

Self-Facilitated Communication

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Talking with employees or business partners about personal or sensitive issues can be difficult, especially if those individuals are also family members. Sometimes in these situations a third party facilitator is necessary for effective communication. The dictionary definition of facilitate is, to make easy or easier. A facilitator then is someone, usually a neutral person, who provides structure and leadership to make a difficult communication process easier.

Frequently, rather than a third party facilitator, all you may need are a few communication techniques to provide some structure and help you through an occasional difficult conversation. Described here are several communication techniques that may provide the help you need to get through a communication impasse. Select the facilitation technique that feels right and will work best in your situation. In most cases a little time and practice will be needed before all parties feel comfortable with the technique and it starts working effectively for you.

Before You Begin

In order to come to a successful resolution to a disagreement or difficult conversation with someone, answer the following questions.

- ❑ Do you believe the person has something to say that you will find worthwhile?
- ❑ Given the opportunity, do you trust this person to express him or herself honestly?
- ❑ Do you feel that this person has the right to his or her own opinion? Of course they have the right to their opinion, the real question is, can you stand to hear it? You can, only if your ego and self-image are up to the task.
- ❑ Are you willing to listen to and understand all sides of the conflict and then compromise in order to come to a mutually acceptable agreement?

Affirmative responses to these questions from everyone involved will not guarantee success but will certainly help maximize the probability. And finally:

- ❑ How far are you willing to push it to get your way on this issue? Is it worth the damage to the relationship and possibly losing a friend, co-worker, employee, boss, or spouse? Deciding up front how far or how hard you are willing to push the issue will help you back off in time if the discussion gets out of hand.

Self-Facilitation Communication Techniques

Scheduled Time

If you and your partner are having a hard time even getting started discussing an issue, try the scheduled time technique. This usually takes the commitment of one party to initiate the communication that needs to occur. Remember that regular and frequent communication, even for short periods, is better than infrequent communication or avoidance.

1. Schedule a 10-minute time block per day for one week (preferably the same time each day, and for spouses NOT just before bedtime) when you will sit and discuss the issue uninterrupted.
2. Each person has 5 minutes to share their thoughts about the topic. (Use a timer with a bell so that you are not distracted by watching the time.)
3. Flip a coin to see who goes first.
4. GROUND RULES:
 - ❑ No interrupting the person who is speaking.
 - ❑ The person who speaks second must remember that this is an opportunity to share their thoughts, **NOT** to evaluate or respond to the first person's thoughts.
 - ❑ After 10 minutes when each of you have had your turn the discussion stops until the next scheduled meeting.

This technique is designed to get communications started not necessarily to resolve an issue or come to a conclusion. As you proceed with this technique you may wish to schedule longer discussion periods and potentially incorporate into your scheduled time some of the other techniques described here.

Written Responses

Frequently in a discussion one person is very influential or dominant. Once the dominant person expresses their opinion others may not say what they truly feel, or may say nothing at all if their ideas conflict with what has been said. This is bad because they may have very good ideas that are missed, and worse, frustration builds for them because they are not able to express their ideas and opinions. The written response technique is a very good tool in this situation.

Some people have difficulty organizing and communicating their thoughts during actual discussions. You may be one of those people if after a discussion you find yourself saying, "I wish I had remembered...", "I wish I had thought of...", or "I wish I had thought to say...". If this is you or someone you know then this technique may be very useful.

- Step 1. Involve everyone who is part of, or has a stake in, the problem or issue. As a group develop one or a series of problem or issue statements or questions to be answered or decided upon. If more than one statement or question is developed each one will be handled separately using this technique
- Step 2. Identify the first statement or questions to be dealt with. Each person, without any discussion, should take some time to just think about the issue.
- Step 3. Without talking with anyone else, each individual takes time alone to write out their thoughts, feelings and ideas about the problem, question or issue. Each person should be in a different room, away from others as they write. This may take 15-30 minutes or more depending on the complexity of the issue.
- Step 4. Without any discussion, exchange the written responses and read them. If there are more than two individuals, continue exchanging responses until everyone has read everyone else's response.
- Step 5. After all responses have been read, everyone involved should come together to talk about the similarities and difference between the written statements. This is also the time to ask questions and get clarification of points in the written responses that were unclear when you read them.

Start the discussion by focusing on the similarities and agreements first to build comfort and problem solving momentum for when the differences and disagreements are discussed. Be aware during the discussion when you or others may need another written response round in order to get all the ideas out and keep the discussion moving in a positive direction.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a well-known, widely used problem-solving tool. It encourages participants to use their imaginations and be creative. It helps elicit numerous solutions to any given problem or responses to any situation.

1. Gather all the people who are involved with the issue or problem and others you would like to have help you solve the problem.
2. On a large sheet of paper, write down the problem or question to be answered (e.g. What should I do in this situation? What's the best way to design or accomplish _____? How can we fix or improve _____?).
3. Designate someone to write down all the responses that people offer, and someone to watch the time. In some situations you may need more than one recorder.
4. For 20 minutes, as quickly as possible, gather as many responses as you can to the given question or situation. Follow these rules, which can be remembered through the word DOVE:
 - A. **D**efer judgment of the responses offered.

- B. **Offbeat ideas are welcome.** It is easier to tone down a wild idea than it is to pep up a bland idea.
- C. **Volume is encouraged.** Quantity eventually breeds quality.
- D. **Everyone is encouraged to build upon or modify the ideas of others.** Combining or modifying previously suggested ideas often leads to new ideas that are superior to those that sparked them.

Speaker / Listener Technique - “I Have The Floor”

This technique is useful when communication is not going well and escalates to arguments. It provides the structure to improve the safety and effectiveness of communication. Each person takes turns being a listener or the speaker. It is useful to have some non-threatening object for the speaker to hold which designates them as the speaker, the person who has the floor. When they have finished, they pass the object to a listener, who then becomes the speaker. Switch the floor as frequently as feels comfortable, the important thing is that everyone has adequate opportunity to speak.

Do not attempt to problem solve during this discussion. The speaker/listener technique is design to get all the issues, concerns and feelings out on the table and assure that everyone understands all the concerns and feelings, and the others' points of view. Other techniques are better for problem solving.

Speaker rules:

- ❑ Be as clear as possible in expressing your thoughts and feelings.
- ❑ Stick to one topic only.
- ❑ Use short clear statements, two or three sentences. This facilitates the listener paraphrasing back.
- ❑ Use “I” statements not “You” statements.
- ❑ Speak only for yourself; talk only about your feelings, ideas and desires. Don't assume you know what anyone else is thinking or feeling about an issue.
- ❑ Listen to the listener paraphrase back your comments and provide clarification if what you hear back is not what you intended to say.

Listener rules:

- ❑ Listen carefully. Do not plan your next response or rebuttal, you will have your uninterrupted turn later.
- ❑ Do not interrupt the speaker.
- ❑ Paraphrase or summarize in your own words what you just heard. This may feel contrived and artificial, but it is a very powerful tool to assure the speaker that you heard and understand what they said.

- ❑ Check for the accuracy of your understanding.
- ❑ Do not interject your comments or feelings, or indicate your agreement or disagreement, simply state what you heard and verify that is what the speaker meant.
- ❑ It does not require that you agree; just that you listen carefully and can accurately paraphrase what was said.

Monks Feedback

This is a variation on the speaker/listener technique, reportedly developed in Monastic Communities where large numbers of men living in close quarters had to get along. This is a good test of your ability to actively listen to someone with whom you strongly disagree on a particular point.

Person A states their position while person B remains silent and listens. Person B must then accurately restate person A's position before going on to state their position. Person A must then accurately restate B's position before going on to respond to it. B must then restate A's response before delivering their response and so on back and forth.

Doing this makes a strong statement that, "I acknowledge what you're saying and I know exactly what you mean". This does not necessarily mean you agree with the other individual but it does indicate that you value what they are saying enough to want to understand it.

Structured Questions

Rather than simply coming together to talk, having a set of specific questions to discuss can lead to a more fruitful outcome.

Structured questions can be specific to the problem or issue at hand. In this instance, as individuals involved think of questions or concerns surrounding the issue or problem they jot them down. Everyone involved then gets together to review and compare the questions that have been written and submitted. At this point agreement should be reached as to which questions will be dealt with during the next discussion. You may choose to deal with only one question or issue, just a few, or all of them at once, whatever seems manageable. In the interim everyone has the questions to think about, research and come prepared to discuss. This preparation can help considerably in moving discussions to a final discussion and agreement.

Structured questions can also take the form of generic questions applied to any discussion, such as:

- ❑ Based on what we think we know about the issue or problem, is there more information we need in order to have a more informed discussion? What are those pieces of information? Where can we find this information? Who will get it?
- ❑ What are the similarities in our ideas, thoughts and opinions on the issue or problem? List them as you identify them.
- ❑ Where are there differences between our ideas, thoughts and opinions? List them as you identify them.
- ❑ Looking back at the similarities, what specifics can we agree on? Write down these points of agreement.
- ❑ Are there areas in the differences between our thoughts, opinions and ideas that will require some facilitated discussion? Can the discussion be self-facilitated or would an outside facilitator be of value?

The “Sandwich” Technique

Sometimes communications break down and people stop listening or even avoid each other entirely because they perceive the messages to be always negative. One approach to overcome this perception of negativity and train ourselves to be more positive, is to use the “sandwich technique”. This involves “sandwiching” constructive criticism between two positive feedback statements. It allows people to hear the constructive criticism in a less defensive state of mind. It can also make us feel more comfortable offering constructive criticism because we can couple it with positive statements.

Several cautions:

1. If overused this technique becomes ineffective. People begin listening to the negative and tuning out the positives on either side. Sometimes we have to just deliver positive messages and leave the negative out altogether.
2. We must maintain the perception of at least an equal balance between positive and negative in the minds of the people we communicate with. Experts say the other person must hear at least 4 positive statements for every one negative statement or constructive criticism in order to feel that there is an equal balance. In the long run this technique will get you up to 2:1; a good start, but in the long run not nearly enough positive in the eyes of the receiver.
3. The positive feedback statements we use must be very specific. Frequently in our culture we are very specific in the criticism we offer and only vague and general in the praise or positive feedback we give. These general positive feedback statements like “good job” and “I appreciate your efforts”, are typically brushed off as meaningless and insincere conversation fillers because they are not specific enough to identify the exact positive behaviors. Negative statements, because they are usually very specific, are taken as more sincere and meaningful. The result: people

hear the negative statement, take that as the nature and intent of the communication and discount or do not hear the positive statements at all.

To use this as a self-training technique the rule is; you cannot make any negative or critical statement unless you can sandwich it between at least two specific positive statements. Again, a good start for most people, but not nearly enough to meet the minimum 4:1 ratio of positive to negative statements.

Let's Play Best Friend

This technique comes from Gestalt therapy. It is based on the concept that it is much easier to see things objectively if you are not directly involved in the situation but are a "best friend" who can step back, observe the situation, and give advice. It plays to the old notion that when you are wrapped up in a situation, "You can't see the forest for the trees".

The two people involved in a difficult conversation take turns acting as an observer of the conversation or situation and best friend of the other individual.

The technique starts by both individuals stating their position and feelings on the issues. Do not respond to the other persons' statements or reaction, simply state your own position. At this point the conversation stops.

Person A now acts as if they are person B's best friend, objectively observing the situation and conversation, and giving advice as though they were an objective 3rd party. When person A has finished the roles reverse and person B speaks as though they were an objective 3rd party and person A's best friend. An example may help.

Bill and Ann are married with two young children. Breakfast is one of the few times they have together without the children. Bill typically reads the paper, which aggravates Ann since she sees this as a statement about their relationship and eventually Bill feels the hostility. They decide this situation has gone on long enough and agree to play "Best Friend" to see if it will provide them with the basis for a solution to the problem.

Ann states her position, "It feels to me like you don't want to share your life with me, like you've lost interest in our relationship. This is one of the only times we get to be together without the kids".

Now Bill states his position, "I just enjoy reading the paper in the morning, it's the only chance I have all day. It doesn't mean I don't love you or don't want to talk to you".

Here the conversation stops. Bill and Ann now switch into their "best friend" roles.

Ann takes on the role of Bill's best friend and an objective 3rd party observer. "Bill, you know your wife really loves your company, you're her best friend. She has a lot she

wants to share with you and talk with you about, but sometimes she feels you just don't care to spend time with her anymore”

Next Bill takes on the role of Ann's best friend and an objective 3rd party observer. “You know Ann, Bill really loves you, but he's also a guy who really loves sports and talking about sports with colleagues at work. He does that as a way of socializing. He feels that if he doesn't read the sports section in the morning he'll be left out at work”.

The conversation may go back and forth several times with Bill and Ann playing the roles of each other's “Best Friend”. Both now have had the opportunity to speak about what was going on as though they were someone else observing the situation. Asking a “Best Friend” to comment brings some less emotional objectivity to the situation. It's amazing how much more objective you can be about a conflict when you act as though you are not directly involved and only giving advice. Hopefully Ann and Bill will begin to see that both have legitimate needs that they must work together to find time to fill.

This technique may not result in a solution to the situation or disagreement but it helps to get each side's concerns out in a more objective fashion that is less likely to spark emotional responses.

Ask For Advice

Depending on the situation and individuals involved, the simple act of asking for advice or constructive feedback can reduce emotional conflict and encourage the other person to more calmly discuss their true concerns and feelings about a situation. For example:

- ❑ What would you suggest?
- ❑ What do you think might work?
- ❑ How would you change the situation?

Questions like these tend to disarm the other person and can be extremely effective in neutralizing their emotion and getting a discussion moving forward.