

Communication Tools

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Building and networking grassroots groups relies on communication in many forms. Learning a few basic skills can greatly aide your success.

For media communications refer to the Community Guide, these tools are for personal development. To acquire these skills requires introspection on your behaviors, beliefs, and patterns that contribute to poor communications and divisiveness. With a little practice and feedback we all can be more effective communicators.

Here are some tools and insights to support collaborative exchanges:

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ENERGY BEHIND THE WORDS

Studies have shown that words impact an interpersonal communication less than one may guess. Only 7% of what a person takes away from an interaction is attributed to the words used, while 57% of what is communicated is attributed to body language and 36% to voice tone. Body language and voice tone are expressions of the energy behind the words, which can account for 93% of the communication's impact.

We often spend time contemplating the words to choose while ignoring how we are feeling during our communication. A good communicator is conscious of their energy and the impact it has.

Reflect on your own experience; how do you feel when someone is angry, ranting on about how bad someone or something is? They may get your attention, but do they get your listening and respect? When you take in someone's words you also take in their energy, some people may want to empathize with the anger; however this is usually a minority.

Reflect on how it feels when someone communicates in a compassionate way, the facts, with objectivity and clarity. What is your

experience when someone enthusiastically gives a vision of hope and speaks of progress with love for his fellow activists? Are you more receptive?

Simply put, emotions that are expansive, like love, compassion, and joy are attractive. We consciously and unconsciously want this expansive, healing and uplifting vibration in our life. So words carried by that frequency are more readily received.

WHOLE MESSAGES

Whenever you have a challenge, conflict, or even an explanation it is often very helpful to be conscious of the many facets involved in your communication. If you unconsciously mix up your message there is a higher probability of a miscommunication.

Before giving a reactive response think about your message and its many parts:

- What I observe (facts only).
- What I imagine (projection).
- What I feel (personal reflection).
- What I want (make a specific request).

Whole messages Clarify

- What you observe, imagine, feel, want.

Mixed messages Contaminate

- What you observe with what you imagine, feel, want

LISTENING: A Vital Skill for Collaboration

"Listen: To make a conscious effort to hear; attend closely, so as to hear. To give heed, to pay attention."

- Webster's Dictionary

Why Listen?

1. You strengthen your work and personal relationships. Others feel understood and respected--thus, respect you in return.
2. You feel satisfied by your interactions--your communications become dynamic, energized, and effective.

3. You learn about yourself, and about others.
4. Listening is expansive, evokes compassion, and helps balance a strong ego.
5. You clearly get all the information you need to be effective.
6. Listening is a compliment to the speaker. It says, "I care about what's happening to you. Your ideas, experience, and life are important."
7. Collaboration requires respectfully listening and is the perfect antidote to hierarchy's control and dominance.

Open Listening

It's not necessary to practice all of these cues at once, as long as most of your body language reflects a feeling of being present and open. Eye contact is the most essential element of good nonverbal listening.

- *Good eye contact.* A relaxed, pleasant, non-aggressive eye contact says, "I am willing to see you and be seen by you. My focus is only with you right now."
- *A relaxed body.* A body that is peaceful, relaxed, and at ease puts others at ease. Physically, you are saying, "I'm at ease with you. I'm not about to bolt off to the next thing. I'm not defending myself."
- *A relaxed face.* Many people chronically tense or purse their lips, crease their foreheads in concentration, tighten the jaw, or frown as they listen. Without being aware of it, they are making it difficult for others to open up and feel trusting and safe in communicating. You do not need to smile or force an expression, either. Just let your face be relaxed.
- *Avoid constant nodding or "mm-hmmm"ing.* This indicates strain and effort to show you're really listening. Nod or indicate agreement if you feel it, but trust that the speaker is feeling how present and open you are.
- *Listen to your own voice.* Tape-record yourself on cassette and listen to the feelings your voice quality evokes. Speed up or slow down, modulate more or less, adjust the loudness or softness of your voice according to what you feel. Your voice has a strong psychological

impact on others. Use it with awareness to communicate your intention, caring, and relating.

THE POWER OF POSITIVE FEEDBACK

Positive feedback is one of the greatest gifts you can give to another person. It lets someone know what they do that has a positive effect on you and others. It inspires them to continue doing this, and makes them feel appreciated. Positive feedback lets another see their worth through your eyes.

Since many people dwell more on their faults and shortcomings, positive feedback builds up their confidence and self-esteem. As a direct result, they feel esteemed, appreciated, and therefore more enthusiastic and creative in what they do. Don't make the mistake of assuming someone knows what you appreciate about them. Tell them!

1. Be specific, not general

Not that helpful: "You're a nice person to work with."

Helpful: Whenever there's a need, you always pitch in to help resolve it. Yesterday, when you helped me distribute the flyers, I really appreciated your support."

2. Be immediate

Send a brief note, email, or tell the receiver as soon as possible.

3. Note any significant change or improvement

When someone makes a sincere effort to change something about their work or performance, let them know you see their effort, and express your appreciation.

4. State it positively, not negatively

No: "Your flyer isn't nearly as messy as your last one. It's almost as good as the one I did last year."

Yes: "The flyer is improved; the new layout makes it much easier to read."

GIVING CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK

Constructive feedback, given consciously, helps another person consider changing their behavior in positive ways. Feedback supportively communicates useful information about how they affect others, and helps an individual grow to achieve his or her personal and professional goals.

Ineffective feedback has an intention to blame someone, make them wrong, make them feel badly about something they've done, and insure that you emerge the winner, the one who's right. Blaming, judgmental feedback, given emotionally, usually results in alienation, conflict, and a weakened relationship. Their ability to hear the content is almost nil. Some criteria for constructive feedback are:

1. It is well timed. Be certain both you and the listener have adequate time to discuss the feedback and complete your conversation.
2. It is usually given in a private setting. Avoid giving individual feedback in front of others, which could make the listener defensive. If it is something affecting the entire group, and they are all aware, it may be appropriate for the group to confront that person.
3. Declare your intention. Before giving feedback, tell the other the positive reasons why you want to give them feedback.
Example: "Our relationship is important to me. I don't want anything to get in the way of our working well together. Because of this, I'd like to clear up something that happened between us."
4. Be descriptive, not evaluative. Describe only the facts of what took place. Do not make evaluative comments which label the other person or their behavior.
YES: "During our street action you confronted the construction workers, and the veteran in a way that made me uncomfortable as the yelling persisted."
NO: "You are so rude and offensive with people."
5. Be specific, rather than general. Address one or two specific incidents, rather than telling someone they "always" or "never" do something, which shuts down their receptivity. Avoid generalizations about their behavior.
6. Describe how you are personally affected by the behavior. Use "I statements" ("I feel...", not "You make me feel...") to describe how you are personally affected. Avoid "band-wagoning" by saying things like "other people feel this way too" or "I'm not the

only person who thinks this about you", which creates defensiveness for the listener. Example: "I felt very angry with you when you said that to me". "I feel upset when you behave like this."

7. Address changeable behavior, not situations or behaviors over which the individual has no control. YES: "I'd like you not to raise your voice and pound the desk around me." NO: "You're too intense and outspoken. You need to be more relaxed."
8. Check to insure the other understands clearly. You might have the receiver paraphrase the feedback they have received from you, to insure they have clearly understood what you are saying.
9. Make a specific request. The other may not understand what you are asking for, and may mentally exaggerate your feedback to be a monumental judgment or request. Make a very specific request of what you would like changed.
10. Listen carefully to the other's response and be willing to learn about yourself, and be willing to admit your own errors.