Listening With the Heart

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of
The DNA of Relationships
by
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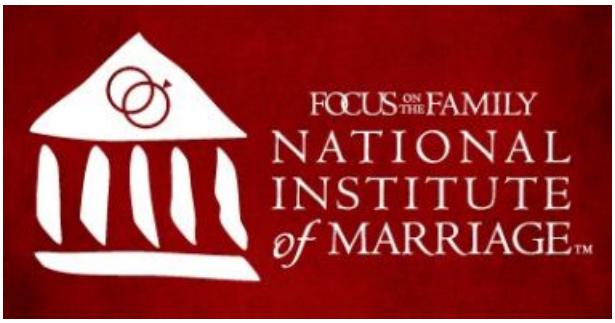

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During a rocky period in Bob Paul's marriage, his wife, Jenni, let him know that she did not feel loved. Her revelation practically killed Bob because he loved Jenni very much. The situation frustrated him beyond words. He just couldn't figure out what she meant.

Bob considered himself pretty skilled at opening his heart to receive God's love and to feel lots of love for Jenni and others. The fact that she could still feel unloved baffled him. No matter what he did, his love didn't seem to get through. Bob wondered why he seemed almost completely inept at getting love from his heart to hers.

One day Jenni walked by and, in a playful gesture, Bob pinched her bottom. She stopped abruptly and glared at him, as if steam poured from her reddening ears. And Bob thought, *Come on. Lighten up! I'm just trying to flirt with you*.

Another day while on his way home from work, Bob thought he'd surprise his wife and sweep her off her feet. He had it all planned. He'd walk in the door, put down all his stuff, and find her in the kitchen, where she'd be preparing dinner. He would quietly sidle up to her, pick her up, swing her around, and give her a big, passionate kiss. He figured it would make her day.

So that's what he did.

What was Jenni's response? She glowered at him, making no effort to hide her red-hot anger. Once again Bob was baffled. He thought, *What is your problem? Here I am, acting out every woman's dream. I'm being Joe Romance – and you are angry at me! What's the deal*?

The two encounters caused Bob to reevaluate how he interacted and communicated with his wife. He realized that although his goal had been to show Jenni his love, he wasn't getting the job done. Obviously Jenni still did not feel loved. So whatever he was doing, it was not working.

"As a guy," Bob told me, "it got to the point where I thought, *This is dumb. I'm tired of being a total failure. No matter what I do, it never works*. So finally I said to myself, 'Maybe I should find out why this isn't working for her and see if there's something else I could do. I'm sick of being a relational goat. I want to be a hero.' "

None of us wants to be a relational goat. We all want to be relational heroes. right? If so, I advise you to pay close attention to this chapter. What I'm about to tell you has the potential to radically improve all your most precious relationships. In fact, the research of Howard J. Markman, Scott M. Stanley, and Susan l. Blumberg indicates that learning and practicing the method of communication shared here will eliminate the four main causes of divorce.[1] You enter into the two deepest levels of communication, where the most relational satisfaction is found in all relationships. I call it the greatest communication method on earth. I have watched it revolutionize my own marriage and family, and I've witnessed thousands of couples and singles using it to enrich their relationships. It's not necessarily easy to learn, but it's very powerful when you do.

[1] Howard J. Markman, Scott M. Stanley, and Susan L. Blumberg, *Fighting for Your Marriage* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

Beyond Words to Feelings

Do you want to know one particularly nasty myth that keeps many people—including my friend Bob—from experiencing the tremendous benefits of effective communication? Somewhere along the way, they have come to believe that real communication occurs when they understand the other person's *words*. They equate effective communication with accurately noting the words and phrases they hear.

But in fact, good communication is more than that. True communication usually does not occur until each person understands the *feelings* that underlie the spoken words. People generally feel more understood, cared for, and connected when the communication focuses on their emotions and feelings rather than merely on their words or thoughts.

Consider this the magic of effective communication. Our goal must go beyond understanding the spoken words to grasping the emotional nugget underlying the words. It's far more important to discover and address the emotions beneath the situation than to parrot the words we hear. Ask yourself, "what is the emotional impact of these words?" Not merely, "what exact words did I just hear?"

Suppose a wife says, "I really don't think our kids should go to public schools. I think we should homeschool them."

What did she mean? Consider carefully her two sentences. The woman used no "feeling" words but all "thinking" words. So if her husband replies, "So what you're saying is that you don't think our kids should go to public schools," he's completely missed the point. He has accurately reflected to her the words she just spoke, but he remains completely in the dark about her real concern.

But what if he listens for the emotions beneath the words? What if he listens with his heart? What if he said, "are you saying that you feel really concerned about our kids"? Presto! This time, he's "got it." He listened beyond his wife's words to her heart, to her real concern. He's tapped into her emotional message—her fear for their kids.

A lot of people get stuck in the Fear Dance at precisely this point. They use "thought" words about their actions instead of talking about their feelings or deepest concerns. They remain stuck until they finally learn to look for the emotional nugget. They free themselves only when they discover how to go beyond the expressed thoughts and opinions and to get to the underlying feelings—the place of real concern and deep emotional experience.

I Care About You

When we work to uncover the emotional nugget, we say to our family member, friend, or partner, "I care how you feel. Your feelings matter to me." And when our loved ones get *this* message, they feel deeply cared for. That's when they feel loved.

But if we don't relay this message—even if we understand the words the person has spoken—he or she still will not feel loved, and real communication will grind to a halt.

A lot of us (especially men) struggle with this skill. Men tend to think in a linear way: cut to the chase, get to the bottom line. We want to solve a problem and complete a task, not deal with emotions. We want only to figure out how to "fix it."

Without listening for and responding to the emotions, however, all of the problem solving in the world won't get us to the real problem. We have found that only when we understand the feelings involved can we effectively start the task of problem solving. Once my friend Bob understood this and then started acting on it, his rocky marriage got not only a lot smoother but also more enjoyable. "I chose to become a 'student' of Jenni, to learn about what

she thinks and feels," Bob said. "Later that night after dinner was done, I asked her, 'hey, how come you got so upset when I came in and swung you around and kissed you?' "

Jenni's quick reply struck a chord of fear in Bob, all the way down to the tips of his toes. She looked at him and said, "Do you *really* want to know?"

Bob thought, *Oh, man—do I really want to know*? He wasn't sure, but by that point he felt committed to hanging up the goat's hat in favor of the one that said hero. So he said, "Yes, I really want to know."

"When you did that," Jenni explained, "at that moment, I had about ten things on my mind. I was rushing around, just trying to get dinner together—and it felt as if you wanted me to drop everything I was doing and just focus on you, as if nothing else in my life mattered to you. You didn't care about me or about anything going on in my life."

Bob swallowed hard, then replied, "Okay, that's really not what I wanted to do. That's not what I was trying to accomplish. I was trying to bless you, to do something that would make you feel loved. What could I have done instead?"

"Hmmm," Jenni replied. "You really want to know?" Bob gulped again and said, "Yes, I really want to know."

"Well, if you had paused for a moment when you got to the doorway of the kitchen and just noticed what was going on with me, and then either rolled up your sleeves and started doing the dishes, or even asked how you could help, I would have felt so loved."

Immediately Bob thought, *You know, this is not that complicated*.

Next he asked her, "When I flirted with you and pinched you a few days ago, you also got very upset. What was the deal with that?"

"You really want to know?"

"Yes, I really want to know."

Jenni explained that some types of affection felt very private to her—including that playful pinch. "The kids were doing their homework in the next room. I'm not comfortable when you do something like that when they are nearby. That's a private gesture to me, not something to be done in the kitchen."

Bob told me later, "That's not the way I feel about it. I'm doing my Tarzan routine, wanting to show the whole world how much I love my woman—but it just angers her."

When Bob asked Jenni what she would have liked him to do differently, she had no ideas. But at that moment, he remembered a situation with their eldest daughter. When Jessica was young, she would occasionally come up to Bob and plant the most inappropriate kisses on his mouth, and it would bother him. He would ask Jenni, "Can you help me here? I don't know what to do about Jessica's kisses."

Jenni came up with a great idea. "The next time Jessica comes to give you a kiss," she suggested, "turn your head and let her kiss you on the cheek. Then you give her a kiss." He did that, and it worked great. And that gave Bob an idea.

"How would you like it," he asked Jenni, "if, instead of pinching you, I gave you a really affectionate kiss on the cheek? I really just want to get the affection from my heart to yours."

Jenni just melted. "I would *love* that!" she exclaimed.

And Bob thought again, *This is just not that hard*.

The Real Message is Often The Emotion Beneath The Words

Effective communication comes down to listening and speaking with your heart. When people feel understood emotionally, they feel cared for. This is very different from listening to

someone from the head—that is, looking merely for the content of the person's words, without paying attention to the emotion. The goal of effective communication is to understand the *emotional* message of the speaker. You have to ask yourself, *What is this person feeling*?

Allow Others' Emotions to Touch You

It is one thing to hear these emotions and say, "Boy, I can really tell you are upset." But it is another thing to allow these emotions to penetrate your heart, to allow yourself to feel the pain or the sadness. The key is not merely to understand these feelings but also to allow the feelings to touch you. This is one of the primary ways that people feel cared for and loved.

When I take the time to find out what is going on inside of my loved ones—when they know that I care how they feel and that their feelings deeply affect me—they feel loved and cared for. If Norma is hurting and I really care about her, I allow her hurt to touch me. I hurt because she is hurting. Why? Because I love her.

Just a few nights ago, I was lying in bed and thought of a conversation I had with my son Greg. He said that he didn't feel as if I understand the pain he went through recently in a very hurtful situation at work. "Do you really care?" he asked me. At the time I didn't know the depth of his feelings. So before I went to sleep, I chose to walk in his shoes during the past year and experience it with my heart. So many feelings came to me; it was quite overwhelming. I felt his pain and suddenly understood how he could have felt. I almost started crying. I met with him two days later and shared what I had done and explained how I started to understand his pain. He looked at me and said, "That's all I needed from you. Just knowing you understand settles it for me." What I did was so helpful for me to feel the pain of others, I did the same thing the next night for my wife, my other children, and grandkids. Now I do it often, and it allows me to feel with people after I have met with them and need to really understand them.

In his book *Scandalous Freedom*, author and radio host Steve Brown talks about the necessity of allowing the hurt of others to affect us:

> I have a dear friend who, in the last two or three years, has come close to tears whenever we talked about certain important matters. I'm a fixer, and fixers, when they see tears, see a problem in need of fixing. I offered all kinds of suggestions to my friend to stop the tears and to make her feel better. Finally, after a number of failed attempts, she said to me, "Stop it! Just stop it. My tears are good."
>
> When I asked my friend to please explain herself, she told me that for many years she felt separate from her own pain and the pain of others. "I was, I suppose," she said, "compassionate in a way. I cared about what people were going through—but there was this thing about not being able to really feel the things that hurt them. There was even a way I separated myself from my own pain." Then my friend said something profound. "Steve," she said, "my tears are good in that they, for the first time in my life, let me know that I'm real."[2]

In just this way, effective communication benefits not only the ones with whom we want to connect but also ourselves. It lets us know we're "real." Still, the primary beneficiary is the one who sees how his or her pain genuinely affects us.

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[2] Steve Brown, *Scandalous Freedom* (West Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing, 2004), from chapter 3, "The Perfection We Desire . . . and the Forgiveness That Sets Us Free."

Does this sound like a lot of work? Do you think it makes more sense just to make a decision, without really understanding what the other person is feeling? Be careful! Just making a quick decision will not solve your problem. When people don't feel understood and cared for, they may "agree" to some decision, but they won't get on board with it. Relationally, it doesn't feel to them like a satisfying or effective solution. And in the end, you'll have to talk about these things all over again.

Listening Does Not Equal Agreement

Some people—again, men in particular—hesitate to use this method of effective communication because they confuse it with the idea that they'll have to do what the other person wants them to do. Some also hesitate because by talking this way, they feel they are agreeing with the other person or they might be exposed to guilt if too many feelings come out during the conversation.

But I can really care about how a person is feeling, even if I do not agree with what that person is saying. When I see that Norma is hurting, I can make it clear that it matters to me that she hurts. True, she might falsely believe that something I said or did caused her hurt, even if I didn't really do or say it. But her misperception does not keep me from caring about her pain. When I allow her pain to affect me, it's not the same thing as saying, "I hurt because I see what I did to you." She hurts, and I want to understand and give comfort.

When I say, "Norma, I really understand that you are hurting, that this has wounded you," I am not necessarily saying, "Norma, I agree with you, and I was wrong." Rather, I am saying, "I could tell that this really hurt you, and your feelings mean the world to me. I care how you feel!"

At other times some of us shy away from effective communication because we feel very vulnerable in the presence of deep emotion. We feel out of control. We don't know where or how deep it is going to take us—and we fear being out of control.

But when we refuse to go to that place, it makes us seem uncaring. Remember Steve Brown's friend? When we refuse to allow the feelings of the other to affect us emotionally, we seem uncaring. And no relationship will grow when the other person thinks we don't care.

Let's take this a little further. When we say things like, "You shouldn't feel this way," we are really saying, "I don't care how you are feeling. Your feelings are wrong; they should be different." And who feels cared for by someone who says, "I don't care how you feel"?

Perhaps the communication method I'm proposing sounds risky to you. Maybe it makes you feel far too vulnerable. I feel that way sometimes. But even though it's a risk, I know I can do it. Why? Because I have already chosen to take responsibility for myself. I already have attended to my own self-care. And you know what? I find that I multiply my ability to care for others a hundredfold when I know that I have taken good care of myself. Had I let that slip, it *would* seem too risky. It *would* throw me into a tailspin. That's why we talked about the Power of One and Self-Care before we got here. It really does make all the difference.

Effective communication makes room for people to actually feel what the other is feeling. This communication method allows people to understand their heart and to be okay with dipping into their emotions.

A Dynamic Process of Discovery

My colleague Bob Paul likes to say, "Effective communication is a dynamic process of discovery that maintains energy in the relationship." And what does that mean? Let's look at each part of his sentence.

First, effective communication is *dynamic*. It changes. It shifts and wiggles and squirms and jumps and turns. It never stands still; that's why you can't plug somebody's words into an electronic translator and come out with a perfect understanding of the intended message. That's also why you have to pay careful attention during the conversation. If you take a break, the conversation may move on and you may miss something. It's *dynamic*.

The other day my friend Jim was asking me about using my John Deere tractor, and he told me about his son, who is moving to Oklahoma City for his doctoral residency. My friend was feeling good that his son would be so close to our hometown. Then Jim mentioned how happy he was about seeing his grandson more often. He started tearing up while sharing a deep feeling about his grandkids. All of Jim's grandparents died before he could remember them. He has always felt cheated by that experience. As he was telling this story, I wondered if it was related to our recent conversation about his increased travel at our company. So I asked him, "Jim, you seemed to react to me the other day when we talked about increasing your travel time." Then the tears started flowing. He admitted that his need to be with his grandkids more often was so strong that he didn't want to travel more often. Finally I understood where the reaction came from, and we started working on how to free his schedule instead of increasing his travel. That is what we mean by dynamic.

"EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IS A DYNAMIC PROCESS OF DISCOVERY THAT MAINTAINS ENERGY IN THE RELATIONSHIP"

Second, effective communication is a *process*. If you see communication as a destination rather than a process, you will miss things. Important things get communicated along the way, things that would never come out if you approached the conversation as a set-in-stone collection of words and sentences that tell you everything you need to know. As a process, effective communication takes time—just like the process of making homemade ice cream. Do you simply throw eggs and sugar and cream and flavorings in a chilled bowl and drink the concoction? You could if you wanted to, but you wouldn't be getting ice cream. Real ice cream—the delicious kind—gets made only when you follow a certain process. And if you cut short the process, you spoil the dessert. The same is true with effective communication. It's a *process*.

Third, effective communication leads to *discovery*. Through it, you learn things you didn't know before and couldn't have guessed. Real communication does not occur when you "skip ahead" and try to predict what the other person is going to say next. It shuts down when you pretend to listen but really are deciding how best to respond. People discover things when they open their ears and eyes and allow what's happening around them to clue them in to something they didn't know before.

You might say to the other person, "I really want to learn about you, about how you are feeling. I want to learn about what God is doing in this." Be genuinely interested in learning about what is going on and about the other person's emotions.

Interestingly, when you see communication primarily as a dynamic process of discovery rather than one of solving problems, you often solve the problems almost by default. Sometimes

you find that the solutions are much less important to the other person than feeling understood and cared for. Often, this understanding alone ends the conflict, even without finding a "solution." We make exciting finds in communication when we treat it as a process of *discovery*.

Last, effective communication *maintains energy in the relationship*. That's psychologist-speak to say that it keeps things between the two of you fun, exciting, satisfying, and healthy. When you learn to communicate with each other at a heart level, you experience more of what God made you to be. You feel more vibrant. Life seems more intriguing. You wake up eager to charge into the world and share your experiences with the ones you love. You find energy you never had before and thank God that he gave you breath.

A friend of mine, Dr. Bob Burbee, illustrates for me the "discovery factor" of this powerful model of effective communication. Several years ago Bob and his wife, Mary Jo, were trying to decide whether they should have more children. At the time they had a five- year-old daughter, Erin, and a three-year-old son, Tyler.

One day Mary Jo asked, "What about having another baby?" From Bob's perspective, they already had the perfect family. It made no sense to him to threaten family harmony with more children.

Mary Jo, on the other hand, really wanted another child and wouldn't let the issue drop. Consequently, they got locked into a conflict and made no progress for months.

Finally, on a holiday road trip, they experienced a breakthrough. When the subject of more children came up, Bob started thinking, *Here we go again*—but something prompted him to think, *What if I listen to Mary Jo as if I were listening to her for the very first time*?

As Bob chose to set aside his own agenda, he began to hear some things Mary Jo had probably tried to tell him before. She described what it meant to her to be a mom. She spoke of the fulfillment and sense of personal worth and self-esteem she derived from loving and caring for their children. She said she thought of motherhood as a divine calling and expressed her desire to mother more than two children.

"It began to dawn on me," Bob said, "that being a mother to her was very different from what being a father was to me. Being a good husband and father are important to me, and I have always felt com- mitted to the role and responsibility of being a loving father. Still, if I were truly honest, my sense of self-esteem and accomplishment are not so tightly attached to my role as father as they are to Mary Jo's role as a mother."

This insight helped Bob understand why Mary Jo couldn't let go of the issue. As his perspective grew, the issue took on new complexity. And something else—something very interesting—happened as they continued to talk.

"Maybe my efforts to really understand Mary Jo inspired her to try to understand my feelings as well," Bob said. "I described my anxiety about not having enough of me to go around with more children in the family. I described the additional strain on our finances and the changes to our lifestyle. We had just gotten out of the 'diaper stage,' and the thought of starting that again did not appeal to me."

By the end of Bob and Mary Jo's drive, they had not made a decision, but their relationship had moved to a new and better place. Think about that! On the surface, this issue looked as if it required a final decision: they either would have more children or they wouldn't. But remember, the problem is rarely the problem. Bob and Mary Jo discovered that trying to make a decision had resulted only in more conflict and a stalemate. When they stopped trying to "solve" the problem and simply worked at understanding each other's emotional state, their relationship took several steps forward.

"The resolution came," Bob said, "not in making a decision but in allowing ourselves to truly understand each other's emotions, and then letting that understanding shape us so the issue took on a new, more complete definition."

Eventually, Bob and Mary Jo did resolve their difference—but you'll have to wait until the next chapter to find out what happened!

Complex, Not Simple

"I don't think this relationship is going to work out," Cyndi tells Chuck. "I wanted to go to Hereford's Steak House yesterday, and you took me to Shrimp's Seafood instead."

"Wait a minute," Chuck replies, dumbfounded. "You want to break up with me because we went to the wrong *restaurant*?"

"Of course not," Cyndi answers. "But see there? You did it again."

"I did *what* again?"

"Oh, honestly! You just don't understand me! How could we be right for each other if you don't 'get' me?"

"But I asked you yesterday where you wanted to eat. You said you didn't care!"

"*Please*! You shouldn't have to ask. You should just know. I can't be with someone who seems unable to catch perfectly obvious hints. Good-bye, Chuck."

Have you ever overheard a conversation anything like this? Maybe you've been involved in one, either on the giving or receiving end. It reflects a very common reason why many people fail at healthy, positive relationships. They fail because they believe that effective communication between people in a relationship should be simple. Easy. Effortless.

It's not! Actually, it is quite complex. And it takes a lot of hard work. But, trust me, it is worth every second of effort!

Many of us get really frustrated with each other when a misunderstanding arises. We even get angry, as if the other person intentionally did something stupid or purposefully failed to "get it."

I remember a situation at the site where I was to give a talk some years ago. When I arrived at the auditorium, I found a very messy stage. I rushed around, trying to get everything straightened out and prepared. Soon I noticed a woman sitting in the auditorium, all alone. I tried, very politely, to recruit her help. I told her I was in a rush and asked for her assistance. She smiled and nodded her head. I thanked her, turned around, and started cleaning again.

But in a couple of minutes when I looked out from the stage, I saw the woman still sitting there. *What is this woman's problem*? I wondered. Irritated, I stopped and got her attention. Once more I appealed to her again to help me, and once more she smiled, nodded . . . and continued to sit where she was.

Finally I quietly lost patience with her and started to walk off when I heard her say something in Spanish. It had never occurred to me that we might be using completely different languages!

In real life, sadly, misunderstandings come even when we speak the same language. If we forget that effective communication is a complex process that takes a great deal of work, we can easily find ourselves getting angry with the other person and wondering how he or she can be so dense.

It helps to remember that we are the only creatures on earth who, as far as we know, communicate with the kind of sophistication that characterizes human interaction. Every time we hear a word or sentence, we have to go through an amazing process of interpretation. Human language can be imprecise; words have so many meanings. Body language and other

nonverbal signals convey huge meaning, but we miss much of it. The chance of misunderstanding is enormous.

Effective Communication Takes Work

Perhaps we really ought to start with the expectation that, at least on some level, we are bound to misunderstand and misinterpret one another. We might even admit it out loud: "more than likely, I am going to say some things that you could take wrong, misunderstand, or misinterpret." If we did this, I think we would tend to be more cautious, more deliberate. We would be more careful to make sure that understanding really takes place.

But let's make this a little more personal. If you hear something that hits you wrong, instead of just reacting—"How could you say such a thing?"—you might instead try saying, "This is what I just heard, and this is what I think you meant. Before I get upset, I need to find out if I'm right." Check it out before you jump to a wrong conclusion.

I have been humbled countless times by thinking that I understood the malicious intent of a person and so reacted harshly—only to discover that what I thought he said was not what he meant. I totally blasted or misjudged the person and so damaged our relationship.

It helps to remember what the Bible says: "The purposes of a man's heart are deep waters, but a man of understanding draws them out."[3] What lies within often lies *deep* within, requiring careful and sustained effort to draw it out.

Think of effective communication as something of a deep-sea dive. If you want to visit the rusting hulk of the *RMS Titanic*, silently resting two and a half miles down on the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean, you don't just jump into the water and start swimming. You have to prepare. You have to know what you're doing. You have to know what kind of submersible you will need. You have to allow sufficient time for both the long descent and the even slower ascent. Without sufficient preparation, you won't be seeing anything but a lot of cold water (and maybe an occasional hungry shark).

Effective communication is a complex business. If you go into it expecting things to flow easily and without a lot of effort, you're just kidding yourself. I recommend that you adjust your expectations from "simple" to "complex," especially in three key areas:

1. Expect problems and misunderstandings. Even the best communicators sometimes fail to understand others, or they fall short of making themselves understood. We're all human. We don't always follow through on what we know to be best. We don't always use the proven techniques that we know work. Often we don't even know for sure why we act or feel a certain way. Effective communicators expect problems and misunderstandings. Because they do not look for seas as calm as glass, they don't feel surprised when a nor'easter hits. They prepare themselves to work through the storms to reach the sunny skies waiting on the other side of the rain clouds.

2. Expect that you'll need a lot of patience. Effective communication takes time. You and the other person may not connect or get on the same wavelength on the first or second (or third or even fourth) attempt. Impatience can doom the goal of genuine understanding. Being in a hurry works against the commitment to care that is essential to all effective communication. How can you genuinely care for someone while you're tapping your feet and reaching for the door?

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[3] Proverbs 20:5, NIV

Instead, relax. Be careful. Recognize that effective communication deserves patience and a deliberate attempt to understand not only the words being said but also the emotions behind the words. Slow down until you get that. It will make the communication much easier and much more effective.

3. Expect a lot of trial and error. People have different ways of communicating. while all of us can master and use a powerful set of tools for effective communication, the way we use those tools varies from person to person.[4] We get the best use out of them by adapting them for our own style and personal bent—and that requires trial and error.

You didn't give up on driving a car just because you felt a little intimidated the first time you sat behind the wheel, did you? You didn't abandon your pursuit of reading when you choked on a few words from *The Cat in the Hat*, did you? You didn't swear off all future attempts at tying your shoes when you bungled your first attempts, did you? Of course not. It takes trial and error to get good at any skill—and that includes the skill of communicating effectively.

Effective communication is a complex business. But you grease the skids for its success when you start out from the right position.

You Can Start On Your Own

A lot of people mistakenly think that they can't practice the elements of effective communication unless they get the full cooperation of the other person, but that is not true. In fact, you can do a lot of effective communication even without the conscious cooperation or understanding of the other person. In fact, you have a tremendous impact, all by yourself.

You can choose to listen for the heart and clearly communicate what you're sensing, regardless of whether the other person knows the process you're using. You can choose to speak more articulately, in a way that the other person can more easily understand. You can also choose to listen carefully and grasp the other person's feelings.

You can exercise the Power of One. You can have a positive influence on your relationship even if the other person does not fully cooperate. You can do a significant amount to make a huge difference, even without a lot of cooperation from the other person.

So don't stay stuck. Don't stay in neutral. Put to work the strategies I've just outlined for you—and start building a stronger relationship *today*.

Effective Communication Saves Time

Does it seem as if identifying the emotional nugget will take far more time than other methods of communication? A lot of guys think so! But, in fact, it actually saves tremendous amounts of time.

Think about it. If you don't have to repeatedly go back over the same old ground, then you can spend your time on other things. Many husbands who come in for counseling initially balk at the idea of trying to identify and focus on their wife's core emotion. Yet they soon come to embrace it, once they see that by getting to the emotional nugget, conversation on the topic can get wrapped up pretty quickly.

Guys, take note: *Effective communication is ultimately more efficient and takes less time than any other method*. A lot of men feel frustrated when their wives seem to go on and on. They don't understand that the reason they go on and on is that they don't feel *emotionally* understood. If

[4] For some very effective communication tools, see Gary Smalley, Greg Smalley, and Michael Smalley, *Men's Relational Toolbox* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2003).

these husbands took the time to actually uncover their wives' emotional concern, the conversation would move on and they wouldn't have to hear the same thing a dozen times, from six different angles. When guys finally "get" this, the lightbulb goes on for them. They get excited about their ability to condense the conversation.

"That's all I have to do—help her see that I truly understand her feelings?" they ask, amazed and delighted.

Yep. That's it. Sounds great, doesn't it? This may sound selfish on a man's part, but when you think about it for a second, why wouldn't you want to save time and reduce frustration?

Guys, hear me: if the woman in your life—whether she is your wife, your dating partner, your daughter, your friend, or your colleague—repeats the same thing over and over, I can almost guarantee that she does not believe you understand her heart. You could say at that point, "I noticed that you are repeating yourself, and that causes me to question whether you believe I am understanding you. Am I missing something?"

It is amazing what happens when a woman feels deeply understood emotionally. She will be much more inclined to stop talking about the issue, for she no longer has any reason to keep going.

The last thing I want to do is spend any more time than necessary on unpleasant topics. Sure, if you shut down the communication, you might not have to deal (at least immediately) with more words—but you probably *will* have to deal with the cold shoulder, the distance, or all the other things that come from not taking the time to attend to a person's feelings.

Is this method easy? Not in one sense—it's probably very different from what you've done to this point in your life. But practice makes perfect! And over time it gets much more efficient. At first, I admit, it feels awkward. It feels very unnatural, and you may be clumsy at it. But as you get more practice, it gets easier. It streamlines. In fact, this is the most streamlined form of communication that I know.

So learn to listen with your heart. Put your problem-solving urges on hold for a while, and listen with your heart. Problem-solving skills remain extremely valuable, of course, but they are much more effective after you understand the emotions involved. So save time! Get efficient! And look for the emotional nugget.

Safety First . . . and Second

What would happen if you discharged a loaded cannon in your bedroom? Not a pretty sight. But what if you made sure that you used only the best artillery shells and the latest guidance systems? How about if you first read the most up-to-date manual, talked to a retired gunnery sergeant, and made sure the weapon was clean and thoroughly inspected before you fired a live round into your ceiling?

"Who's stupid enough to do something like that?" you ask. "Everybody knows that you don't fire a cannon in your own bedroom!"

Why not? That's easy—it's a question of environment. No matter how good your equipment and supplies might be, if you use a cannon in the wrong environment, you'll get disastrous results.

It's exactly the same story when it comes to effective communication. You can have the best tools, the latest insights, the greatest determination, and the most powerful strategies and *still fail* if the environment is wrong.

So what is the "right" environment for effective communication? In a safe environment, no one has to worry about being shamed or rejected or punished or attacked for stating personal beliefs and feelings. In a place like that, heartfelt communication can bloom and grow.

When I believe someone is allowing me to feel the way I feel, without judging my feelings, I feel cared for. On the other hand, I never feel cared for when someone tells me that I "shouldn't feel that way," that my feelings are "stupid" or "wrong" or "excessive." If they tell me that my feelings are anything other than what they are, I do not feel cared for. And I don't feel safe.

Effective communication ought to begin with a simple and firm commitment to the goal of safety. Of course, agreeing on basic ground rules and an effective strategy for communication can help to create a safe environment.[5] But the commitment to safety must come first. Make safety your goal, and watch intimacy blossom. Otherwise, you may find the ceiling raining down in chunks.

But it doesn't end there! In fact, the way you communicate also creates a greater measure of safety. If you listen with your heart, to the point that the other person feels deeply understood and cared for, you increase the person's sense of safety. The more safety that exists in your relationships, the more openness, real intimacy, and connection will occur. When a person feels safe, he or she is more inclined to become a willing participant in the relationship.

In other words, a safe environment makes effective communication easier, and effective communication creates more safety. They work off of each other to improve your relationships.

Whose Fault Is It?

One last issue needs to get unpacked before we can move on to the next chapter. Many of us spend a whole lifetime consistently "missing" each other because we remain in the iron grip of a deadly myth.

Let's take a little quiz. Here is the question: *When you find yourself in a conflict with someone, how much of your conversation includes questions like the following*?

- Who is right? Who is wrong?
- Whose fault is this mess? Who's to blame?
- What really happened here?
- How will we solve the problem?

Probably 90 percent of the people who come to us for relationship help begin their sessions by asking exactly these questions. They really believe that if they can establish "who's right" and "what happened," they will set the stage for effective communication. They think that by doing so, they'll improve their relationships.

But you know what? They rarely do.

When we focus—at least, as a place to start—on trying to determine who is right and who is wrong, we embark on a totally useless pursuit. Starting anywhere other than attending to the emotions will get you derailed most of the time. When we begin by attempting to figure out who is to blame or what really happened, we succeed only in fueling power struggles and hurtful disagreements.

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[5] To learn more about what we call LUV talk (**L**isten, **U**nderstand, **V**alue), see Greg Smalley, *The Marriage You've Always Dreamed Of* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2005).

When people feel emotionally heard and understood, on the other hand, they tend to relax and to trust that you really care. Eventually they will be able to move toward determining right and wrong. What really happened might be useful to know in finding a solution. But it is very hard to get on the same page and to feel relaxed if you do not first feel that your emotions are being heard, cared for, and understood.

Effective communication makes thorough understanding its goal. The Bible counsels, "Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding."[6]

COMMUNICATION IS UNDERSTANDING, NOT DETERMINING WHO'S RIGHT

The apostle Paul had healthy relationships in mind when he said, "Let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way."[7] Rather than trying to fix blame or nail someone to the wall, Paul tells us, "Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification."[8]

And what best leads to peace? What builds us up, as almost nothing else can? The sense that we have been genuinely heard and deeply understood! That's the goal we're after. That's the treasure we seek.

It Gets Even Better

Remember my friend Bob, the one who flirted with his wife but didn't get the reaction he wanted? He desperately wanted that treasure. He longed for the gold of true understanding. So do you know what he did?

Bob chose to create a list of things that would be surefire winners—things that would make Jenni feel really loved. He said. "I created that list either from things I witnessed or asked her about. And I created another list, equally long, of things she didn't like, things not to do. I knew that if I stopped doing the things on the second list, she would begin to feel loved. I started doing the things on my first list, and sure enough, over time, she started to feel very much loved."

But it gets even better for this man who chose to practice effective communication. "In fact," Bob continued, "these days, Jenni feels deeply loved. We hardly ever fight anymore. We have learned to manage our differences wonderfully, and we trust each other. Things are in a very, very different place at this stage. I wouldn't trade this relationship for anything. The last thing in the world I would ever want is to start over. I can't think of anything more unappealing. I've spent more than two decades getting to this point, and I want to ride this out for as long as I can and enjoy it for the rest of my life."

Would you like to enjoy your relationships for the rest of your life? Would you like to ride them out for the long haul? You can! When you choose to master the art of effective communication, you, like Bob, can help all of your loved ones to *feel* truly loved. And a loving relationship is a growing relationship!

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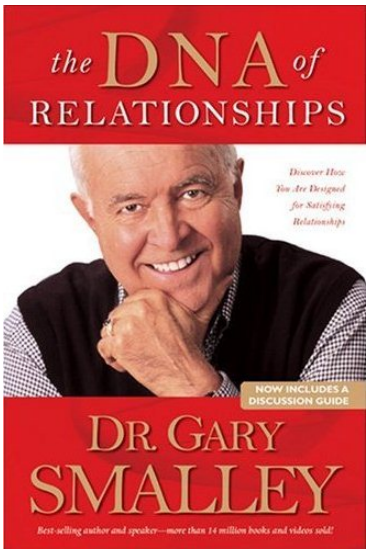
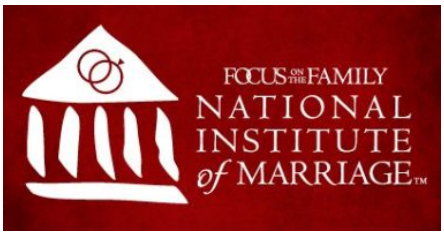
[6] Proverbs 4:7, NIV
[7] Romans 14:13, NIV
[8] Romans 14:19, NIV

ONE-MINUTE REVIEW
EMOTIONAL COMMUNICATION: LISTEN WITH THE HEART

1. **Listen beyond the words to the feelings.** People generally feel more understood, cared for, and connected when the communication focuses on their emotions and feelings rather than merely on their words or thoughts.
2. **The real message is often the emotion behind the words.** When you listen with your heart and listen for the heart of the other person, you show that you care.
3. **Allow others' emotions to touch you.** People feel loved when they know you truly understand their feelings.
4. **Effective communication is a dynamic process of discovery that maintains energy in the relationship.** When you see communication as a dynamic process of discovery rather than one of solving problems, you often solve the problems by default.
5. **Effective communication starts with safety.** When you listen rather than judge or correct, you create a safe environment for understanding to blossom.
6. **Communication is understanding, not determining who's right.** Your relationships will thrive if your priority is understanding the other person.

For deeper discussion of these themes, see the entire book ***The DNA of Relationships: Discover How You Are Designed for Satisfying Relationships***, by Gary Smalley, Dr. Greg Smalley, Robert S. Paul and Michael Smalley. Published by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. Available in paperback and eBook (ePub) format through Focus on the Family.





The **National Institute of Marriage** was created for the specific purpose of saving marriages in crisis. Originally growing out of the Smalley Relationship Center, and headquartered in Branson, Missouri, NIM has served as a pioneer in the development of the Marriage Intensives Model. This innovative approach to crisis counseling has been revolutionary in rescuing marriages in distress and on the brink of divorce. Follow-up research indicates that *85 percent* of these couples remain married two years after their Intensive Experience.

NIM's outreach has touched over 3,000 couples in all 50 states and over 20 different countries. In addition to the Intensive programs at our facilities, our talented team of presenters travel to churches all over the nation and conduct two-day seminars for couples in local churches and communities.

In May 2014, NIM was acquired by Focus on the Family and came under its umbrella, bringing the best of both organizations together. If you or someone you know might benefit from the in-depth relational assistance available through the **Focus on the Family National Institute of Marriage**, please see www.nationalmarriage.com.

Focus on the Family is a global Christian ministry dedicated to helping families thrive. We provide help and resources for couples to build healthy marriages that reflect God's design, and for parents to raise their children according to morals and values grounded in biblical principles.

We're here to come alongside families with relevance and grace at each stage of their journey. We support families as they seek to teach their children about God and His beautiful design for the family, protect themselves from the harmful influences of culture and equip themselves to make a greater difference in the lives of those around them.

No matter who you are, what you're going through or what challenges your family may be facing, Focus exists to help. With practical resources – like our 1-800 Family Help line, counseling and websites – we're committed to providing trustworthy, biblical guidance and support.

If you feel there is a specific way we can help your family, or if you'd simply like to know more about us, please browse our website (www.focusonthefamily.com) or call us toll-free at 1-800-A-FAMILY (1-800-232-6459).

You can also arrange to speak with a licensed Christian counselor at no cost by calling 1-855-771-HELP (4357) Monday through Friday between 6:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m. Mountain time.

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