



Right or Kind?

Navigating the Soft Skills Revolution

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Do we care about talking to each other anymore, or are we settling for mostly texts, emails, tweets, and electronic quickies?

Is this like quickie sex, compared to romantic adventures with all the accoutrements of a love making session? Are we too busy to really connect? What is the draw of fast talk?

We often think that quick communication saves time. This is true in some cases. But relying only on cursory communication runs the risk of misunderstanding, and a lot of hoopla about “what did she mean by that e-mail?” Once those questions get started, they take on a life of their own and end up as huge time wasters, not time savers, and the intent of the communication may be lost or so badly misinterpreted that trust goes astray in the translation. Let’s regroup and think about the advantages of face-to-face communication, what might get in the way, and types of skills that promote cooperation even in difficult instances.

Face to face communication motivated by care and concern can be so meaningful. But meaningful discourse has a lot of components, many of which are ignored—often unintentionally—no matter how many training classes are offered on the subject of communication. Let’s take a look at some ways that demotivate even the most intelligent and dedicated among us.

Invalidation

Invalidation has been called one of the most lethal forms of emotional abuse, killing confidence, creativity, and individuality. Invalidation is an action that denies another's right to be heard and understood.

In Jay Carter's 1989 book, *Nasty People: How to Stop Being Hurt by Them Without Becoming One of Them*, he suggests that the way people hurt each other by discounting others' thoughts and feelings is contagious, passed down from one generation to the next, causing the person who is invalidated to strike back with similar invalidations. He states that 1 percent intentionally spread this misery to manipulate and control others, and that 20 percent do it semiconsciously as a defense mechanism. Why is that? First, there is the old one-upsmanship need that some find necessary to achieve what they consider a superior position, and the need to be right is a paramount goal. In the process, friends, colleagues, and significant others may be emotionally bulldozed. This is not always the intent, and may be far from what is actually in the heart of the person who considers his or her comments to be helpful, not hurtful. So many people operate out of good will. The suggestions that follow may help in spreading that good will, and not burying it.

What does invalidation look like? How do we invalidate each other? Our children?

Here are some ways.

“Grow up.”

“You don’t know what you are talking about.”

“Lighten up.”

“You are too sensitive.”

These are obvious invalidations. Heard at an early age, a child learns that Mom or Dad thinks he or she is wrong, not appreciated; somehow not enough. Did Mom say that? No. But our words take second place to tone of voice and body language, and digs go far beneath the skin and lodge in the brain and heart.

Negative comments are remembered much more than positive regard. In the adult world, we may be thicker-skinned, but we remember. Take a look at other invalidations that pop up every day.

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Ten Ways to Invalidate Others

1. **Ordering** | “*Stop Your Whining. Do your job.*”

Whining is like chalk on a blackboard. But, might there be a chance that listening to someone’s woes might give us a clue to what obstacles are in the way of efficiency? Or, could listening to the whining serve as a catharsis for the individual who, after a detox, goes to work and finishes the job without emotional barriers? As professionals in a hectic world, whiners may push our buttons. But as soon as we stiffen and close our mind to what is being said, we demoralize the other person. Is it worth it? We can, however, use the whining as a teaching moment. We can ask, “What would you like to see?” “If you could change this policy, what would it look like?” This is focusing on the solution. It is changing someone’s mindset to present solutions. One of my favorite bosses once said to me in my interview for the job, “Don’t bring me problems; bring me solutions.” I took that as a challenge and researched my concerns, always bringing a solution. This is not to say that discussing problems is not important. It is just a way to remind people that they have the power to present positive resolutions as well as to offer complaints.

Some say that a complaint is a gift, and whether you choose to listen to the complaint or use the situation as a teaching moment, or do both in combination, either is preferable to an order to obey. After all, in a healthy environment thoughts and opinions are welcomed.

2. Threatening | *“If you don’t come up to speed, you won’t have your job for long.”*

Fear is a powerful motivator, but not for long. Fear can kick someone into action short term, but the exchange may result in compliance, not initiative. If someone thinks he is in trouble, staying out of trouble is the goal. Staying out of trouble means doing only what someone commands. It doesn’t take into account reasons for how another came to his method of choice for completing work or an assignment. Of course, you may have given feedback galore, and you really mean that someone’s job is in jeopardy. Consider that there are more productive ways to get your point across. By stating what you want at a particular time and using examples, you can help. If there are serious performance issues, you know what to do via the guidelines of your company.

3. Preaching | *“You shouldn’t act like a spoiled brat. Maybe that worked when you were a little girl, but it doesn’t work now. Let me tell you how the world works.”*

This is an extreme example of preaching. We all preach. We have beliefs, values, and ways that have worked for us. We want to impart them, to be of assistance. Although we can’t expect others to adopt our values all the time, we can share what we have learned in our lives in positive ways. The more encouraging the approach is, the less we risk pushing people away, and eventually being ignored, or disrespected as being rigid and just boring.

Religious preachers are listened to because people know what to expect. Good ones have great things to say by which we can choose to guide our lives. But in everyday life, instead of using personal power to make a difference, preaching may sound like a broken record. Giving your opinion with good intent and in the right place and time can be invaluable. But, if you say the same thing over and over, ears close.

As an executive, you have a lot to say, ways to guide, encourage, and support. It is situational. You have a lot to give. Give well and it will be received well, appreciated, and remembered as offering a leg up. One conversation can be the turning point in a life, and you will have been the catalyst. I remember every conversation I ever had with a boss who took the time to be a mentor, and I can tell you the names of the people who listened and coached. So can others when asked, “Who gave you a leg up in this world?” Those names and what they did remain precious, and you can tell how much the coaches meant by listening to others’ stories of what their genuine conversations have done in terms of lighting the way for achievement and self worth.

4. Giving Solutions | Yesterday, I was a participant in a dialog group where one question was asked, and each person responded for about seven minutes each. The ground rules of the dialog group were to listen without judgment. Just listen. In a dialog group, there is no cross-talk, and no contrary opinions or questions. Just listening.

The people in the group were given the question, “Who are you?” All of the group members were going through some kind of transition, either in their personal lives, professional lives, or both. They expressed their concerns, fears, and desire to make changes. In seven minutes, with the support of other listeners, they came up with life changing answers, not only to the question, but to when they were happiest, and what they wanted to accomplish in the future. Seven minutes. Nobody gave them a solution. They came up with their own. An artist decided on a new direction for her work. A therapist realized that, although she had many plans and felt overwhelmed by the magnitude of the changes in her life, she was denying herself the pleasure of nature, being by the beach, taking in sunshine and fresh air. Another realized that her leadership style might be preventing her from moving her organization forward. One redesigned her company goals, taking into account what really made her happy and fulfilled. It was an intense and productive day—life changing, even. Seven minutes. The whole dialog group came to the conclusion that we were all so serious, and needed to have more fun, especially on outings together.

The point here is that most people will come up with their own solutions if we do not impose ours. All of us in the workforce have a tendency to give solutions. We are always thinking of solutions to challenges. That’s most of what we do at work. When they are our challenges, we figure out how to solve them. When you give solutions too quickly to others, though, they shut down. They can’t think. You take center stage and relegate them to the sidelines.

Of course, sometimes people ask for advice. This is when you give it. Otherwise, a true respect for the other person's ability to problem solve on his or her own, with you giving your full attention (body language speaks loudly here), can add more value than a quick solution. And, the change you encourage may have long-term effects, not just a temporary solution to one issue. If you are thinking, "I don't have time for this," change the paradigm to "I don't have time not to—I can make a lasting contribution by offering respect, trust, and dignity." Think about how the person you are engaging with would want to do his or her best for you, and for himself.

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5. Lecturing | “You should be happy that you have a roof over your head—or a job.”

If you have children, ask them what lecturing means. Really, just try it. Lecturing is similar to preaching, but the subject is specific. It can come across as pejorative, even if someone has the very best of intentions. It often occurs when we are angry or frustrated.

Along with some of the other unproductive communication techniques mentioned thus far, we all get frustrated and lecture—almost naturally. If positive regard and respect, and meaningful communication methods were so common, we wouldn't need to be digesting them now. The suggestions presented here are SKILLS. We learn them...well, nowhere, unless we have been coached in these ways at home as kids, or we went to graduate school or leadership training programs to learn them. It takes practice and commitment. Eventually, these methods become more accessible like learning and practicing any other skill.

6. Criticizing | *“Your opinions are irrelevant to this discussion.”*

Forced to deal with antagonism and criticism, people, young and old, lose self-esteem. Eventually, they may tune out, act out, or check out (of the situation). There are ways to provide constructive feedback. The first rule of thumb is to determine if the feedback is for a valuable reason, to help someone change behavior or review a situation that you have observed to be less than optimum in terms of interaction with clients, co-workers, or at home. “You are a jerk,” is not a helpful comment. It does not constitute a teaching moment. Guidelines for giving feedback include:

- Describe the purpose and value of the feedback. (“I wanted to talk to you about your interaction with Joshua. I think there might be a better way for you to get what you need.”)

- Clearly describe your own observation or concern. (I noticed that you raised your voice and that you called him a lazy bum. If you needed his information for your report, it might have been better to ask for what you needed and give him a deadline as to when you needed it.) This should only take 60 seconds, and should be very specific.
- Let the other person respond. (Well, I had asked him before...)
- Offer confidence. (I know that you can work with your colleagues cooperatively because I've seen you do it.)
- Decide on actions. (I'd like you to be descriptive about what you need when you speak with colleagues.)
- Ask the other person for commitment. (Can you make a commitment to what we discussed?)
- Offer your support. (If you need to blow off steam, you know you can always come to me to work out your frustrations before you approach someone—especially when you are angry.)

It's important to give constructive feedback in person, unless you are just reviewing a document and making comments. Even so, person-to-person interaction will create a better learning experience. The initial response to receiving feedback is often, "Oh, no. What did I do wrong?"

If the motivation to help is genuine, people come to know that feedback is just part of the process of improving and learning, and it is more likely that it will not be so tough for them to receive it.

Here is the big difference between criticism and feedback: criticism stings. Criticizing a colleague in front of others is the ultimate degradation. More than degrading the other person, it degrades the person who is criticizing, especially when it is sarcastic or outright cruel. Sides are immediately taken, usually based on perceived political clout. The worst public criticism is from leaders to each other and their direct reports. The unprofessionalism is so undermining that it splits an organization in pieces, forcing the pieces to operate without—or against—each other.

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Receiving feedback is also a skill.

1. Recognize your strengths. Be proud of your desire to do the right thing. Then, feedback becomes help in your quest for excellence.
2. Be open to improvements and listen without responding until the giver of the feedback asks you to respond.
3. Acknowledge the feedback. (“So you think the process I’m following needs to be simplified.”)
4. Clarify. (“Lets take the process step-by-step to see how it can be easier.”)
5. Make a plan. (“The process that we revised sounds good. I’ll try it with the sales team and we’ll see if it works better.”)
6. Say thanks. Your willingness to hear feedback demonstrates your professionalism and enhances your working relationship.

7. Blaming | *“Maryanne caused all the distractions. It’s her fault we failed.”*

A statement like this could cause a flurry and have unintended consequences, especially if the person who hears that Maryanne was disruptive chooses to take the comment at face value and goes to Maryanne instead of figuring out how to go forward, and what the real problem entails. Take responsibility for your own actions when you are discussing mishaps, and encourage others to do the same. Present how you will go forward and what you can do to make the situation better. If someone tells you about problems and issues, focus on problem solving.

Front-line representatives who deal with difficult customers sometimes blame the customer. In a recent conversation with a colleague of mine, Amy, a director of a statewide initiative, explained how she teaches staff to value the customer. She teaches them: “work hard, be nice, and don’t lie,” followed up with, “there is nothing that I won’t help with except for hiding a dead body.” This almost always produces quick laughter. And humor, in tough situations, may work to break the ice. (It should be used carefully, like in this situation, so as not to minimize a situation or feeling.) Amy recognizes that it is not “a natural action,” not easy for a subordinate to walk into a supervisor’s office and be courageous enough to admit a mistake. So she is careful not to lay blame, and says, “OK, let’s figure out what to do next.” It becomes a teaching moment. As she says, “If I don’t stand by my words, I cannot expect staff to implement my rules.”

8. Minimizing | *“You’re making too much of this.”*

What is important to one person may not be so important to another. If thoughts and feelings are squashed, it becomes what is important to the listener, not the speaker. This is hurtful to the speaker, not helpful. Minimizing often happens when someone is expressing a feeling. It may not be a popular idea, but people need to listen to feelings. Feelings often uncover serious work issues and professional areas that need to be addressed. If someone is afraid of listening to feelings, or only listens to whom they like at the moment, or those who are in politically advantageous positions, it’s likely that important messages will be ignored. Also, there’s a chance that what the speaker is imparting is more serious than his or her perception. Not listening influences the trust that person puts in another. Trust builds, and it can be torn down before we even realize it. For someone to express feelings is a huge risk in the workplace, although it shouldn’t be. Honor those who have the courage to express what may be difficult for them to say.

Expanding on “Amy’s principles,” mentioned earlier, Amy had a discussion with a staff member (let’s call her Terry) about blaming customers for concerns that arose in transactions. It’s them—not me, Terry insisted. Amy responded with facts. Three customers had complained about exchanges with Terry. Terry was defensive and stunned, insisting that the customers were lying. Through a series of listening exercises and follow-up questions, Amy allowed Terry to share her perspective. And, what a wealth of information she received. From individual incidents, the

discussion took a turn to how important Terry's job was to her, and she revealed that "when customers call, I assume that they are telling me that I did something wrong, and I react from that position." Her need to be validated was driving her communication and leading to invalidating customers. Amy asked Terry to think of what she needed from supervisors in terms of mentoring, training, feedback, or other support and, most crucial, what she needed to increase her skills to ensure that customers felt supported, validated, and heard. Terry thought about the discussion over a weekend, and came to work on Monday with a new attitude that was visible. Here's a description from Amy on what happened next.

"On Monday, Terry came back to work with a new attitude that was visible. She spent 25 minutes on the phone with a customer, listening, helping, and problem solving. Five minutes later, this customer was so pleased with the service she received that she sent me a note that said 'I feel it important to let you know how helpful and polite Terry has been. When I ask questions, she is right on target and takes the time to look for the answer. She has guided me through this amazing paperwork and documentation. I know we all get busy and forget to compliment people, but I felt you should know about Terry.' That, to me, is success. The customer was validated. My staff member was validated. And I, as the boss, was also validated. We all want to succeed. We all need to be kind, work hard, and not lie. That is validating."

9. Changing the Subject | *“Forget about your concerns. How was your weekend?”*

This is an example of minimizing and changing the subject. When people don't want to talk about what you might be desperate to communicate, they may change the subject. Sometimes it's from a work related issue to a personal one, “How's your mother?” It can be disconcerting because the content of the changed subject may be important to you, but not in the middle of a work conversation or a personal phone call when you are pouring your heart out about something else. Whenever this tactic is employed, it's obvious. It's a power and control method of gearing the conversation away from what the speaker is communicating, and the speaker knows it. If you are the listener, and don't have time to finish a conversation, you can always say, “Can we finish this conversation tomorrow? I really want to hear what you have to say, but I have to go to a meeting in five minutes.”

10. Denial | *“You don't really feel that way.”*

Well, yes I do. Trying to second guess what someone is conveying is a slap in the face. A co-worker or friend trusts you with a conversation. It's not likely that you would intentionally give him the brush off. You may not want to hear what Manny has to say, but Manny is right there in front of you, trusting you. Manny's most intimate revelations or even his perceptions are important to him. You would not want to crush him in the middle of an exchange. If someone

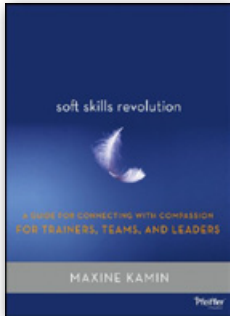
says “You don’t really mean that” to you, you have to think. Maybe you will revise your statement to be more acceptable. But, it may not be what you mean. “Don’t worry; it will all work out” is another dismissal. A better response might be “I have faith in what you come up with as a solution.” Or, “Tell me more about your thought/feeling process. Do you want to walk through it?”

Right or Kind?

As a conclusion, consider the question, “Is it better to be right or kind?” It’s human nature to want to be right. And, for some, it’s human nature to want to be kind. Several of the examples I have presented have to do with feelings. Personalities are different. Some people are, by their Myers-Briggs type, “feelers.” Some are “thinkers.” Thinkers most often prefer to be right. Feelers are wired for cooperation and harmony. But, even the most kind or the most rational person will have difficulty being invalidated. Is there an answer to the question “Is it better to be right or kind?” Are they mutually exclusive? I hope that with the skills that have been presented here, you will continue to be both.

I really appreciate your listening. 🙏

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Maxine Kamin is president of TOUCH Consulting, Inc.: The Personal Touch in Business. She is an author of internationally recognized books and training guides for the American Society for Training and Development such as *10 Steps to Successful Customer Service* and *Customer Service Training*. Her background includes fourteen years in academia as an instructor at the University of Massachusetts, dean level roles at Miami Dade College, director of Miami-Dade College's Pre-School Lab, and over twenty years in corporate positions, including Manager of Instruction and Evaluation at American Express. She founded TOUCH Consulting, Inc. in 1995, and works with companies all over the United States to enhance service delivery through improvement of systems and processes.

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