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## The Communication Illusion: The Silent Relationship Killer

By Rene F. Rodriguez



A man yelled frantically into the phone: *“My wife is pregnant and her contractions are only two minutes apart!”* *“Is this her first child?”* the doctor asked. *“No!”* the man shouted, *“this is her husband!”*

I can’t hold it in anymore, I just need to say it straight out: most of us suck at communicating! But yet many of us (me included) think that we are great at it. You’re going to have to forgive my bluntness, but I needed a way to catch your attention amongst all the articles and information written about this abused subject.

Communication is a part of almost every human interaction, which is why we keep hearing that we need to be better communicators. But let me ask you a question, *“How well do you communicate?”* Most people respond with some sort of positive assessment of their communication while being somewhat open for more learning. Here is another question for you, *“what would your significant other, coworkers, children, friends, boss or customers say about your communication effectiveness?”* Before you answer, ask yourself this question, *“Will they even tell me the truth? If your immediate answer was *“of course they would”*, then this article is for you.*

I have a simple goal and that is to make you paranoid (in a good way) about the effectiveness of your communication with others, and that can only happen when we become aware of what often goes unnoticed. Stay with me and it will all make sense.

The reality of our poor communication, along with what seems to be a collective belief that we are better at it than we really are, is a phenomenon that I have wrestled with for over 15 years. The word/concept of *“communication”* has been so widely talked about, misunderstood and over used that it has entered the realm of becoming a cliché. Stanley Kubrick illustrates one of the underlying challenges we face when dealing with clichés:

*“Our ability to talk about a subject matter  
can create the **consoling illusion** that it has been mastered.”*

What he means here is that most of us can *“talk”* a great game in regards to communication, but when it comes to *“walking”* it, research and experience show that we stumble not just sometimes, but most of the time.

*“The beginning of wisdom is a definition of terms.”  
-Socrates*

### Understanding the problem

Before we dive into what needs to change, we must understand the problem better. Webster’s Dictionary defines *“communication”* as *“a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior.”* Okay, so by that definition, we

are communicating all the time. I get it, but it doesn't help me understand the problem. We need to look further.

I found a definition for “**excellent communication**” that states “*a communication that is managed strategically, meets its objectives, and balances the needs of the organization and the needs of key people with two-way symmetrical communication*” (Grunig & Grunig). Though I love that definition, it still doesn't help me to understand why it is so hard to be (and be perceived) as an effective communicator.

### Why is communication so hard?

George Bernard Shaw wisely observed that “*the single biggest problem in communication is the **illusion** that it has taken place.*” When we combine the collective wisdom of Kubrick, Shaw and Socrates, it becomes clear the biggest threat to good communication lies in our perceptions *tricking us* into feeling that we have communicated effectively or that we have understood clearly. The worst part about this is that our perceptions form our reality—which is to say that if we are not diligent in maintaining a high sense of awareness, we will never know when we communicate poorly.

### How do we fix something that we are not even aware of?

First off, let's remember that the things we take for granted in life (i.e. how we communicate) are often very complex processes when analyzed.

For example, anytime we communicate something, there are six checkpoints that our message must pass through before it is fully transmitted. At any of these points, our message can either pass through in its intended form or become distorted.

#### The Six Checkpoints are:

1. What I **want** to say
2. What I **actually** say
3. What the other **hears**
4. What the other **understands**
5. What the other **wants to say in response**
6. What the other **actually** says in response

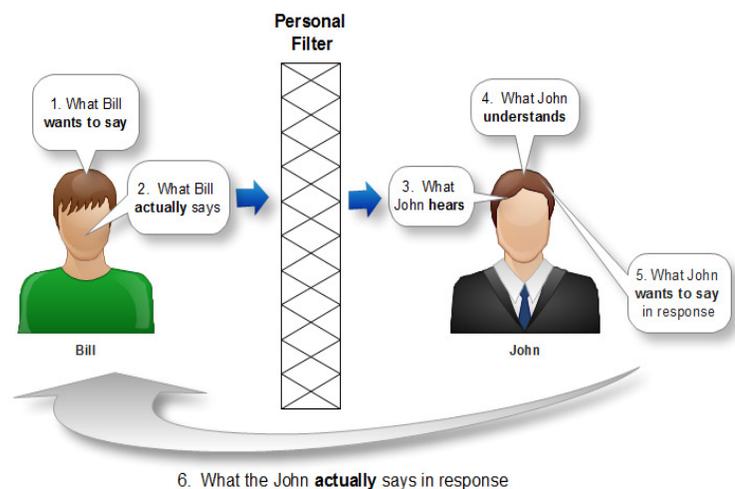


Figure 1

**Figure 1** illustrates a simple conversation between Bill and John. If at any point the steps in the process break down, there is the potential for a wide range of miscommunication.

### Personal filters

Let's assume that Bill (green shirt) is an excellent communicator and can translate what he “wants” to say into what he “actually” says. That information still has to pass through John's (the listener's) “personal filters.” These filters form an invisible barrier that can distort even a seemingly clear message from Bill. Common filters include the *emotional state, cultural background, situational context, personal beliefs, and stress level* of the listener. These filters will influence the perception and interpretation of Bill's message, resulting in either a clear communication or a distorted one. The effect our personal

filters can have on a message can be seen clearly among sports fans. We've all seen a referee make a certain call, and then watched how the fan whose team benefited argues that it was "fair" and "the right call", while the fan whose team was penalized derides the call as a "horrible" one. Here you have two people receiving the exact same message, yet having completely opposite interpretations and subsequent reactions. All due to personal filters.

## Types of Personal Filters

### Emotion:

We are always in an emotional state—joyful, anxious, upset, expectant, excited to name a few. Our emotional state will influence our reaction to the message. When we are upset or anxious, it is much harder to receive new ideas. Conversely, when we are joyful or expectant, and look forward to hearing what someone has to say, we listen better and are more likely to accept reasonable ideas if they are presented well.

### Culture:

Personal history, country, state or cities of origin and upbringing have an enormous impact on our filters. Language and accent differences can confuse understanding of difficult concepts, as well as the interpretation of events, tone, facial expressions and the like. When formulating important messages, it is important to consider cultures, customs, and histories that are different from our own.

### Situational Context:

Recent experiences and environmental factors also influence the way we receive messages. Unlike emotions, situational context involves elements that are external to the listener. This includes how the message is presented and what was said or done previously. For example, a room that is too noisy, dark, cold, or uncomfortable will distract the listener's attention.

### Personal Beliefs:

In life, everything we experience is related to previous experiences. When we understand an idea or concept, it is because we are relating it to our past learning, making truly new experiences a rarity. We have core beliefs about our lives that guide the way we listen, perceive, and interpret what we hear. Being aware of our listener's personal beliefs, we need to select our words carefully and craft presentations and communications capable of touching our listeners on a deeper emotional level, which is where the most effective communication is achieved.

### Stress Level:

Under stress, our brain becomes highly selective as to what it decides to let in to our perception. This phenomenon, while vital to protect us from physical danger, can make it difficult to listen and accurately interpret what is being said. Similar to the stressed husband in the opening anecdote of this article, we may completely misinterpret the question.

## Words are NOT enough!

Most of us took English classes in school where we learned how to use words to communicate. But how many of us took classes on voice inflection and body language? Chances are you didn't, unless you were part of the speech team or drama class. That question is important as we look at a powerful study done

by Albert Mehrabian. His research illustrated that, in face to face communication, we impact people not only by the words we use, but also through the tone of our voice and our body language. The breakdown was as follows:

- 7% What we say - WORDS
- 38% How we say it – TONE of our voice
- 55% What we do – BODY LANGUAGE (facial expressions)

Though Mehrabian's model is often oversimplified, and can be misinterpreted when taken out of context, it is nevertheless one of the most widely referenced statistics in communications and carries a powerful message: **93% of the impact we make on others has nothing to do with words.**

### What can we do?

In figure 1 above, we illustrated that the listener does not always hear the intended message of the speaker due to personal filters. Although it is impossible to remove these filters completely, we can mitigate their influence. Here is an analogy from the world of mathematics that may help. How do we know that 2 times 3 equals 6? Because we can “check our math” by dividing 3 into 6, which gives us 2. So how can we check our “communication math” to make sure our message got through?

### Here are some tips for effective communication:

1. **Ask Clarifying Questions** – In addition to indicating interest and attention, such questions help to clarify meaning and may unearth multiple messages. For example: *"I'm not sure I understand?" ... "What was it you just said?" ... "What do you mean by...?"*
2. **Paraphrase** – Do not assume you understand what was said. Use paraphrasing to test out what you heard and show your depth of understanding. For example: *"Do you mean that...?"*
3. **Repeat Back What You Heard** – In stressful situations, avoid over paraphrasing. Come as close to a verbatim repetition as you can and ALWAYS ASK “AM I CORRECT?” Make sure to give them a chance to respond “yes” or “no.” We have done this exercise with over 75,000 people, and almost all of them were shocked by how often the answer was “NO”. One of the most common reactions was, *"I never knew just how hard it was to really listen."*
4. **Perception Checking** – Remember that people also communicate feelings through language. A perception check should not express approval or disapproval of the other’s feelings, but rather should convey how you understand the feelings. For example: Jim: *"I get the impression that you are bored. Am I correct?"* Bill: *"No, it's very hot in here and I'm uncomfortable. That's why I keep moving around."*
5. **Active, Attentive Listening** – This type of listening takes practice and is an essential communication skill. Perfect practice of active listening involves being responsive through facial expression, eye contact and obvious interest. Words such as “I see”, “yes” and “please go on,” demonstrate your keen attention.

Well-chosen language, said in the right way and with body language that is congruent, can touch the heart and soul, find a common ground, tear down walls of division, foster powerful new relationships and move people to take action. Language that ignores another person’s emotional state, culture, current life situations, and personal beliefs will miss its mark. Instead of building trust, it can distance us from those we care about and those whom we need to influence.

I know that I was hard on you (and myself) earlier, so I will leave you with some good news. **You have the answers**, capability and the tools to be an outstanding communicator. In fact, you've had them all along, and the best part, they're all free! Things like good eye contact, active listening, and being sensitive to others' stress level and background are all things that you know to be important. Perhaps they have become so familiar that we may have lost sight of their value and subsequently stopped using them. Now it is time to remind ourselves of the importance of these fundamentals and to apply them. Doing so will make the difference between winning and losing a sale, landing the job and not getting a call back, or getting through to your children about the importance of saying "NO" to drugs versus having them ignore you. I hope this message causes you to be at least a little bit paranoid about your communication—paranoid enough to slow down, think before we speak, and listen before we respond. I am ready for the challenge...are you?

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