

## Improving Communication

Communicating is something we do almost every waking moment – most often with little or no conscious effort. Communicating – the *act* of communicating is one of the simplest things we do. The *art* of communicating *effectively*, however, is something we must consciously put effort into.

One of the tenets underlying the First Step in AA (*We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable*) is the idea that we are responsible for the effort we put into whatever we do. What does this have to do with recovery and what does this have to do with communication?

Learning to communicate *effectively* (in a way that gets our message across so that another person can openly listen to it) is NOT something that most people are taught... the reason that most people aren't taught this is because not many people actually communicate effectively.

Think about it... you have probably heard the phrase “*Children learn what they live*”. If kids are raised in an environment where inaccurate grammar is used, it's quite likely that they will use poor grammar. If the environment in which a child is raised is such that very proper grammar is regularly used, that child will likely speak using proper grammar. Kids who grow up in homes or environments where alcohol and other drug use is common are not likely to have grown up in a place where the people knew, or practiced, good healthy communication skills!

Think for a minute about the fact that **the way a message is sent will have an impact on how it is received...**

For example:

*Let's say that I have a teen-age son who takes the car out for the evening. He is supposed to be home by midnight but returns at 12:45. I'm scared because I am worried he might be hurt. I'm angry because he didn't call (assuming he could) to let me know he'd be late. I could handle this in several ways:*

- a) *I might say, “Where the hell have you been?!” Think about the response I am likely to get by asking a question in this way... I'm likely to get yelled at by my teen-age son, who probably feels attacked by me or like he is being threatened.*
- b) *I might say, “When you come home late and don't call to let me know you'll be late, I feel both worried and angry. If you are going to be late in the future, I will need for you to call me and let me know that you're safe”.*

*Obviously, there are many other ways to handle this, but one thing is almost certain... I will get a better response by using the second method to talk to my son about this situation than if I use the first method.*

*Let's use another situation... A coworker complains to your supervisor without coming to you first... You feel hurt, angry, suspicious, etc. You could:*

- a) *Not say anything... my guess is, however, you would communicate that you are upset with this person in some nonverbal way (ignoring them, being sarcastic with them, talking badly about them to others. This is a very damaging way to communicate. You are sending a loud and clear message without ever addressing the issue. This can only make things worse, because in addition to whatever feelings you had about the coworker talking to the boss, there will now be another whole batch of hurt feelings to deal with sooner or later because of the negative way you are treating the coworker.*
- b) *You could say to them, “Why didn't you come to me before you went and talked to the boss?” This type of response is almost always going to lead to the other person feeling... DEFENSIVE! When you start a statement with “WHY” you are setting the other person up to defend themselves. This is the start of a no-win situation in many cases.*

- c) You could say, "When you spoke to the boss before you said anything to me about your concern related to me I felt hurt, suspicious, and angry. It would be very helpful in the future if you would come and let me know what your concerns are to see if we can work them out between us before going to the boss". This sort of comment is MUCH more likely to open up a civil conversation, allowing you to work through the problem.

I could list hundreds of examples of this. The point is very simple: when communicating to someone else, try using this sentence and fill in the blanks according to your situation:

**WHEN YOU \_\_\_\_\_, I FEEL/FELT \_\_\_\_\_  
because \_\_\_\_\_. I NEED (or "It would help me  
out if..."), or "I would prefer if you...") \_\_\_\_\_  
so that \_\_\_\_\_.**

*This is where the EFFORT part comes in!* This sort of talk doesn't come very naturally to most people. Why? Because we didn't grow up hearing it... Many people heard communication that began with the word "YOU"...

*"YOU threw the clothes on the floor now YOU pick them up!" (This could have been stated, "When you throw the clothes on the floor after I have worked hard to wash them, I feel angry and used. I need you to take better care of your things if you want me to continue to do your laundry"). The person to whom the comment is directed is going to be MUCH more receptive to the second method.*

*"YOU idiot! How many times have I told you to put food back in the refrigerator instead of leaving it out on the counter all afternoon? You ruined it!" (This could have been stated, "When you leave food that needs refrigeration out on the counter all afternoon I feel angry. I work hard for the money to buy that food and I need you to be responsible for yourself and to the family and put away what you get out"). Again, the second method is going to be much better received than the first.*

*One more example... "You need to get a clue! You have been watching TV all day long. All I asked you to do was to put the dishes in the dishwasher before I got home from work!" (This could have been stated, "When you don't do the one thing I asked you to do to help out around the house during the day while you're home, I feel hurt and angry. It would be a big help to the rest of the family if you would do your share of the work so that we could all have less to do").*

**Is this easy? No! Is it worth it? Yes!** The reasons include:

- talking to someone in this manner is not demeaning to them... this is VERY important... demeaning comments lead to the development of a low self esteem
- talking to someone in an appropriate manner allows them to hear our message without becoming DEFENSIVE... if someone is put on the defensive (by asking "why" or starting something with "YOU...") they are not likely to hear what you are trying to tell them
- **most importantly**, when you use the format "When you.... I feel....because.... I need...." you are focusing the message on YOURSELF instead of on the other person; you are telling them how YOU feel in relation to something they did... usually, people are willing to listen to how you feel and are more able to see the situation from your point of view when you use this format

**TRY IT... IT WILL TAKE EFFORT ON YOUR PART... IT WILL BECOME NATURAL IN TIME**