

When Emotions Get in the Way

It is not unusual in a communications workshop for a participant to state a learning goal of "putting emotions aside so I can communicate more clearly." What he/she is usually expressing is a desire to sound rational and logical, to not show how difficult the conversation feels. The possibility of being seen as having this emotion, whether it is anger or fear or any other feeling that is perceived as negative, often prevents us from saying anything. The wish, then, is to separate the emotion from the conversation.

But there is no such thing as "putting emotions aside." As any child who has ever been caught in a lie will tell you, people have an uncanny way of knowing what you are not telling them. The more you try NOT to let someone know you are angry, upset, worried or even happy, the more your body and tone will communicate the truth.

An illustration: Your boss comes to your office, stands in your doorway, arms folded across his/her chest, and tells you in a monotone voice with a deadpan face, "I've just come from an executive meeting and I've got some great news. We'll all meet in the conference room in half an hour and I'll tell you all about it." Remember -- arms folded, monotone and deadpan. What would you be thinking when your boss leaves your doorway? If you are like most people, you would be thinking "Uh oh, better get my résumé in order."

Why might you have that reaction? Didn't your boss say it's "great news"? Why wouldn't you believe his/her words?

Another illustration: On May 11, 2000, The Boston Globe published an article titled "In Detecting Liars, Actions Speak Louder Than Words," by Richard A. Knox. It stated: "Researchers report today that people who have suffered brain damage that wipes out their ability to decipher speech are much sharper than almost everybody else at spotting lies." This type of brain damage is called *aphasia* and most commonly occurs as a result of a stroke.

What does this tell us? That people with aphasia are less distracted by our attempts to hide the truth with our words. They concentrate on body language and tone and as a result can better discern who is telling the truth.

Another illustration: Hippo Family Club is an organization for teaching language and bringing people together across cultures. One of the basic premises is that if people who speak different languages spend time together doing things, they will eventually begin to understand each other. Ultimately, this occurs as exposure to the sounds of another language begin to sound familiar, and take on a pattern that is recognized and can be deciphered, just as we learned our native language. But until that direct deciphering of language is possible, Hippo Families rely on body language and tone to express their intentions.

How is it that I can make you understand me just using body language and tone, but not just using words?

Often cited research* indicates that **only 7% of the message we receive while communicating with others comes from the words that are used.** Seven percent! That means that 93% of the message comes from body language (55%) and tone (38%).

The crucial underlying message is this: If our words are presenting the same message as our body language and our tone, our message will more likely be believed. If there is dissonance between our words, body language and tone, our words will be discounted.

So when my body is experiencing emotions and I try to hide them through my use of words, my body will communicate its message much "louder" than my words, however well crafted.

And by not stating my true feelings, I signal that I am trying to hide them which can make them even more distracting to the person I am trying to hide them from.

So if you can't put your emotions aside, and you really need/want to have the conversation, what can you do to make it as productive as possible? Speak your truth.

"Your truth" is about your experience, your reactions, your thoughts and feelings. "Your truth" is not "THE truth." There is no such thing.

"Your truth" is complicated. If it was all negative, that is, you are angry and don't care at all about your relationship with this person, you would probably just avoid the individual and that would be the end of it. But if you, for whatever reason, care enough about the relationship to wish your emotions did not get in the way, then your truth is complicated.

You might say "I'm feeling really (*angry/frustrated/hurt/nervous/impatient/fill in the blank*) AND (*our relationship/the work we do together/fill in the blank*) is important to me, so I'd like us to talk about how we can move ahead."

Or "I'm uncomfortable talking with you about this AND I think it's important to our/your success that we do so."

When we speak our complicated truth, we honor the other party. We share our experience, as difficult as it is, without blaming. We invite the other to explore with us. We assume that any hurt we received was unintentional and gives both of us the opportunity to learn.

When we withhold our truth, because our "emotions are in the way," we rob the other party of critical information about his/her impact on others. And we rob ourselves of the opportunity to transform a hurt into a learning.

** Mehrabian, Albert (1971), "Silent messages," Wadsworth, Belmont, California*

© Francine Crystal , 2000