



# Communicating to Better Relationships

by Joan Garbo

The foundation for cooperative actions among people is a strong sense of relationship. The right “personality fit” usually makes this easy.

But not everyone on a team, particularly large teams, always “fits” with each other.

Our personality and communication styles often interfere with our feeling accepted and feeling held in high regard. As an example, some people have a communication style in which they are very direct in addressing issues and may not be focused on the listeners’ feelings. This style can be considered offensive by those who have a very indirect or subtle style of communicating, and are highly concerned with people’s feelings. When one examines the situation closely, it becomes clear that the “direct” person does not intend to offend. Conversely, when the “subtle” communicator speaks, he or she can be thought of as wimpy or indecisive or confusing, when in fact that person is focused on something that the listener is not. Neither way is good or bad, right or wrong. It is simply what is so. The important question to ask is, “How can we make this work for everyone?”

The other important aspect in relationships is to understand that everyone has their own emotional reality that may or may not be in agreement with others around them. Any two people in a situation will have different emotional realities and both are right! In order to be fulfilled and happy, people must be able to cope with the gap that often exists between their own and others’ emotional realities. They must be able, in spite of the gap, to give and receive from their fellow workers and loved ones a sufficient level of regard, acceptance, caring, approval, esteem, and respect. The way to bridge that gap is communication.

Feelings are neither good nor bad, they just are. They exist and are in constant operation to allow human beings to evaluate situations. Feelings are the internal data system based on our value hierarchy, and let us know how a situation is affecting us. When negative feelings come up,

most people store them rather than express them openly. There are many reasons NOT to communicate, such as not wanting to hurt the other person’s feelings, judging the incident to be too petty, or trying to be “bigger than that”. The problem lies in the fact that stored feelings do not go away; and each time an incident occurs, it is added to the file. This storage system is arranged and cross indexed so that new data coming in triggers the emotional experience of all the similar data in the file. This is why people often “explode” over an incident that is only of minor importance. To make things worse, the emotionally charged behavior seems confusing and inappropriate to the other person, and is often not understood. The listener often judges the speaker as being “out of control” or assesses that it’s “just the way the speaker is”.

The other way accumulated negative feelings can be dealt with is for the person to withdraw from the situation. They often feel that they are misunderstood, uncared for, and/or incompetent to deal with others. This behavior limits the person’s ability to have and maintain close relationships, preventing them from experiencing the warmth, acceptance, and love that comes from being known by others.

Another consequence of storing feelings rather than expressing them is that they prevent the experience and awareness of positive feelings. An example of this is when you feel angry with someone, (or hurt, or used) your mind takes that feeling and works at justifying it, collecting other incidents and data to prove you are right. Your attention becomes focused on seeing other negative behaviors in the other person to prove your case. When your mind is thus involved, it censors perceptions of a positive nature in regard to the other person. In a similar way, the mind focuses upon perceived negative behavior of your own, and constructs elaborate fears, guilt, and preoccupations in relation to the other person.

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Finally, all of the above creates fertile ground for the seeds of gossip to be sprung. Gossip becomes another way to justify your position and to accumulate agreement from others regarding your emotional reality and thus further “prove your case”.

The ultimate truth is you are left with the problem (it doesn't clear up by itself) and with the negative impacts from not communicating.

The alternative is to express the negative feelings in a responsible and understandable way. The goal is to communicate your emotional reality in a way that is constructive and without malicious intent. It is a way of deepening one's relationships when it is done with the utmost respect for the emotional reality of the other person. What a person feels is an integral part of his or her identity and sharing those feelings requires an atmosphere of trust and integrity.

Having behaviors and attitudes that others will find disagreeable is part of being alive and being human. No one has cornered the market on perfection; nor would we be likely to agree on a definition of perfection! We value relationships in terms of how they serve to nurture and sustain us in our personal goals and value systems. Being self-righteous in our actions and opinions not only thwarts our relationship with others, but also ends up being self-destructive.

If we are open and responsible in our expression of our emotional reality, we will nurture the same in others, as well as attract people who can nurture and support us. We will be able to experience being known and understood, and at the same time, we will provide caring constructive criticism necessary for personal growth and development.

## Clearing the Path for Open Communication

It is critical that you embrace the belief that people are doing the best they can with what they have to work; therefore, don't try to change people—give them better tools to work with! Communication is THE primary tool for social control, and it is one that almost no one has learned to use effectively. Most of the barriers to open communication are habitual and therefore unconscious. Using a specific format will assist in making distinctions in our speaking that will support the message being listened to in an empowering way, while avoiding the confusion and mixed messages so often present in interpersonal interactions. The following guidelines are the basis for the format to be suggested:

**1. Be specific!** Using phrases such as always or never triggers denial in the listener. For example, “You're always late” brings to the mind of the listener times when they were punctual, and thus negates the communication. Being specific “On Tuesday morning when you were late...” is an accurate statement and can be dealt with rationally.

**2. Be responsible.** The habitual statements we make put blame on others and imply they are bad, nasty, or evil intentioned. Examples include “You made me angry” or “You ruined my day”. The truth is no one “makes” you anything! They do what they do and you feel the way you feel!

“When you were 45 minutes late returning from lunch yesterday, I felt worried and upset,” informs the person what you were feeling without implying that they were out to get you.

**3. Do not “zing” the other.** A zinger is a covert attack. For example, “When you came back from lunch 45 minutes late, **like you usually do...**” The zinger defeats the intent to communicate and is an attempt to shame the other.

**4. Do not “story tell”.** Stick to the specifics of the incident without going back into history, or giving extraneous details that not only cloud the real issue, but also tend to “martyr” the speaker and blame or shame the other.

**5. Listen openly.** It is essential when someone is communicating to you what their upset or problem is that you draw distinctions in your listening. When someone says, “When you did X, I felt Y,” — they are not saying you're a rotten person, or you intended to hurt them. They are saying that they have a reaction to something you did that you may or may not be aware of. By bringing it to your attention, they intend to clear the way for you and the other to be back in full relationship. In other words, they are communicating in order to be closer to you. The most important thing the listener can do is simply GET IT! DO NOT try to justify why you did what you did, or explain it. Know that the speaker would not tell you anything if they thought the relationship with you wasn't worth it. When people communicate that which is not working for them, they are pointing to a breakdown—something that isn't working within a specific system. You are not THE system; you are part of a system. You must learn to trust that responsible and effective communication is the way to create corrections in the system. When you learn to trust this, listening with compassion for the other becomes easier, and empowers you to show you care or are concerned about the speaker's feelings. Rather than

deflecting what is said to you, thank the person for telling you and when appropriate, apologize.

### **Suggested Format for Communicating Problems and Upsets**

**(Name of person), when you (state specifically what happened ), I felt (express the feeling you had).**

When you have brought up a situation that isn't working for you, be sure to have a request that can be the solution to the problem. It is important that you not just complain. The format for a request needs to be specific as well.

**I request that (name of person or persons) (state the action to be taken) by (date to be done.)**

When a request is made, the listener can accept the request as it is stated, or can negotiate the conditions until both parties are satisfied.

### **Giving Compliments and Acknowledgements**

While it's important to "clear the air", it is equally, if not more, important to acknowledge the people in your

life and let them know how much you appreciate them and what they do. Some of the same guidelines apply. In other words, be specific, and let them know how you feel. The following is an example of an empowering acknowledgement.

"Susan, when you stayed an extra hour on Tuesday to help me get the insurance forms completed and in the mail, I felt supported and grateful and proud to be on the same team with you." ♦

## **About the Author**

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Joan Garbo is a coach, speaker, and consultant specializing in effective communication skills, team building, and leadership skills. The results of her work are evidenced in increased patient referrals, reduced stress, and higher profits.