

Five Blocks to Effective In Person Communication

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Why do some people feel more comfortable communicating with email, on message boards or "Twittering" than communicating than face-to-face? As a radio and TV host and public affairs consultant I've seen and heard many people unintentionally stand in their own way of being comfortable and being effective up close and personal. Their verbal and nonverbal behavior blocks their efforts to get across what they want to say in one-by-one, groups, and over the air conversation and leaves them hoping to avoid a next time.

Psychologists Taibi Kahler and Hedges Capers have described five basic blocks to communication that we experience every day. Most of us stumble into these blocks at least occasionally because they originate in our culture. They begin as messages we receive in our earliest years from our parents and those around us.

Here they are. You'll recognize them in others and perhaps yourself.

1. Being perfectly precise. Individuals who get caught up in this block strain to make sure that what they say is absolutely precise in every detail. Being precise, they number or alphabetize their points. They use big words like *efficacious* when simpler words will do. They punctuate their sentences with such phrases as *exactly, of course, obviously*.

They may begin a sentence, stop cold, insert a clarifying phrase, add another explanatory sentence, or even a full paragraph, before going back to complete their original sentence.

They over-qualify their statements with words like *probably, usually, perhaps, for the most part, and kind of*.

Their tone of voice may be well-modulated or clipped and righteous; their posture is erect and rigid; their head pulled back. You can recognize them by their serious and stern facial expressions, often accompanied by appearing as if they just stepped out of a bandbox. You may also notice them using their fingers to count off, number, and itemize their points, scratching their head, and cocking their index finger and thumb like a pistol for emphasis.

2. Being pleasing. Individuals ensnared in this trap strain to please as they make their points, often ending them with a question. They play to and check with their listeners for agreement and will request reassurance for compliments by asking "Really?" or "Are you serious?" Their conversations are dotted with bell-ringer phrases such as: *kinda, you know, could you? would you? (instead of will you?), OK? Don't you think? Right?*

The voice tone of a person who goes overboard to please may be high, whining or seductive. Their hands may be outstretched, their eyebrows raised, their heads cocked or bobbing or nodding encouraging agreement. They may look away before answering a question, as if to see if a manager or parent is watching.

3. Trying too hard. Those trapped get ensnared in trying so hard to put their message across that then will start a sentence but never quite finishes it — starting, stopping, and starting over again. "Uhs" and "ahs" are never in short supply. They're inclined to ask multiple questions in a row or repeat your question even when they understand it. Their voice sounds impatient, their fists may be clenched as they talk, or their hands rapidly gesticulating about with choppy gestures.

They say things like "I can't, I don't know, I'll try, it's hard, and That's a problem."

Often they'll be sitting or leaning forward with his shoulders stiff, using more exaggerated facial expressions than would be needed to get their message across, such as wrinkling their brow, squinting, working their mouth. They're working overtime all the time.

4. Hurrying. Those driven by hurry-up will complete other's sentences the moment there's a pause. They issues *OK's* like a machine gun and call everyone to attention with *Come on – come on, we've got to go now, We've got to hustle, We hafta hurry, and So.*

Their speech is rapid, impatient, staccato-like, up and down. They move quickly, even when it is not necessary. You will notice them agitating, squirming, squinting, pacing, tapping fingers or feet impatiently as if staying in motion will speed things along.

5. Being stoically strong. Psychological investigation has found that we ordinarily use about 45 percent of our energy processing our emotions or feelings and about 35 percent processing information about ourselves or the outside world with the remaining 20 percent used to make judgments and forming opinions. We tend to expect that those we talk with will communicate in approximately this same pattern.

But stoically strong people with this block are different. They consciously or unconsciously cut off their feelings, or try to. They pushing them aside and hold them back. This takes a lot of psychic energy and sometimes to exhaustion or even over time to a heart attack.

Those stoically strong talk about feelings and opinions in the passive voice. Common expressions include *It came to me, That made me feel like, I don't care one way or the other, No comment on that, and You have to be able to take it.*

Their voices tend to be hard and monotonous, their posture, rigid. They fold their arms, and sometimes brace themselves as if digging in or holding on. Their facial expressions can be described as stone-faced, cold, hard, distant, and motionless.

Getting over these blocks

If you recognize yourself with any of these characteristics, don't be discouraged. As I said earlier, nearly everyone gets stuck in them to one degree or another or from time to time. But if they are limiting or obstructing your ability to feel relaxed and comfortable talking person-to person, then take note that everyone has the capacity to change these habits and develop the ability to be a clear and smooth as a conversationalist in person or at the podium.

Sometimes we are not aware of the personal traits that limit our communication until they are pointed out to us by others or we have a chance to see ourselves on our monitor or a TV screen. Our response to such feedback is usually "I didn't know I sounded like that!" or "I wasn't aware that I do that."

Like any habit, retraining is possible in a matter of weeks or months by paying attention and pausing to give yourself replacement messages like "I can take my time," or "I am doing fine; I don't need to try hard." However, in coaching candidates and spokespeople, we find that ongoing video feedback can be a shortcut for getting rid of blocking behaviors that reveal our discomfort and keep us from being as effective as we might be as communicators.

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