

# How to Develop Effective Communication Skills

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In the words of author C. S. Lewis, *“pain is inherent in the very existence of a world where souls can possibly meet.”* If pain is inherent, we can easily assume that conflict and differences are also inevitable. Whenever two or more people commit to developing a relationship or to nurturing its growth—whether friendship or familial—conflict will arise.

God has designed each of us as unique beings with different strengths, abilities, gifts, and shortcomings. Moreover, we each also have differing frames of reference that were developed in our particular families, friendship circles, educational backgrounds, etc. Even beyond this, we each have unique perceptions that may easily be misinterpreted or misunderstood. Because of our diversity, great care needs to be taken to communicate clearly, or misunderstandings can lead to anger and resentment; where the devil can gain a foothold (Ephesians 4:27).

No matter what the circumstance is, we need to get along with each other—at least enough to communicate our thoughts, feelings and intentions clearly so that they are understood and received by the other person. Applying these rules to your interactions with other people will help to insure that accurate communication will take place.

Write your first initial next to each rule that you need to work on, and the first initial of the person you are in conflict with if you feel it is a rule that he or she needs to work on.

## Ten Rules of Caring Confrontation

1. \_\_\_ ***Learn to separate major issues from minor issues.*** Conflict can easily get out of control when we major in the minors. If an issue is not worth confronting, prayerfully submit it to God’s control. Try to look at the “big picture” and focus on the person’s positive traits rather than his or her negative ones. Also, make sure that you do not keep the issue alive by discussing it with other people. We also focus on the minor issues at times to *avoid* focusing on the major ones. For such conflicts to be resolved, someone must have the insight, courage, and wisdom to recognize the unnamed issue and name it out loud.
2. \_\_\_ ***When conflicts arise, confront them as soon as possible.*** Once a problem clearly exists and it is perceived as in need of confrontation, deal with it openly, forthrightly, and directly (Galatians 2:11). Be sure to do it thoughtfully and kindly or else the other person will become defensive as if under attack. Remember, the longer one waits, the more intractable the problem becomes. Time tends to magnify resolvable grievances into unresolvable grudges. The emotions behind the conflict gradually build up pressure until the issue comes out explosively rather than constructively.
3. \_\_\_ ***Stick to the subject at hand.*** Stay focused on the specific issue to avoid drifting into other problems. In times of conflict, people often want their case to be as big and convincing as possible. It is too easy to gather all of the ammunition one can think of—dredging up past issues, side issues, character issues—to hammer their point home. Conflict cannot be constructively resolved by incorporating issues that will create a defensive atmosphere.
4. \_\_\_ ***In times of conflict, avoid generalizing; be specific.*** If you are specific, you give them something concrete to deal with—whether they agree with you or not. This point has been applied to previous studies as well. Avoiding words such as “always” and “never” can prevent the other person from taking a defensive stance and counterattacking with a destructive response. Generalizations tend to be perceived as a personal and injurious statement about ones character rather than about his or her performance. If you can make a specific statement about a

specific issue, people are able to be much more objective. Furthermore, when you generalize, people have a difficult time understanding what it is that you want them to change in their behavior.

5. \_\_\_ **Avoid personal insults and character assassination.** Keep the conflict focused on issues, not personalities. Again, avoid behavior or comments that put the other person on the defensive. Demonstrate that your true allegiance is to the healing the *relationship*, not to the issue at hand. No matter how intense the conflict is, the other person should always feel confident that you value him or her.
6. \_\_\_ **Express real feelings; avoid intellectualizing.** The retreating into philosophical exchanging of ideas only masks the true feelings that are so important to resolving conflict. It actually serves as a defense mechanism to avoid the true conflict. Expressing genuine feelings does mean taking a risk. We make ourselves vulnerable by exposing our true self and by being transparent to someone who could hurt us and may not respect our feelings. Ideally, the other person will see your sincerity and be more receptive to the confrontation. If not, remember that the other person's response is not a reflection on you, but on him or her. You cannot control what he or she will do, so don't personalize it.
7. \_\_\_ **Demonstrate unconditional love and affirmation without being Patronizing.** I Corinthians 13: 4-7 sums up this point best as it focuses on the proper attitude and standard that we should all apply in the midst of any conflict or confrontation: patience, kindness, rejoicing with the truth, bearing all things, believing all things, hoping all things, enduring all things; not jealous, not bragging, not arrogant, not unbecoming, not seeking its own, not provoked, not taking into account a wrong suffered, not rejoicing in unrighteousness.
8. \_\_\_ **Demonstrate empathy and reflective listening.** Put yourself in the other person's shoes—how would you feel if *you* were in the same place? This is a natural extension of steps 6 & 7. Also, listen to what the other person is really saying, what feelings is he or she expressing? Do not unload a preset speech, which will make the other person defensive. Instead, seek to learn and to be responsive to the other person's issues and emotions. When the other person speaks, *really listen*; do not prepare yourself mentally for the next point that you want to make. Your active listening will foster receptivity and prevent a wall of defense from being built. An effective tool to ensure reflective listening is *mirroring*—repeating back to the other person what you heard him or her say in your own words. This allows the *other person* to feel he or she has been heard accurately, and it allows *you* to understand the other person's thoughts, feelings, and issues on a deeper level as you verbalize it.
9. \_\_\_ **Affirm publicly, confront privately.** Don't air your dirty laundry in public! Rebuking and confronting people in public bring humiliation, embarrassment, and shame. It destroys both self-esteem and relationships. It is also contrary to 1 Corinthians 13 as previously mentioned.
10. \_\_\_ **Confront to heal, not to win.** Seek growth, not victory. Seek a stronger relationship, greater understanding (Proverbs 15:31-33), and a healing resolution. Seek to learn, change, and grow from the conflict as much or more as you want the other person to learn, change, and grow.

In any conflict, the only winners are those who learn how to manage the situation so that it brings about a positive, constructive resolution. When we approach conflict with courage, honesty, and love for the other person, conflict is no longer the enemy of our relationships—it is our ally.

The preceding rules are based in part on material from Minirth-Meyer's "Complete Life Encyclopedia."