



kort's korner

What is Your Response-Ability in Communication?

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The concept of Response-Ability comes from Rick Carson's "Taming Your Gremlin". Our interactions with others are dependent on our taking responsibility for our reactions and our responses to what is seen and heard. It is inappropriate to just react and say and do hurtful things to someone out of reactivity. This can only make the problem worse.

I use both a Shadow Process form of communication along with the IMAGO Relationship Model's Intentional Dialogue to help couples through difficult frustrations and conflicts with one another.

Clearings

Cliff Barry's communication model, which complements the Imago model, has four parts: data, judgment, feelings, and "what I want." Barry calls these communication strategies clearings, in that you clear up the misunderstandings that stand in the way of you and your partner's having good feelings toward each other and staying connected.

Data

As Sender, you say to your partner, "I want to do a clearing with you regarding my frustration about _____," then tell him what your frustration is. You state the data by talking about only the facts. You report what you heard him say and saw him do, word for word, and action for action. As Sender, you

do not interpret, judge, or try to change anything you perceived. Describe his behavior dispassionately, as if you were explaining it to a third party who wasn't there and wanted "Just the facts."

Talking to your partner, you would say, "I heard you say, " _____" or "I saw you _____,"

Keeping your own feelings and judgments totally out of this part of the exchange. Other behaviors you can mention include, "When you rolled your eyes..." or "When you looked away while I was talking..."

Using the Imago communication method, the other person simply mirrors the data of what he hears. All that the listener or Receiver is to do is reflect back what he hears you saying, nothing more. Otherwise, he breaks the mirror. Your tone of voice should be the same as if you were in a restaurant, asking, "Please pass the salt and pepper."

Judgment

In any significant situation, we can't help judging what happened, and the closer we are to the person involved, the more reactive we are and the more judgments we have. But in the judgment phase, you have the opportunity to verbalize your beliefs and explain your opinions about what you saw and heard; and the listener should mirror your judgment. We can't help judging what happened in any significant situation, and the closer we are to the person involved, the more reactive we are and the more judgments we have. Here you

are free to go into details of what you assume is going on. Remember that it's your truth, not the truth.

Here, you can say things like, "My guess about why you did that or said that is _____."

A cautionary note: one can go too far with judgment by becoming critical or contemptuous. That's not what this process is for. Understand that it offers a safe way for you to purge your judgments so they're no longer in your way. Doing so, you may discover some information about yourself; indeed, most of your judgments are really reflections on yourself. Removing your judgments lets you hear your partner more clearly.

This process lets the Sender discover what his own judgments say about him as well. In other words, your judgments are almost always more about you than about whomever you're judging. This helps you discover your shadow. Listening to your partner's judgments, it's crucial to keep this in mind. Otherwise, you'll take things too personally and not be able to listen. But there's almost always some truth to what your partner is telling you. Staying curious about whether there's any truth to his judgments helps you, as the listener, examine your own shadow.

We often fear judgment because it is wielded in such negative, punitive ways. In my groups and workshops, I invite participants to voice their judgments in a safe and contained way. Through hearing others' judgments as well as their own group members can learn a great deal about themselves and how they're

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perceived by others. If expressed and explored constructively, these oft-distorted reflections get corrected, helping people identify and work through each of their shadows.

Feelings

To accomplish this next stage, you need to be in touch with your feelings as the Sender and know how to express all of them, both positive and negative. Typical emotions to use as baselines are mad, sad, glad, afraid, ashamed, and even sexual. Most other feelings are spinoffs from those.

As the Sender, you would begin sentences like, “What hurts me about this frustration with you is _____” and “What scares and worries me about that frustration is _____.”

The next important technique comes from IRT. The Sender begins by saying, “This reminds me of my childhood when _____.”

This helps both you and your partner remember you're often being triggered by something that happened in your past. The event in question needn't be about your childhood (though it often is), but also about your past relationships. It's to your advantage to determine how your shadow is interfering in your current life. If you don't clear up unresolved issues from those past relationships, they'll likely follow you into the next one.

All of these feelings, judgments, and what you are reminded of in your past helps you move away from the surface problem (which is usually not the real problem anyway) and helps both the Sender and the Receiver understand that more is at play here than the specific, superficial argument they're having. Feelings and histories also play their part in the conflict.

But when you share your feelings, it's not fair to say things like, “You make

me feel _____” or “I wouldn't feel this way if you wouldn't _____.”

This puts the cause of your emotions on your partner, where it doesn't belong. Better to say things like, “When you tell me _____, I feel _____” or “I feel this way when you _____.”

That keeps the responsibility and accountability on you.

Before progressing to the final “what I want” quarter, I suggest that the Receiver validate what his partner is saying. Remember: this is not agreement or rather; it's simply letting him know that you've listened to him and that what he says makes sense from his point of view. Again, you keep on breaking through the “belief symbiosis” trap that suggests that your partner thinks as you do and sees things exactly the same way (or damn well ought to).

“What I Want”

What do you want that would relieve the frustration you're having with your partner? Imago employs a technique called Behavior Change Requests (BCR), in which one partner tells the other partner what he wants in a specifically outlined way. These requests should be positive, measurable, specific, and time-limited (PMST). As you can see, BCR works perfectly together with the “what I want” phase of communication.

“What I want” means saying what you do want, not what you don't want. Be specific: say exactly what you want, so there's no guessing and your partner knows exactly what to do. Make it measurable, as in: “I want _____ every day” and time-limited: “for the next two weeks” or “over the next month.” The trick here is to keep the time duration short enough that it can be measured and thereby not easily forgotten.

Usually, the Sending partner suggests three BCRs. That gives the Receiving

partner choices and lets him choose which one he can fulfill. The Receiver, however, might hear all three and not be able or willing to do any of them. As the Sender, you need to be flexible, remembering that if your partner says no, it simply means that right now, he cannot make that kind of commitment to any of the three. You want him to commit only to what he can do.

For his part, the Receiver can modify one request and ask, “Is that okay with you?” Also, he needs to understand that the Sender may not be okay with that at all and be willing to come up with three more things.

As the Sender offering three BCRs, you might secretly hope that your partner will pick a certain one and feel angry, sad, or hurt when he doesn't. You have to remind yourself that you will get whatever he can give at this time. Later, you'll have other opportunities to return to whichever BCR you want to give.

The secret here is keeping the same goodwill toward each other that you shared at the beginning. In these moments of communication, suspend judgments or at least don't act on them, and remember that each of you is doing the best he can and committing to the things he knows he can do best. ■