

## - Communication

# GOLDEN KEYS OF COMMUNICATION

*Being heard and understood means that what we say is not only acknowledged, but is seen as worthwhile to others in a deep and profound way. This neurological synchronisation helps society to function at its best.*

WORDS BY CHERIE GILMOUR

Communication is like a car; you take it for granted until there's a weird clunking noise in the engine or it starts leaking oil. Think of the reason so commonly cited by divorcing couples that it's a cliché: a communication breakdown. Every day, we perform communication gymnastics without realising it, adjusting tone, body language, content, and word choice as we speak to our spouse, children, boss, co-workers, or the person behind the check-out at the supermarket. But how much better could our communication skills be if we consciously worked at them and learned from people for whom good communication in their jobs can mean life or death?

"Every act of communication is an act of tremendous courage in which we give ourselves over to two parallel possibilities: the possibility of planting into another mind a seed sprouted in ours and watching it blossom into a breathtaking flower of mutual understanding; and the possibility of being wholly misunderstood, reduced to a withering weed," Maria Popova writes on her blog, *The Marginalian*.

In a literal sense, communication is, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, simply "the imparting or exchanging information by speaking, writing, or using some other medium." However, we know intuitively that interpersonal communication, the spoken kind, involves so much more. "In most cases of people talking to one another, human communication cannot be reduced to information. The message not only involves, it is, a relationship between speaker and hearer. The medium in which the message is embedded is immensely complex, infinitely more than a code: it is a language, a function of a society, a culture, in which the language, the speaker, and the hearer are all embedded," novelist Ursula le Guin wrote.

## NEUROLOGICAL SYNCHRONISATION

Charles Duhigg, author of the bestselling *The Power of Habit*, writes in his latest book *Supercommunicators: How to Unlock the Secret Language of Connection* that "Connecting with others through speech is both more powerful and more complicated than we ever realised." He talks of new research "showing that at the heart of every

conversation is the potential for neurological synchronisation, an alignment of our brains and bodies – everything from how fast each of us breathes to the goosebumps on our skin – that we often fail to notice but which influences how we talk, hear and think."

Duhigg describes a US study in which volunteers' brains were scanned while they watched a scene from a film without sound. Each participant had their own ideas about what was happening in the scene, but later, they discussed their ideas in a group. After the discussion, the brain scans revealed that the group's neural impulses had synced. These findings shed light on some of the mysteries of human communication and what makes it 'work'.

Duhigg talks about the importance of defining the kind of conversation that's taking place. He breaks them into three categories: 'Who are we?' 'What's this really about?' and 'How do we feel?' Each conversation type comes with shifts in tone and values, and when both partners match the conversation 'type', it will lead to more successful communication outcomes. Once the type of conversation is established, the

parties can consciously or unconsciously decide on their approach. Does the conversation require cold, complex logic or empathy and storytelling? The stereotypical image of someone complaining about work and becoming frustrated as their partner suggests ways of improving it speaks to this dynamic mismatch: the speaker wants empathy but receives logic instead.

#### 'WHAT'S THIS REALLY ABOUT?'

The 'What's This Really About' conversation is the most complex because it can involve many facets of communication, from the emotive to the logical. It's usually defined by a decision that needs to be made, even if the decision is about the conversation itself; as Duhigg writes, "Is it okay to openly disagree, or should we sugar-coat our differences? Unless we come to a basic agreement about what we're actually discussing, and how we should discuss it, it's hard to make progress."

In psychologist Esther Perel's podcast *Where Should We Begin?* there are vivid examples of how a communication breakdown can erode an intimate relationship. One episode, 'I Don't Mean To Be Mean But...' shows a couple whose communication style frequently escalates into conflict.

"Our conversations don't end up going anywhere because we have them so much, I know exactly what she'll say next, she knows what I'm going to say and when we do interact it's very mean," the (unnamed) husband says in this fly-on-the-wall counselling session.

Perel says their goal needs to shift from defeating the other to "develop(ing) some basic skills about regulating together so (they) don't escalate". Duhigg gives an example of how you might establish a difficult conversation. "Next time you feel yourself edging towards an argument, try asking your partner: 'Do you want to talk about our emotions? Or do we need to make a decision together? Or is this about something else?'" he writes. The aim is to create alignment within the conversation from the beginning.

Jess Phillips was a police negotiator for over 10 years. She now works to train people to use police negotiation tactics in their everyday lives and work. Of the various methods she talks about, one is unexpected for a professional communicator: silence. "The first thing silence does is show that you're actively listening," she says. "Especially in a hostile or life-and-death situation, silence can be a sign of respect to someone who's going through trauma. So I'm listening and reflecting, and if I ask a question, it will be to clarify or seek more information," she says. She says that negotiators are trained to speak about 20% of the time, and the other 80% should be actively listening.

Another technique is shifting from 'you' statements to 'I' statements. Phillips says this is one of the main tactics police negotiators use in a tense conversation to prevent escalation, but it's effective in everyday life. As a mother, she gives the example of a child having a tantrum. Rather than saying things like, 'You need to calm down,' you can start with an 'I' statement, like: 'I feel worried for you at the moment because it seems like you're having a hard time; what can I do to help?' This prevents a conversation from becoming a power struggle and can work for children and adults alike.


She also stresses how important empathy is in communication. "When you break it down into its simplest terms, empathy means it's not about you," she says. Phillips points out that people often say things like, 'That's really hard, I understand'. That's not empathy, she says, explaining that people in these situations often seek validation for their feelings, whether intensely sad or angry. She offers the alternative: "I could never understand what you're going through." This is more validating to someone that their intense emotional state is unique.

#### LABELLING EMOTIONS

Another interesting technique is to label the emotions that crop up as the conversation unfolds or even before a difficult conversation has started. "I can see that this conversation is going to be challenging for you and me," Phillips says as an example of what someone might say at the beginning of a difficult work meeting. It helps to "put the challenge and

awkwardness right out there in front of us," she says. You can continue to identify emotions as they crop up in a conversation, e.g. "I can see this is making you more angry. Is it appropriate to keep talking, or should we finish up and try again another day?" It's like creating signposts in a conversation so it's clear to both parties what's happening. When the emotional temperature is identified, it can diffuse tension so both parties can focus on responding rather than reacting.

All communication will inevitably involve conflict. "Conflict, of course, has always been part of life," Duhigg writes. "We argue in our marriages and friendships, at work and with our kids. Debate and dissent are part of democracy, domesticity and every meaningful relationship. As the human rights activist Dorothy Thomas once wrote, 'Peace is not the absence of conflict, but the ability to cope with it!'"

Good communication is not void of conflict but there are tactics we can use to help guide a conversation to the heart of an issue, our feelings about it, and even exert a positive influence over one another. The Latin origin of 'communication' is *communicatio*, which means 'share' or 'impart' and comes somewhat closer to the word's true meaning. Communication is the sharing of our whole selves with one another. And the most magical part of it, as Popova writes, is that "we end up having transformed one another in this vulnerable-making process of speaking and listening", which makes communication infinitely more complex than we may have realised and worthy of perfecting. 

## The Four Colours of Communication – Which Colour Are You?

The Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument (HBDI) is a four-quadrant model, which represents the four major thinking styles. Developed by William "Ned" Herrmann it also indicates natural communication preferences. The idea behind the model is that if you understand what someone's communications preference is, you can adapt your style to theirs so that the conversation is more impactful.

#### 1. FIERY RED

Energetic and feelings-based. Reds are interested in the 'who' in a situation. Relationship-driven, personable and engaging. If communicating with Red, take time to build rapport.

#### 2. SUNSHINE YELLOW

Imaginative and creative, with unique ideas. They like to understand the 'why' in a situation. When communicating with Yellow, they like to talk about the big picture and future plans.

#### 3. EARTH GREEN

Team-based, understanding and reliable. Greens are interested in the 'how', organised and methodical. If communicating with Green, have a plan with details on how to achieve objectives.

#### 4. COOL BLUE

Analytical, fact-based thinking. Blues often look for the 'what' in the situation and are logical and rational. When you communicate with a Blue, have your facts ready, stay relevant and get to the point.