

Communicating Successfully

Jeff, our youngest of three sons, met his wife-to-be, Sonia, in college. Both did graduate work in communications. Jokingly, they would say: "If we can't communicate successfully with each other, there's no hope for the world."

The truth is, even the best communicators are misunderstood. God is the foremost communicator and he is misunderstood. Is it any wonder my words and intentions are sometimes misread and misinterpreted?

What is the problem? It's a problem that is exclusively human. We are flawed... devious... imperfect... complex. There are many handicaps, hazards and barriers along the communication highway of life.

What are some of these challenges?

One. No two people think alike, and no two people express themselves the same way. All of us have a vocabulary, a language of our own, including our own definition for words. These differences must be bridged for communication to be successful. (Obviously, actual communication – voiced or not -- is a two-way street.)

Two. Not always do we know how to express ourselves clearly, rationally, logically. I shouldn't be surprised when people don't understand me sometimes. (After all, there are times when I don't understand myself.)

Three. We are not always transparent and upfront. The deceitfulness of our human nature contaminates our communication. So, people are misled or bewildered.

Four. Instead of being kindly candid and ask for explanations, we rather second guess each other, and we jump to wrong conclusions.

Five. We are not static beings. In many ways I am not the same person Betty married 60+ years ago. Our views, our beliefs and our positions on issues do undergo change. We shouldn't assume anything when we communicate with others.

Six. Our vocabulary may be deficient. Words, and what they mean, are a mixed blessing. We perceive and comprehend words and expressions differently. Are we talking about the same thing or are we self-assuredly talking past each other? Little wonder Jesus often communicated by stories and parables.

Seven. Trying to communicate through a third person - an interpreter, a representative, a go-between – is also a formidable task. You might be surprised how much is lost in translation. Some trusted interpreters know a foreign language only well enough to get them (and you) into trouble.

In all fairness, "instantaneous" interpreters find it hard to translate idioms. Example: "Where the rubber meets the road."

Eight. All too often, words (linguistics or semantics) are inadequate. There is the more important language of the heart, of the soul. And, initially, the cultural language is more important than the spoken or written language.

Examples:

- In Pakistan, invited guests are expected to arrive 15 minutes late.
- If you are invited to a Danish home, be punctual.
- In addition, every culture has its own entrenched logic. The Eastern world uses “both-and” logic. The Western world uses “either-or” logic.

Nine. Demeanor is a language of its own. Thanks to our cultivated two-facedness, our “body language” can contradict what we say.

And Ten. Behavior is more important than words. Our actions and our reactions make a greater impression than our words. The most convincing communication involves conduct, not conversation alone. Years of positive service can be nullified with one negative act.

You are fortunate if people consider you their friend. A friend is trusted and believed, whether she or he is understood or not. So, strive to be a true friend and you will not need to worry about being misunderstood. Give generously of yourself without high expectations.

Good communication includes acceptance, though not necessarily agreement or approval. Do you know how to speak the language of acceptance, of grace, of compassion? We can learn from God.

Do the people with whom you are trying to connect misunderstand you? Your loving, selfless disposition will be hard to misunderstand. Your acts of kindness and your good deeds will be hard to dismiss.

You may not be the problem. Others bring their share of cultural, psychological and emotional baggage into a relationship. They might be bringing a truckload of presumptions and biases. That’s why it’s easier for them to understand you by how you treat them, rather than by what you say to them.

But even after you do everything you possibly can, some people will still misunderstand you simply because they don’t make a sincere effort to understand you. Sometimes, some people use the “I don’t understand” line as an excuse to reject someone or something.

And don’t forget even God is misunderstood—honestly or deceitfully.