



The Best Communicator in the World

Jon Wortmann

You Can Improve So Many Relationships

As technology intertwines us, we can connect with almost anyone around the globe. What differentiates a person we want to connect with and someone we ignore? **The communication feels natural.**

The busier our world gets, the less likely we are to believe what we hear: whether it's hyperbole on the evening news to keep us tuned in past the next commercial; a salesperson promising the end of all earthly troubles with his potion, pill, or vibrating massage chair (actually the newest vibrating chairs live up to all the promises); or someone in our personal life cajoling us to do something, using rhetorical devices that make Aristotle look like an amateur.

Most of us have stopped answering our phones, we loathe to talk to strangers, and it's affecting everything from our work to our most precious relationships.

We think everyone has an angle, and as a result, we don't trust anybody—until we do. And the reason we trust that person is that he is *real*. Even if he is the sales guy who wants our business, we gladly take his calls because he is a pleasure to talk to. At home, with the people we care about most, when a partner, spouse, parent or child asks for what she needs in a way that doesn't feel manipulative, we'll do anything for her.

The best communicator in the world is authentic, and your interactions at work and in your personal life will stop feeling forced when you can:

- Name how you communicate under stress
- Recognize how the person you're talking with usually communicates
- Apply three techniques you can use to connect in your next conversation

First: A One-Paragraph Pep Talk

I hear people every day offer very valid excuses why they don't try to improve how they communicate. Some people think it's too hard. Others don't know where to go for help. The most repeated excuse from people at work and in their personal lives that could be so much happier with some focused, intentional new habits: "I don't have time." Every single one of us can communicate in a way that makes it easier for people to like spending time with us. If you feel shy, nervous, or afraid, you're not crazy, you're not alone, and today is the day you stop letting ugly communication damage your relationships. Authentic communication can become as natural as breathing when you pay attention to a few essential aspects of what connects people.

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Communicating Under Stress

You're running out the door in the morning and you tell your spouse what you need from him. You thought you were clear. You asked him to pick up the dry-cleaning and the children at soccer practice. He got the dry cleaning, even brought in the dirty clothes without being asked; but the kids sat in the rain for an hour wondering if mommy loved them anymore.

You're at work and you have a client call in twenty minutes, but one of your team just bounced, literally bounced like Tigger, into your office with a new idea. You're trying to finish the power point for a meeting in twenty minutes, and your teammate says, "Jimmy, I got it. This is going to change everythi..." You cut Jimmy off—even though you like him, you value him, and you always think his ideas are spot on—saying, "Not now." Jimmy goes white like Casper and never shares the idea again. Two weeks later: He resigns, saying the environment just didn't feel collegial.

Stress is the new normal. The power of interconnection—the kind that lets you know what everyone in your life is doing right now through social networks, watch same-time news around the world, and do business face to face without ever leaving your home—has a down side. We are connected to everyone all the time through so many technologies that, unless you want to become a cave dweller, other people and their struggles will endlessly surround you (and cell service and satellite TV are available in that cave for a monthly fee).

Stress, like smoke, affects people who come in contact with it. The days of long lunches and long weekends, of unscheduled time and endless afternoons at home, are rare. You have to produce results at work now. Your kids have soccer, birthday parties, and that new gadget to pick up at the mall. Then, while driving them from place to place (don't be late or get off schedule), you get a text from work on the weekend and you make a call. Your kids feel you ignoring them and start fighting. You yell at your children. They proclaim they hate you. Your co-worker, still on the phone, asks if everything is alright, and you declare, confidently, almost believing it yourself, "Absolutely!"

The stresses are the same as a hundred years ago—perpetual challenges like finances, war, and the Chicago Cubs not winning again (I'm not even a Cubs fan and it still hurts). What's different is you come in contact with more of it. Stress is the result of a hormone, cortisol, which your brain releases when you're supposed to be running from a bear. You want a higher blood pressure and increased blood sugar when you're running from a wild animal; but in a boardroom or while spending quality time with the family, it makes you irritable and woozy. Grumpy, dazed folks don't communicate well.

The first thing you have to do to communicate better is to name what happens to you under stress. Relaxed people usually communicate pretty well. Stress is the dog that eats the communication roast off the counter before anyone gets a slice. Since stress is everywhere, it means we understand each other less than ever before, and knowing what to do about it has become as important as breakfast.

Begin by going Greek like Socrates and "know thyself." You have to know your communication tendencies under stress. The first tendency to consider: Talking. When you feel the tension build in your body—your shoulders stiffen and rise and your face start to pickle like the Grinch: What happens? Some people are talkers. They spout words like Old Faithful, and their inner monologues become soliloquies for anyone in earshot to enjoy. Other people get silent. They turn inward like a monk or nun, and if you want to know what they're thinking, you have to know the magic password.

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You have to know what happens to you. For example, you lose a big deal. You're a silent-type and you're working with a talker, and you need to figure out what to do next. Too often, you end up hating each other. He won't stop talking and all you'll want is a few minutes to think. If at home, your child gets a bad report card or you're having money problems—and he likes to talk it out and you like to sleep on it—you're not sleeping because he can't shut up, and he does not feel heard (causing more stress that keeps him talking). Unfortunately, talking and silence aren't the only communication responses to stress that you need to recognize.

Tendency two: Drama, a.k.a., emotion. Some people get emotional, while others get very logical under stress. If you like drama, you want to know all the details of what happened in a situation and you really care about every other person's opinions (not opinion, opinions—you want the dirt, every last detail), and it's really important to you that everyone feel good about what's happening. If the last sentence made sense to you, under stress you value the spectrum of emotional experience and you like processing it.

If the last paragraph made you want to stop reading and reintroduce your breakfast to the world, you value logic. If you tend towards logical communication under stress (bulleted list with intention), you

- Want to figure out what is going on,
- Develop a well-reasoned plan,
- And then execute the strategy to improve the situation.

It doesn't take a PhD in communication science to recognize that when the emotional and the logical meet under stress, being chased by a bear might be more pleasant. You have to know your tendencies under stress before you can build stronger relationships.

The third tendency is an Aristotelian classic, and it's perhaps the hardest to notice. Under stress, where do you need the point? The point of any statement is your meaning, the core idea you want someone to take away. That's why people throw in phrases like, "The point is." They've been communicating inductively, putting the point last, and they're worried you weren't listening. The first tendency in the duality is inductive thinkers. They need the details first when they listen to you and, when they speak, they will put the point last. Some people need the point first: Deductive thinkers. They'll put their main idea before any of the details when talking, and they like the point first when listening to you.

Here's how you tell the difference: Where do you tune out in this paragraph?

So I was at a meeting last week and my friend said I was wearing an ugly sweater. My friend has good taste, and I thought it was rude for him to say it at a meeting, but I decided to poll my other friends on Facebook. A few agreed with him, but most agreed with me. They may only have been trying to spare my feelings, but I don't think so. I even went to the mall and got a new sweater, but I like this one better. I'm wearing it today. Do you like my sweater?

The point was: Do you like my sweater? If you were frustrated right away and felt like he was rambling, you probably tend towards deductive thinking. If you liked those details, you most likely tend towards inductive thinking. Under stress, you need the point where you need it. Neither way is right or wrong. People in each category, however, believe their way of thinking is the right way and this is what gets us into trouble.

Here's the key: People are different. Under stress, we react differently. You have to name what happens to you because, if you don't, you can't take responsibility for your tendencies in any conversation. If you don't know what happens to your communication under stress, you will always be the person who says, "Can you believe what Cristina just did?" when, in reality, you are part of the system where the communication isn't working. What happens to your body and, as a result your communication, affects other people too.

Under stress, we want people to communicate like us. Sometimes they can and other times we have to adapt (more on that in the tendencies section below). To be able to even make that choice, you have to know if under stress you're

- A talker or a quiet-type
- Emotional or logical
- Inductive or deductive

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Recognizing the Tendencies in the Person with Whom You're Talking

Once you know what you are, you have to read your listener if you want your relationship to get stronger. If you're a talker and the other person isn't, they'll stop listening to you after a few sentences. If you're emotional and the other person values logic, under stress, she will tune you out. When you start with the point and the other person is an inductive, point-at-the-end thinker, they will stop listening because they didn't hear the details first.

The secret to recognizing the person's tendencies under stress: Eye contact, body language, and grunts. People like to communicate with people who communicate like they do. Start with the eyes. If the moment is stressful, you're talking and her eyes roll back in her head, she's probably not a talker. If you're giving a dramatic, inductive account with all the details before getting to your point and two sentences in, his eyes glaze over, he's probably a logical, deductive guy. On the other hand, if the person is following you with her eyes, she's in the moment with you; she is probably the same tendency under stress.

Body language is an equally valuable litmus test of someone's tendencies. If you're quiet and the person starts to vibrate and shake, they are delivering a clear point: "You better say something so that I can say something or I am going to explode." In this case, bets are you've got a talker. If you're talking and the person slumps like a third grader learning the history of Victorian England (If you are one of the people who liked that class, please insert the word "fractions" for "the history

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of Victorian England”), that person’s tendency is different than yours. Head nods mean they share you’re tendency. Falling asleep or leaving the room: Firm evidence they communicate differently.

Grunts are the secret decoder ring of communication tendency identification. Grunts are the sounds and brief responses that reveal whether a person is with you, listening to you attentively, or not. Everyone grunts differently. Some people say, “Mmm, hmm.” Others say, “Yes,” or “Right, right,” or “Oh.” Or the granddaddy of them all, “Oh yes, right, mmmm.” If under stress he responds in sounds and phrases that encourage you to keep going, that verify he hears you, your listener most likely vibes with your tendency. If he, “Harrumphs,” you have evidence his tendency is different than the way you are communicating in that moment.

A few twists:

1. If the person is a great communicator, she may be able to switch back and forth and you have to really watch her under stress to figure out her tendency.
2. People definitely change their tendencies in different environments. Reliable sources like Aristotle have found that people usually have some clear patterns, but don’t be surprised if a person who has always been a talker or logical or deductive, is different on occasion. The key then is to switch and match their tendency. That’s the first technique that creates deeper connections. But first: The most under utilized tool in the history of figuring out what people need to build a better relationship...

Ask them. Reading your listener is essential because people may not know how they communicate and they may think you’re strange for asking. On the other hand, especially when dealing with the life partner with whom you plan to spend eternity, it will probably strengthen your connection if you ask the person how he wants you to communicate with him: More talk or less, emotional or logical, inductive or deductive. Usually, people tell you. If not, the relational struggles may be deeper than communication.

The Techniques

→ Match the Other Person's Tendency

You want someone to like you? You want someone to enjoy working with you? You want to feel connected to your spouse, partner, lover? (And it works with parents, kids, and friends too.) Match the other person's tendency. Talkers like talkers (I'm not talking about goobers who only want to hear themselves talk; they are a separate category and a quality relationship with them demands you learn to meditate so you can listen for days on end without judgment). Quiet-types need more quiet than verbal barrages. That doesn't mean you don't listen to a talker and quiet-types don't want conversation; it's about what the person needs, and under stress, a talker wants a back and forth and a quiet-type needs some space.

The same goes for folks who tend towards emotion or logic. If you want a new car and you speak emotionally to your logical spouse, you will continue driving the '79 Nova. Talk about the reason why your Nova is not safe, is inefficient, and doesn't have room to take the garbage to the dump; you're driving a shiny new vehicle in days.

At work, if your boss is deductive and you come in and say, "So, this weekend I went to the football game, then..." She will tune you out. Say, "Let's talk strategy, and first, can we catch up on our weekends?" She will love the conversation and she will feel more connected to you. Bosses favor the people with whom they connect.

The best communicators can switch tendencies to match the person with whom they're communicating. The good news is that all you have to do is pay attention and be willing to switch the way you communicate. The bad news is that most of us are so stuck in the way we think and speak that we're not willing. The reason it is so important is trust. In a world where there is too much communication and we don't know who to believe, we trust the person who makes the effort to connect with us by speaking and listening the way we like to communicate.

→ Validate

A second technique that is so easy and rarely used: validation. Validation is like oil: It keeps relationships running smoothly. Mentally page through a few of the moments in the last week when communication went badly. What if as the tension rose, you made clear to the other person he mattered? I'm not talking about a pat on the back or saying, "Good job." I'm talking about thinking about why you need the other person in your life, and showing them.

Validation is defined as valuing the other person. It is not agreeing with them. It is not approving of behavior that drives you crazy. It is not being weak or giving in. Every person needs different kinds of validation, and it is the communication technique that shows the other person she is important to you. A few examples:

- Winking at your spouse across a crowded party where you see her making an effort to put up with your crazy friends.
- Listening to that co-worker at lunch who is painfully inductive so she can figure out what she needs to do next on a project.
- Leaving someone alone to do her work, thus proving you trust her.
- Being able to ask questions of someone after paraphrasing her point to prove you were paying attention.

Paying attention is always a powerful validator, and validated people want to have a relationship with you. They share their opinions openly. They want to hear yours. They voice disagreement quickly rather than letting it boil until it erupts. Validated people are easier to work with and live with. Matching the other person's tendency validates. When you discover the way to validate a person, you know how to keep the relationship flowing and what to do when things go wrong.

→ Reframe

The third technique, the third instrument in the trio of communication virtuosity, is reframing. It is actually just framing, but with a vital, philosophical punch. Framing is paying attention to what the words you use mean to your listener. Framing is thinking about how the words you utter will affect the listener based on important categories like gender, age, ethnicity, life experience, and choosing what you say based on how the other person might hear your words.

For instance, if your child is a poor swimmer you don't say, "Don't go in the water, you'll drown." You say, "You're working really hard on your swimming. Do you want to keep working with an instructor or shall we practice together this weekend?" At work, the phrase, "Your writing isn't worth lettuce" tends not to motivate; but saying, "I know you're a strong writer; let's rework this piece by the end of the day" clearly validates and expresses the need.

Framing is so important because most people just let the words pour out of their mouth without any filter. The words you choose will either strengthen a connection or construct great pyramid size roadblocks between you. You have to say what you think, and just spitting it out only works if your relationship is so strong that the other person won't leave you when you aggravate them repeatedly. Most of us are not as strong as we wish we were. Whether it's you or them, miscommunication will always plague us, and that's why framing is core to being authentic.

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The third technique, however, is called reframing. Reframing is framing and then retranslating, stating the same point again in different language, speaking a different language if you have to, so the other person gets your meaning. The philosophy behind it: I'm going to keep trying to connect with you until I know that what I've said makes sense to you. I don't care how many times I have to try, I value you, I want a relationship with you, and so I'll keep trying out new words until we get it right. I hope I can frame things right the first time, and when I don't, I'll reframe until we're on the same page.

You want a closer relationship; you'll get it when you keep trying. The person with whom you're communicating will see you making the extra effort and usually the extra effort builds bridges of meaning between you that you can use again next time you don't understand each other; and for the rest of your relationship.

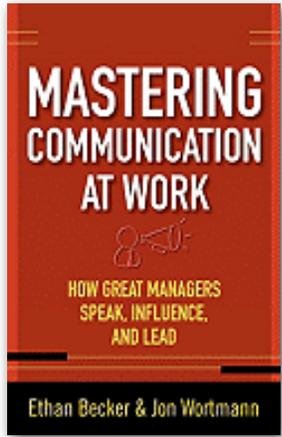
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Why Communication Is as Important as Air

We can't read minds. Even worse, even when we're talking to people out loud—rather than swearing at them in our heads—messages and meanings get lost like that one sock that always seems to fall behind the dryer. The difference between people always feeling connected to you and the hell most people's lives have become because they feel disenfranchised, misunderstood, and alone is the way you pay attention to communication.

When you pay attention, you notice the way you communicate under stress and what happens to the people around you. While none of us fit in boxes, we do tend to think and then communicate in patterns. Use the patterns to build a connection. Notice how you communicate; notice how they communicate; then match the other person's tendencies, validate, and reframe until at work, at home, and everywhere in your life, you can communicate with confidence and it happens as naturally as breathing. Then, are you the best communicator in the world? To the people in your world: definitely. 🧠

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