



# Can We Talk?

## *Working Together through Communication, Respect and Cooperation*

By Katherine Carol

**W**e want something. And someone doesn't want to give it to us. We become indignant, frustrated and simply can't believe their obvious lack of intelligence, because we want something and we should get it—now.

If we don't get it—then someone is to blame and it is probably not us. Or, alternatively, we might think this lack of communication is entirely our fault...we are just not smart enough, or don't have enough power or prestige or something!

In reality, influencing people is a complex set of experiences and perceptions that most of us are unaware as we go about our days. Our perceptions of communication are actually filtered through our life experiences, our values and education.

Adding another layer of complicated communication is something that has become so popular in our fast-paced culture—what I call “drive-by communication”—communication on the run, on the way out the door, rushing down to the next meeting or via email and voice messaging. We think of this as having a conversation, but in reality, a conversation is a dialogue that is supported by an established rapport with one another. Rapport can

only truly happen when time is invested in another person.

Yet, we often have trouble clearly asking for what we want out of our professional relationships. So the best place to start is deciding what your ultimate goal in this relationship is, and what you need to make it successful for you and, yes, the other person.

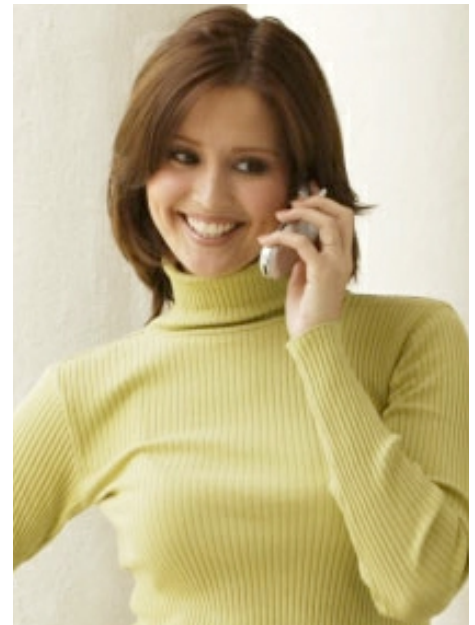
I like this quote from Socrates, “Before we start talking, let's decide what we are talking about.” Makes sense.

In our heads we know what is we want, but sometimes we just aren't able to say what we want to another person in a way that they can understand us. Consider this example. In my workshops on communication I pick out a participant from the group and ask him or her to give me an orange. If they don't have one, I ask them to tell me about the orange that they would give me.

*Here is a typical dialogue—*

He says, “It's an orange!”

I ask a few questions, because I know in his head he has pictured an orange. But, is it the orange that I want?



“Is it a big orange or a little one?” I ask. “Is it a juicy one or one that is easy to peel? Is it fresh or have you had it for a few weeks?”

And then I ask the most interesting question yet. Because in my part of the world, theoretically speaking, my experience with oranges just might be different than the participant's. But, keep in mind we are still talking oranges.

So, I ask the final question, “When you cut the orange open, what color is it?”

What do you think this person says? “Orange.”

I say, “Oh, no, no. That will never do!”

“What do you mean?” he says.

“Well, there is something wrong with that orange!” I reply.

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With a confused look on his face he asks, "What do you mean?"

I tell him, in my part of the world, "Oranges are red inside. We call them blood oranges."

"Oh," he says. "I have never seen one of those before."

And, I take out my orange and slice it and sure enough it is red inside. But, we were both talking oranges and yet, we had two very different pictures of what oranges look like in our heads.

Miscommunication happens every day and all day in our efforts to communicate and influence people. We meet resistance and never quite understand why.

Often, in the human services arena we need help from other people to meet the needs of our job seeker. And, sometimes they resist working with us. Consider these strategies before you give up. Creative persistence is often the key that opens the door to real and substantive discourse.

For illustration purposes, let's take a common situation we find in seeking employment for an individual. Now, for the job seeker to be successful, she needs additional funding from another source. It is necessary for us to forge a partnership with this person, who probably is working in a rather complex system like vocational rehabilitation, education or perhaps Social Security. Answers are often no, and solutions are usually complex.

Our success can improve if we know exactly what we want from the funding source and we have the abili-

ty to help them to understand our request. We must also be aware—they might need something from us, too.

Over the years I have found these strategies to be very successful. They take a little time to put into practice, but the good thing is they work in all types of relationships.

## Preparation

Ask yourself what it is you need to consider well before hand. Here is a brief checklist.

- What do I know about this person? Think about their interests, hobbies, books they read. Take a peek at their office. People generally give clues as to what is important to them by what they surround themselves with at work. Look at the pictures on the wall, the bookshelf, type of furniture, lighting around their desk and even the position of the desk.
- How do they learn best? Are they visual, auditory or physical learners? Are you making a great proposal to give to someone who won't even read it? If they are physical learners, they will process your information best when they are moving. That is why so much business is done on the golf course—physical learners and processors think best when they are active.
- Ask yourself if you need to adapt to that style.
- Where is the best place to talk to this person? I can tell you the office is the worst place. The average office worker experiences eight to ten interruptions per hour. Take them for coffee—one reason why Starbucks makes so much money...it is a good

place to talk. People relax the defenses they use to deal with office politics and distractions. People also tend to open up when enjoying food or beverages in a way they would not over a stack of papers they are obsessing over getting done.

- What are the other person's motives and needs? You will do much better getting what you want if you help the other person get what they want or need. If they are funders and you need their money to support your job seeker—they need outcomes. Find a way to assure them they are making a good investment and spending their agency money wisely.
- Know what actions this person would like to take place. Understand what concerns or reservations they might have. You can do this by listening. Problem is most of us don't really know how to listen. We are too busy thinking about other things when we engage in our conversations. There are three levels of communication.
- **Level One.** You are connected. Eye contact comes easily. People lean into the conversation. Feet are pointed to the other person; hands are relaxed and often animated. You will hear statements like: "That is interesting," "Tell me more," "Yes, that is right!"
- **Level Two.** Your attention is divided. You are worried about the to-do list on your desk or getting to the next meeting on time. You experience an increased level of discomfort, anxiety, resistance or boredom. There are few facial expressions—think poker face. You will hear statements like: "That's wrong" and "Let me speak."

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• **Level Three.** You are tuned out. Your concentration is weak. You have stopped listening and there are lots of interruptions.

- What questions can I ask to gain more information?
- What is?
- What do we need?
- What are the facts?
- How can we?
- What are my(our) choices?
- What do I want from this? (Be detailed)
- What if we could....?
- How could we.....?
- What are the other right answers?

I would like to share with you a model for listening that has never failed me in over 30 years. I first learned about it from speaker Ken Moses, who spoke on chronic grief.

He states many people live with a great sadness within them. Some have lifelong challenges and have trouble with the daily ups and downs. His point was, people can't listen to you until you help them get past the pain. His ENUF method takes less than five minutes and works wonders:

## **E=Empathy**

A show of genuine concern is always felt and appreciated. Once a persons reality is recognized they begin to move on from it. Until it is they will stay with it until they feel you get it.

## **N=Non-judgment**

Next step in helping people feel validated. You don't have to agree or disagree. Just accept this is how the world looks to this person at this time.

## **U=Understanding**

Seeking more information so you feel you understand their situation. Be careful not to assume you know about it. You can use statements like, "Something similar happened to me," or "Can you tell me more about that so I can have a better understanding of what happened?"

## **F=Feeling**

A good follow-up from empathy, allow yourself a moment to check in with how you feel. You can share that with them if you have followed the above steps. Share your concern.

Remember little things make a big difference!

