

## Thinking about Communication

By David Beagan

“What people don’t realize is that I’m faster than you think I am,” I heard a young man say on a TV show. I loved the delightful incongruity between “people” in the first part of the sentence and “you” in the last part. Unfortunately, I think the young man who said it had no idea how awkward it sounds, delightful or not, and how he could fix it. When he goes on a job interview, will he even be aware of how lack of ability with language will be viewed? We are all fallible. For example, I recently heard, “I am a risk taker and I have all of my life.” Probably a slip of the tongue, next time the speaker would undoubtedly say, “... and I have *been* all of my life.”

Or consider this example, heard recently, “I hope there is a golden retriever here,” uttered by someone upon arriving at a park to test a pet cleanup product. He meant to say golden retriever, but his brain substituted a different word. So yes, none of us are perfect. But more and more I observe people who are inept in their ability to communicate. Maybe as I have gotten older, I am more sensitive to these things. Sometimes in professional situations it seems people are struggling to get their point across – grasping for the right word, blathering on as if talking enough about ones thought might somehow be the same as actually communicating it. I understand that people are doing the best they can. But for those who may wish to do better, here are some thoughts on how we can all do better.

Let’s start right off with getting our mindset right. While almost none of us could be considered roles models for grammatical perfection, those who claim, “it doesn’t matter how I say something as long as I get my point across.” To me, they might as well be saying, “who cares if I am lazy?” How much time, effort, and money have been wasted because people think or assume that they understand one another when really they do not. Only later do they find out that they were not communicating well.

I remember, growing up, I had learned the bad habit of saying, “I *seen* it.” A work friend would repeatedly correct me, reminding me that I should say, “I *saw* it.” Eventually I broke the habit. Another I am still working on is saying “hissself.” No such word! Correct is of course, “himself.” I’m getting better, but still working on that one.

Here are some of my peeves with how people communicate to me. I sometimes hear people start off with a pronoun, as in, “she will be coming back in a minute.” Excuse me, who is *she*? If we haven’t been talking about someone, I cannot know who you are thinking of.

One of the foundations of being a good communicator is empathy. The ability for the speaker to put himself in the shoes of the listener. Always endeavoring to understand what the other person knows, what their viewpoint is, and how what is being said will be perceived. So many times I hear someone explain something to another person and think, that is a great explanation – for someone like you who already understands it! A lot of being a good verbal communicator involves being a good listener. While explaining, are you getting indicators of understanding: nods, “uh-huhs,” and an intent listener? Good. Or are you getting silence, and averted gaze, or other signs of disinterest? Not good.

I sometimes hear people exclaim, “can I finish” when interrupted. Generally it is thought of as rude to interrupt. I remember during one of the presidential campaigns that maverick candidate Ross Perot would sometimes, exclaim, “can I finish?” Now I am sure that in some cases he was justified in calling the interviewer on interrupting him. But it seemed he did it so much that one of the nighttime comedians would imitate him doing it and everyone would know who was being mocked. Mr. Perot would have better served his campaign by giving appropriately succinct answers in the time frame allotted and thus not inviting interviewers to cut him off. Too many politicians have perfected the fine art of the filibuster, filling the time with blather so that there is less time for them to be asked difficult questions. So I think the lesson on interruptions is, try not to, but if the other person is going on, and on, and on, politely ask to jump in, apologizing as necessary. Another technique, usually in a professional situation, is to write your question or comment so you don’t forget. It should almost go without saying, that as a speaker, if you don’t want to be interrupted keep your points on point, pause for questions, and do not monopolize the conversation.

Some parting points. Keep the language as simple as possible. A wise one once said, “brevity is the soul of wit.” Avoid using jargon unless you are certain the listener knows its meaning. A silent pause is always more effective than filling with “um,” “uh,” or “you know.” A smile and eye contact, can make up for myriad other deficiencies. Always be polite, respectful, and never condescending, especially in the face of anger. I think one of the greatest things I ever heard from Wayne Dyer was, when confronted with a choice of being right or being kind, always choose kindness.