of the time I blush. In fact, you wouldn't hear those things from other people."

She folded her hands uncomfortably, "I don't even know how to do some of those things, do you know what I mean?" she leaned toward me and talked softly. "My friend says things that seem outrageous, but she treats them as if they are normal table conversation. Now I am only going to write letters with her so I can blush in private!"

It is important to know why you are disclosing what you are disclosing. That is, don't let self-disclosure become an end in itself. As we talked earlier, if you disclose to others, they will tend to reciprocate. If this mutuality does not develop, then self-disclosure is not being done in an appropriate way. Without a doubt, relationships are more effective if self-disclosure is mutual.

Part of the process of openness and self-disclosure is taking some basic risk. It is another piece of the puzzle of which you need to be aware. Take some time to think about how you are perceived by others in the context of openness and self-disclosure.

We've seen over-disclosure in the paragraphs above, but there are actually three levels of self-disclosure. They are: over-disclosure, under-disclosure, and appropriate-disclosure.

Have you seen people who have trouble opening up at all? Have you ever sat at a dinner table where everybody was talking at once, but there was no authentic dialogue? I have a friend who talks about *plastic people*.

What she usually says is something like, “Oh my God, I sat at the party and listened as they talked, and talked. And they did not say anything! How could anybody say so many words and not talk about who they REALLY are? It’s like they were made out of plastic or rubber, or something.”

There are situations in which appropriate self-disclosure can be one of the most challenging and difficult things possible, and yet, done properly, openness and self-disclosure can change the quality of your relationships and your life.

Here is an example that comes to mind from one of my workshops. People work feverishly at these workshops to develop the skills we are talking about. During an afternoon session we were experimenting with the skill of self-disclosure. A woman, who had been reserved and very much to herself, spoke up. She announced that another woman at the workshop had been on her mind from the previous day’s session.

“I’ve been thinking about you since yesterday,” she said, “and I realized, I am angry with some of the things you did.” It is important that you say I am angry at *what you did* and not with *you*.

But she was very specific. “On two separate occasions yesterday, you interrupted me, and it made me angry.”

At first, you might think this type of feedback would incite an argument between these two women, but that did not happen. The second woman listened carefully and intently to what was being said. She listened for what the woman meant, and not just how the words made her initially feel. As a result, the exchange drew the two of them together.

At the end of the afternoon session, both of them said

they felt *they grew closer* after disclosing important information about each other.

The description of this interchange says several important things about their relationship and about the process of self-disclosure. First, in order for the woman who was feeling angry to say “I feel angry,” there had to be a level of trust. Both of them had to feel that trust. The woman, who received the comments, was trusted to take the other’s anger and not abandon her for being angry.

Secondly, the relationship had to be able to tolerate this negativity.

Finally, the process of angry confrontation was used to communicate to the receiving woman respect. This was the message—“I care enough about our relationship to not keep my feelings from you.” In effect she said, “I care enough about this relationship to be honest and genuine.” In reality, the first woman admitted, “to tell you I am angry with you may have been one of the hardest things in the world for me to do.”

And at the end of this interaction both of the women said, “I feel closer to you.” They had achieved openness and understanding.

The openness was a direct result of the two women’s ability *to be themselves* and communicate with each other. Being yourself and communicating who you are means revealing the things you know about yourself to the other person—thereby allowing yourself to be known so that the *playing field is equal*.

Sometimes, someone can see something the other does not see, and holds that information for ransom in the relationship. Here is a familiar example for most of us.

One person says, “What’s wrong?”

The other person answers, “Nothing.”

There is a pause, and the first says, “Come on, I know something’s the matter. What is it?”

Another pause, then, “Oh, nothing.”

And so it goes on. This conversation does not foster openness, and usually creates an interpersonal tango that leads nowhere.

Do you see any of yourself in that tango? Do you see what impact that tango has on your relationships? When we shut down, when we stop expressing ourselves, our relationships stop as well.

At the same time, as soon as we develop a new level of comfort with expressing ourselves, then we will be much more adept at deepening the connections we have with the people in our lives. For the more people know about us, the better able they are to understand us. When the people in our lives understand us, they are much better able to be receptive to who we are and what we need from them.

Quite simply, communication is the engine that drives our relationships. Effective communication is the force that keeps our relationships open and free. But when communication grinds to a halt; when the point of communication becomes hiding from our partner rather than being open with our partner; we then manage to bring our relationship bridge building to a halt—forever stuck in an endless stream of misunderstandings and hurt feelings.

Self-disclosure is the first aspect of effective communication—listening is the second aspect. Listening skills are the most powerful tools there are to develop a safe, trusting relationship.

## Bridge Builder’s Tip



*Openness is enriched by your ability to listen, understand, and communicate that understanding to your partner.*

Here is what I do when listening to someone:

1. I listen to what is being said.
2. I work at understanding—not judging what is being said to me.
3. I check out the accuracy of my understanding.
4. I listen carefully for what I have not understood and then start the process over again.

The operative words are listening and understanding. Not persuading. Not judging. Not dissuading. Not replying. Just listening and understanding.

Then, I try to communicate my understanding back. My hope is to let you know you are important enough to be listened to—not argued with. And when you have that feeling, you realize, “God, it’s great to be understood.”

No relationship of mine will work effectively if I don’t understand my partner and communicate my understanding to my partner.

Listening is what lets the process of *letting yourself be known* work for you and your partner. And when the process of *letting yourself be known* works, it feels good. Because another person understands you and you can feel accepted and cared about.

I had a client who liked to test me. He would talk at length about things important to him. He would then ask

me to tell him everything he had just talked about. He came back the following week and again asked me to review what we had talked about.

He seemed very surprised when I remembered most of the details of his conversation. “You really listened... and I saw that you listened. I feel like what is important to me is important to you. That allows me to trust you and tell you even more about me.” Taking the time to accurately listen feels good to anybody.

Whether your relationship is open or closed depends on you. You have a choice to move forward or not move at all. Consider your options as often as they come to mind. In most instances, openness depends as much on intuition as it does anything else. Rely on that intuition. If you feel uncomfortable opening up to someone, don't. If you feel it's okay to relax your guard, try to. Most importantly, listen to the little voice inside of you.

Strive toward the goal of experiencing all that you are today with your partner. Communicate, let yourself be known. Celebrate your ability to be real, to be exactly who you are at this moment.