

Effective Communication Skills

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Intent vs. Impact

When communicating, intent refers to the message you are trying to convey to the other person. Impact refers to the message they actually receive. If we were all top rate communicators, our intent would always match our impact perfectly. It is important to learn more about intent and impact because it is when they don't match, that bitterness and hurt feelings can result. Look at the following example:

Jane had a really bad day. When she arrives home she sees that her husband Bill has, once again, left a mess in the kitchen. This makes her furious and she yells at him: "You never help me with anything around here!";.

Jane's intent was that she is frustrated because Bill often leaves a mess in the kitchen that she ends up cleaning. Her impact is that Bill hears: "You never help me with anything around here!";. How is the intent different from the impact? Think about it for a minute before reading on.

It is not that Bill never helps with anything, it is that he doesn't usually help cleaning the kitchen. When Jane tells him that he never helps, he feels unappreciated for all the things he does do, such as taking out the trash, making supper, earning an income for his family, etc. Instantly Bill becomes defensive and closed off to listening to anymore that his wife has to say on the matter. So much for healthy communication. How could Jane have clearly communicated her real feelings?

Before discussing a complaint with our partner we should always plan what we are going to say and how we are going to say it without hurting our partner or causing them to be on the defense.

One of the best ways to accomplish this is with "I"; language.

"I"; Language

"I"; language is using the words "I"; and "me"; as opposed to "you";, when voicing a complaint. Everyone is sensitive to complaints and criticism, we don't want to feel that it is our fault, that we have screwed up big time. Think of this, wife A might get very annoyed when her husband leaves his dirty clothes on the floor, wife B might not care at all if her husband leaves his dirty clothes on the floor. So, if wife A wants to express her complaint to her husband should she really focus on him? Should she say: "You are such a slob! You never put your clothes in the laundry hamper, you always expect me to pick them up!";? Rather than focus on what her husband is "doing wrong"; she should focus on herself because she is the one who is bothered by this. An excellent way to approach this issue with her husband would be to say:

"I really don't like your clothes being left on the floor because I have to pick them up when I do the laundry. It would be so much easier for me if you would put them in the laundry hamper.";

Now she is still communicating the same message, she wants him to put his clothes in the hamper, but she has done it in a way that doesn't blame or accuse.

Another benefit of "I"; language is that it avoids mind reading. "Research shows that mind reading is more common among distressed couples than among nondistressed couples." (Hyde and DeLamater, 2000) Take another look at the quote above:

"You are such a slob! You never put your clothes in the laundry hamper, you always expect me to pick them up!";

The wife is engaging in mind reading by assuming that her husband expects her to pick them up at all, he might not even notice if they stayed on the floor for weeks! :)

Give Examples

I'll admit it, I have a selective memory. A lot of people do. This is why you should always have some specific examples to cite when bringing a complaint to your partner. If you lash out at your partner angrily because she never listens to you, you may leave her wondering why you think she NEVER listens. She probably listens most of the time, but that once and awhile when she doesn't has become the straw that broke the camel's back. An example such as the following is very effective:

"Last night when I got home I was very stressed about my day. I tried to talk to you but I felt like you weren't paying attention. Were you distracted with something?"

This example is effective because it leads into a possible cause, maybe your loved one needs some time to wind down after their day before they can focus on listening. He or she has also been given a specific example that is easy to recount, not to mention that they don't feel unappreciated for all the times they do listen. Tactics such as this make someone want to do better next time. They don't feel blamed or unappreciated.

If you really want to add frosting to giving examples, follow your example up with a suggestion of what you would like for them to do next time. This saves your partner from having to figure out how to make you happy. Take the example below:

Bonnie and Jack went to a party together and Jack left Bonnie by herself while he went and talked with some friends. Bonnie felt abandoned and awkward because she did not know anyone to talk to. She could approach her husband like this: "Last night at the party I didn't know anyone and when you left me alone I felt very uncomfortable sitting by myself. Next time would you please introduce me to your friends so that we can all talk together."

So, to sum this up...it is important to make sure that our intent always matches our impact. To ensure this we should use "I" language instead of "you" language, avoid mindreading, and give examples of specific situations related to our complaint. Follow this up with suggestions that our partner can put to use next time. Good luck!

Reference: "Understanding Human Sexuality", Janet Shibley Hyde and John D. DeLamater, 2000

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