

Money and Meaning

By Thayer Willis

Essential Family Communication Skills

Imagine a family with no communication. It is a cold picture. Hopelessness and despair take up residence in a house where people barely talk to each other. The good news is these unwanted boarders can be shown the door. It is possible to build a warm and inviting home environment when, instead of accepting silence and chilly withdrawal, people decide to respect and repair their relationships. Maybe someone forgot to get your favorite food at the grocery store, even though you carefully wrote it on the list. What if, instead of reacting with anger, you were able to be assertive and convey your disappointment? What if the forgetful shopper responded with respect, empathy and caring and gave you a sincere apology? Or if it occurred to you to go to the store, buy your item and return with something special for the “forgetful one” also. The habits of withdrawal or retaliation are roadblocks to open and positive communication, and new habits can be established. This is how a family builds a home with a culture of warm support and interaction.

We each develop steps of communication within our culture. Every group of people develops a culture that is uniquely its own. Defining characteristics of culture are family, education, economy, government, religion, recreation and communication. Communication is the spoken language, body language, traditions, the written word, music, visual arts, theater arts and the group’s understanding of its psychology. Certain qualities become standards of behavior in any culture, and reach the status of traditions which all members of the group value. In our culture, for instance, freedom is a quality that nearly everyone values. Many of us have traveled outside of the United States and see how much freedom we have relative to other countries. Freedom is a characteristic of our culture that makes us unique and it affects us in ways



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we may not acknowledge. We are free to develop good communication in our families to a height that our freedom and family culture allow. Some family cultures are open to change and improvement, and often this improvement can be initiated by one family member.

Perhaps you are the one member in your family whom you know is open to change and improvement. How do you and your family define all that is best in your interrelationships? Some indicators to consider are these. Have individual family members taken charge of their lives? What is the “glue” that holds you together? Are family members learning, growing and thriving? Your answers to these questions will reveal the effectiveness of your communication. What lenses are family members looking through? Where there is difficulty communicating, individuals often look through the lens of their history. Bad habits and bad experiences are powerful. It takes commitment and discipline to break through these and establish better communication practices in the family. Someone has to be courageous enough to try out new methods.

One method, which I encourage families to employ when they are together, is a questioning technique designed to open the inner worlds of family members. For instance, imagine that your family is gathered around you at the table for Thanksgiving Dinner. Stop reading for a moment and think about who is there. Picture them sitting at the table. Now, imagine asking the question, of each family member, young and old, “What has been your greatest joy?” Take a moment to look around that table in your mind’s eye and hear each person’s response to your question. What does each say ... we don’t know, do we? We don’t know unless we ask. When have you felt your greatest sense of purpose? How did this happen? Were you taught gratitude by your parents? If so, how? These, and more questions like them, can be the beginning of better communication in your family. It is important to accept each person’s answer with grace and kindness, without judgment. This can be the entrée into your family members’ inner worlds. By asking these questions, you communicate your respect and caring. If you can also focus on building basic communication skills in the family, you can develop empathy and strengthen the whole family at the same time through your caring example.

The locomotive of all communication skills is example. The most important values in life are caught, not taught. We learn primarily by example and

when example is reinforced with teaching, we learn better. In families, the older generations constantly set examples for the younger ones. Example can be intentionally set, of course, and the wisest family members use this to their advantage. For instance, younger family members are keenly aware of the ways in which older family members handle adversity. Watching this gives them their first lessons in how to handle adversity themselves. Respect for others, or the lack thereof, is a key skill we learn from our older family members.

Beyond example, there are four widely acknowledged basic communication skills, which every family member can develop and improve. These are:

- **Attending** is being fully present for the family member with whom you are communicating. Being fully present means staying in the present; striving to understand what is important to the other person’s point of view, not sitting there waiting to talk and planning what you will say next.
- **Listening** is a poorly practiced skill in our culture in general. But we all know how powerful it is to be really listened to. Think of that rare person in a crowded room who draws you into conversation and makes you feel like you are the only person there. I often have clients practice the skill of listening, and nearly everyone is surprised at how difficult it is to listen well enough to report to our group what they heard.
- **Empathy** is the fertile ground of communication. If we can empathize with a family member, we can become close. If we cannot empathize, we cannot improve the relationship.
- **Curiosity** is the way to move forward. Even if you are “bored” with a family member, or think you know everything that goes on in his or her reality, the truth is, you don’t know. Be curious, just like you might be curious about someone you just met. Be kind and ask questions.

The basic communication guidelines are to be kind, stay positive and be respectful. These guidelines sound deceptively simple. The importance of guidelines is even greater within families than it is outside. One has far more potential to hurt a family member than anyone else. The communication guidelines, when applied, keep family members safe as communication tools are learned, practiced and put into use.

When striving to implement safe communication, there are tools families can learn and practice. Communication tools include listening, assertiveness,

acknowledging gratitude, forgiveness, mentoring, family philanthropy, the family bank and family governance. These tools work best when each family member has identified and clarified his or her values, when family members write personal mission statements and the family together writes its own family mission statement. A professional who can facilitate development of these tools may already work with the family, but if not, hire an outside specialist. If development of these tools is poorly led, more harm than good can be done in the family. Poor development of communication tools can become a liability.

There are several liabilities to effective family communication. The first is simply neglect of building and improving communication skills. Another liability is harboring secrets and hurt feelings. Distrust is a liability. And prioritizing family communication low among the family's concerns is a liability that can hurt all family members. Poor intergenerational communication can hurt families in many ways. Sometimes not only individuals, but entire generations have different points of view. This can be the result of different financial circumstances, current events in the formative years of a generation or family tensions that are buried and never resolved. Good family communication, like many of life's best qualities, is work. Rewarding work, but nevertheless work.

Since developing a strong family culture is work, families can take specific steps. Think back to your Thanksgiving table with all of your family members gathered. Imagine using some of your time together to bring the family closer. In addition to, "What has been your greatest joy?" more questions you can ask

are: What is our family's greatest strength ... what strength can you see through the generations? What do you have that's special from your father? From your mother? Were you encouraged to give time, talent or treasure to make the world a better place? If yes, how were you encouraged? From whom in our family did you learn kindness? Give an example. What is the legacy you are creating? For what will you be remembered? These questions and their answers give you and your family members a more meaningful arena in which to communicate. Important steps you can practice on an ongoing basis are listening, mentoring and philanthropy. These are all means to more effective communication. Hire a facilitator if you need one, even if just to get started.

After you start building effective communication, family culture can grow and improve. All it takes is motivation and simple guidance. In many families I work with, the culture of learning and growing has long been established and family members are willing to take risks to improve their communication. Yet in other families, the culture of learning and growing has not yet been established. It just takes one brave soul to get started. For a family who is receptive, the brave soul to introduce the work of learning to communicate better can be a professional who has earned the family's trust. A professional can be perfectly positioned to help the family through the beginning stages of this work. For, like any skills, when we practice there are awkward steps to navigate. A trusted family advisor can help the family take on the challenge and log some valuable experiences, so that family closeness can build and eventually become strong.

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