

Chapter 1: WE JUST CAN'T COMMUNICATE!



I've heard hundreds of couples say to me, "We just can't communicate!" I've heard parents say about their child, "He won't listen to me!" I've heard adult children say about his or her parent, "She just doesn't understand!" or, "He's so unreasonable!" Employees complain, "My boss doesn't listen to me!" A customer rants, "You don't understand!" I've sometimes said those things myself!

Each of the relationships described above is built around a core of love and/or a need for some level of connection, either the need for emotional connection or the successful conduction of business. Yet the experience is sometimes one of pain and frustration. Poor communication is cited as one of the most common causes of divorce. Even when other reasons are given, the inability to communicate effectively often exacerbates the issues rather than helping to resolve them. Lack of effective communication creates a sense of isolation, frustration, and disconnection in the most mundane daily interactions, whether between loved ones or in communications between co-workers or with a boss and employee.

Each of us carries around in us a tool box filled with communication tools that we collected as they were modeled for us as children. Some additional tools have, no doubt, been added as we watched TV or heard others on the playground or on the job. Some of you may have even taken communication classes in school or read books about salesmanship. The questions that need to be asked are "Do these tools create the interpersonal relationships that I want? Is how I speak or listen or negotiate differences helping to build a successful relationship or are my methods contributing to a communication breakdown?"

AN OBJECT LESSON

I own a few rental properties. I recently went to a vacated house to do some painting for the new tenant. I tried opening the door with one of the keys on my key ring that didn't have a label to identify it. Although I had another key that had the correct address label on it, I wanted to see if this unmarked key, also, fit this house. When it wouldn't unlock the front door, I knew I had the wrong key. So I used the correctly labeled key that successfully opened the door.

All of us have had some version of this "key" experience where we make course corrections based on new information. For instance, when the item we want isn't available in one store, we go to another store. When we don't like the look of one outfit, we choose another. If we try a new dish and find it not to our taste, in the future we eat something else.

Communication Elixirs by Nancy Landrum

Yet we may not be applying this course-correcting principle to our communication skills. I recall when, out of frustration, I yelled at my late husband Jim and the situation got worse, not better, I blamed Jim, not my communication method. When I sent a sarcastic put-down his way because he didn't agree with me, and he left the house in a huff, I blamed *him*, not my sarcasm. When our arguments escalated into shouting matches, Jim and I blamed each other. We were not even aware of how poorly we listened to each other. We each only felt the frustration and hopelessness of *not* being heard, let alone understood. We neglected to realize that, like the key that didn't fit the lock, the communication methods we were using were not capable of opening the door to the loving connection we craved.

Does this mean that my poor communication methods are always to blame if a discussion doesn't go well? No. I can only be responsible for respectfully using skills that manage my half of the exchange. But since I learned and began consistently using better speaking, listening and negotiating tools, it's amazing how my relationships have significantly improved!

STIR THE POT: Increase Awareness

This book will challenge you to look at the communication tools you habitually use. You'll examine your listening skills, your speaking skills, and how you converse with another. Starting now, I want you to notice—without self-judgment, just awareness—what happens when your communication with someone doesn't go well. What was your tone of voice? Your facial expression? What words did you use? What was your underlying attitude toward the other person? Imagine how *you* would feel if that combination of words, body language and tone was delivered to *you*. How would you respond? What was the goal of that interaction? Was the goal achieved?

Before learning how to speak well, let's take a look at some common communication methods that abort a healthy dialogue before it even gets started...