

Strategies to Overcoming Communication Breakdown

by Carol Dickson-Carr

"But that's not what I meant!!!" Have you ever found yourself feeling this way when a person misinterprets something you said?

The way people interpret information from others they communicate with differs almost as often as the personalities and experiences of each of these individuals. The world wouldn't be a very interesting place if everyone had identical beliefs, thought patterns, and feelings, but it can be exasperating if the person you are communicating with does not "get" what you're trying to say. It gets even trickier in e-mail when you can't see the body language or hear the tone of voice from the other person.

So how do we address this challenge? We do it by first being aware of some of the roadblocks to good communication, and then consider some of the remedies I propose to address these roadblocks.

Three roadblocks to communication that immediately come to mind include:

1. Conflicting Communication Styles: Some people are most comfortable communicating with a direct style, while others find it uncomfortable. Similarly, some are more comfortable with other people being direct with them, while still others might find it offensive.

Some people are laser-like in their speaking, and get to the point immediately, while others are more comfortable giving a lot of background information before getting to the point.

The key is to realize that there's no communication style that's better than the other and to have patience and compassion when interacting with a person whose communication style is different from your own.

If you're unaware of your own communication style, you might be interested in taking the DISC(R) profile or purchasing Linda Beren's "Understanding Yourself and Others(R) An Introduction to Interaction Styles." It's a great little book and will provide a lot of great insight into dealing with people who communicate differently than you do.

Regardless of your preferred style, some things are universal when it comes to communicating effectively. This leads me to the next roadblock...

2. Different Frames of Reference: This is where different individuals interpret the same set of facts or the same event in different ways. Each individual brings to the situation a different frame of reference.

The way people interpret situations or sets of facts depends on the background, experiences, values, attitudes, motives, assumptions, and expectations of each individual.

As of this writing, the devastation of Hurricane Katrina is very fresh in my mind, and it's been interesting, for example, to see how people have interpreted different statements people have made in the media after

this disaster. Different frames of reference are at the very crux of this issue. The upshot in my own case is that I'm able to have a discussion with friends I don't necessarily agree with that have a different framework without it getting heated. Sometimes agreeing to disagree is the best you can do. No hard feelings!

For example, someone who grew up in survival mode on the streets will have a very different frame of reference from a person who had every advantage growing up.

That's an extreme comparison, but anything in between that continuum can affect the interpretation of a statement. What are your frameworks?

3. Personal Barriers: The way a person interprets a situation also depends on emotions and values. The person may hear what he or she wants to hear rather than hear what was actually said.

Mental set, emotional states, prejudices, and the way the individual chooses to filter or screen what is said will affect the way a message is understood. Poor listening skills are a major reason many messages are not understood properly.

For example, suppose I was in a really bad mood for some reason, and I showed up late to an event. Someone at the event totally unaware of my mood may ask out of genuine concern, "Where were you?" I'd really have to be careful not to interpret that question as accusatory.

Below are a few more tips that can at least get you started to help bridge the communication gap:

On the listening end:

- Have an open mind. Remember: seek understanding rather than employing judgment.
- If communicating in person, pay attention to body language as well as the content of the message being conveyed. Listen to what is not said. Pay attention to their tone of voice.
- Ask for clarification about what the person has said before jumping to conclusions (i.e., "What I think I'm hearing you say is <insert what you thought you heard>...Is that correct?")
- Acknowledge the other person's feelings and try to put yourself in their shoes. Empathy goes a long way!

On the speaking end:

- Show responsibility for how you're interpreting things (i.e., "This is what I perceive the situation to be")
- Be assertive and say what's on your mind, but the key is to do it diplomatically.
- Be aware of *your* tone of voice.
- Ask if you're being understood and clarify any misunderstandings.

Remember that in the extreme, communication breakdown can cost you relationships and in business can also cost you money. Something I heard Tony Alessandra say a few years ago really shifted the way I thought about how I interacted with people, which was, "Do unto others as they would like done unto



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them!" instead of the familiar, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." So go forth, do good in this world, and communicate well while you're making your mark!

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