People Skills

What’s in it for me? Improve your personal and professional relationships with time-tested communication techniques.

Communication is the lifeblood of any relationship. Whether it’s with friends, colleagues, family, or romantic partners, people experience deeper satisfaction as a result of effective communication. And yet most people aren’t great communicators. We’ve learned and developed communication habits and patterns that create interpersonal gaps and inhibit our ability to truly understand and connect with others. The good news is that you’re not doomed to repeat the communication habits that aren’t serving you. These blinks will explore how you can actively change for the better by replacing dysfunctional habits with new and effective communication skills. In these blinks, you’ll learn

how to identify and eliminate conversational roadblocks; how to practice reflective listening; constructive ways to confront others; how to reduce defensiveness in others; and a process to resolve conflicts collaboratively.

Before learning new communication skills, correct poor conversational habits.

From an early age, most of us are taught flawed ways of relating to those around us – things like being superficial, hiding our feelings, and manipulating others to get what we want. These tendencies are habitual and learned, usually from well-intentioned people who were also given inadequate communication tools. And that means they can be unlearned and replaced – once we identify them. Think about a time you’ve entered into an interpersonal exchange, determined to make it a successful one – and then found yourself disappointed afterward. Maybe you told yourself you’d be kind and gentle with your parents before a holiday visit. But as soon as they started criticizing you, you took the bait and argued for an hour. If you’ve had an experience like this, you’re not alone. Most people yearn for better communication than they typically achieve. Yet, an estimated 90 percent of the time, they spoil conversations with 12 common communication roadblocks. These tend to make people either more compliant or argumentative; they also undermine the self-esteem of all parties involved and thwart the self-determination of the person who’s sharing their problem. There are three major roadblock categories. First up? Judging. You judge when you criticize, name-call, or diagnose the person you’re talking to – in other words, when you play armchair psychologist and analyze their behavior. Judging others also includes praising. Praise may seem innocent, but it can be used to control, manipulate, outmaneuver, or sweet-talk. The second category is sending solutions. There are various ways you send solutions to other people. One is by ordering – that means calling the other person’s judgment into question. Another is by threatening, which emphasizes the punishment that will result if the solution you want isn’t implemented. Both can diminish your self-

esteem when you employ them. Another way of sending solutions is excessive or inappropriate questioning, which is impersonal and tends to invite a defensive response. Then, there's advising – which may seem innocuous but can be insulting, as it calls the other person's intelligence into question. Plus, although it's tempting to offer advice, the truth is that only the person expressing their problem can truly understand the full emotional and logistical scope of it, no matter how much they explain to the other person. The goal when someone has a problem is to help them solve it themselves. The third major roadblock category is avoiding the other's concern. You do this when you divert the conversation to what you want to talk about, keep the other person at an emotional distance with logical responses, or offer reassurance. That last one, reassurance, may come as a surprise – but reassuring someone can be a way to emotionally withdraw from the other person while appearing to be helpful.

Listening is more than just hearing – it's about active involvement with the speaker.

Did you know that you spend more time listening than doing anything else? A study showed that people with different occupations spent 70 percent of their waking hours communicating. And, of that time, listening accounted for 45 percent! However, society doesn't prioritize listening skills. In fact, people grow up receiving antilistening advice like, "Don't pay any attention to them." Parents demonstrate inattentiveness and offer roadblock-laden responses to problems – behaviors they inherited from their own parents. Furthermore, experts say that people can only listen effectively from one-third to two-thirds of the time – yet most schools structure classes so that students spend significantly more time listening than practicing any other communication skill. As a result, people tune out, ignore, misunderstand, or forget what they've just heard – and perhaps most tragically, they often neglect to listen for deeper meaning. After a lifetime of antilistening training, improving can seem tough, so the author recommends a simplified approach – focusing on small clusters of skills and gaining proficiency in just a few at a time. There are three clusters: attending, following, and reflecting. Attending is a way of nonverbally communicating that you sense the importance of what the speaker is saying and that you're committed to trying your best to understand them. Practice attending by assuming a relaxed-but-alert posture of involvement, in which you face the speaker squarely, leaning forward just slightly. Keep your arms and legs uncrossed to avoid communicating defensiveness, and maintain an appropriate distance of about three feet. Eye contact is also essential; when your eyes flit around the room, it suggests indifference. The second cluster, following, is about staying out of the speaker's way so you can find out how they view the situation. This means paying attention to nonverbal cues that suggest they have something on their mind, as well as sending noncoercive invitations to talk, or door openers. A door opener could be describing the other person's demeanor back to them. Or, since attending is part of initiating a door opener, it could also include a posture of involvement and eye contact. For example, if a friend's been sighing and looking down a lot, you might say, "You seem disappointed today. Would you like to talk about it?" If they don't, let it go – the empathetic listener respects others' privacy and honors their separateness. If they do take you up on your invitation, use minimal encouragement to facilitate their self-exploration. Without agreeing or disagreeing, say things like, "Tell me more," "I see," and "Really?" Don't follow up with closed questions, which only invite a specific, short

response. Instead, use open questions, like “What’s on your mind?” These give the other person space to express their thoughts.

Reflective listening communicates acceptance and understanding.

Say you’re having one of those days when everything seems to go wrong. The car won’t start, you’re late for an important meeting, and then you spill coffee on your white shirt. You come home, and now you’ve accidentally burnt the lasagna. Your partner says, “When will you learn how to cook?” How do you feel? Now imagine that instead of ridiculing your cooking, your partner says, “Wow, you’ve had a rough day – first the car, then the meeting, now the lasagna.” How would you feel then? Grateful for the nonjudgmental response? Validated because they’ve accurately summarized your experience? This is an example of the third listening skill cluster: reflective listening. You practice reflective listening when you exhibit the following listening skills: paraphrasing, reflecting feelings, reflecting meaning, and summative reflection. Paraphrasing is when the listener relays the essence of the speaker’s content in their own words. A paraphrase is concise, cuts through the clutter, and focuses on the speaker’s central message. For example, let’s say Maria says to her friend Sara, “I don’t know if I should have children or not. Paul and I are still paying off our student loans; I can’t imagine saving up for a down payment anytime soon. What if by the time we can buy a house, I can’t get pregnant? It’s so unfair that our parents didn’t have to worry about debt like we do.” If Sara chose to paraphrase Maria’s problem, she might say something like, “You want to be financially stable before you have children, but our generation has the odds stacked against us.” Reflecting feelings, on the other hand, is when the listener relays the emotional crux of the speaker’s message. The speaker may be experiencing a lot of emotions, but as they talk, the listener tries to determine the principal one. This helps the speaker realize their true feelings about the problem – which can assist them in moving toward a solution. If Sara chose to reflect Maria’s feelings, she might add that Maria seemed worried and frustrated. Reflecting meaning is when the listener combines the feelings and facts they’ve gleaned from the speaker’s message and provides a succinct response. If Sara were to practice reflecting meaning, she might say, “You’re worried about not being as financially stable as you’d like to be before having children, and you’re frustrated that our generation has the odds stacked against us.” Finally, a summative reflection is when you briefly restate the main themes and feelings of a longer conversation. The listener ties together the most important fragments of the conversation, allowing the speaker to zoom out and understand themselves more clearly.

Practice healthy confrontation by sending three-part assertion messages.

Being able to listen effectively is hugely important, but it isn’t everything. Vital relationships are sustained through a complementary balance of listening and another form of communication – asserting. If effective listening can be described as offering understanding and acceptance to another person, asserting is when you disclose your own needs, emotions, and desires. Assertion encompasses both defending your personal space and impacting other people and society in nondestructive ways. Every individual

has a personal space: a physical, psychological, and values-oriented territory which is theirs to defend. At the same time, they have a psychological need to impact the world. This is the nonaggressive, nourishing way in which people reach out to one another, establish relationships, and give and receive love. Another way of looking at assertion is to see it in the middle of a continuum between submission and aggression. A person who mostly acts submissively tends to avoid conflict, while a person who mostly acts aggressively seeks and secures their wants and needs at the expense of others. Both submission and aggression interfere with your ability to forge intimate relationships. The submissive person's repressed emotions breed resentment toward the people they've sacrificed for; submission can also lead to depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, migraines, chronic fatigue, hypertension, and more. Aggressive behavior sows fear and distrust, and the aggressive person tends to make enemies and alienate themselves. The better option? Assertion. Assertion allows people to take responsibility for their own lives and stop leaning on dysfunctional behavior in an attempt to get their needs met. Assertion also helps people realize and meet one another's needs, which promotes intimacy and leads to fulfilling relationships. Unsurprisingly, assertive people tend to feel good about themselves. To begin practicing assertive communication, start sending three-part assertion messages. The first part of this kind of message should include an objective, specific, nonjudgmental description of the behavior you're asking the other person to change. So instead of saying "when you don't pull your weight around the house," you could try, "when you don't clean up after yourself in the kitchen." The second part is sharing your feelings – for example, "I feel annoyed." Finally, clarify exactly how the other person's behavior affects you. That might sound something like "because it makes more work for me before I start cooking." Beginners should only send a three-part assertion message if their message meets the following criteria: it's highly likely to be effective; there's a low risk of violating the other person's space; there's a low probability it will diminish the other's self-esteem; and the other person is unlikely to respond so defensively that it will damage the relationship. The author also recommends that beginners write down their assertion messages before delivering them verbally. While it's unethical to try and change another person's behavior, when someone is violating your space, you have the right to confront them. Defending yourself in this way is not manipulative, nor is it controlling – it's establishing reasonable boundaries.

When people respond defensively, use the six-step assertion process.

Even if you've written and delivered your assertion message with the utmost respect, the other person will probably be defensive. But this is a normal human tendency. After all, it's uncomfortable to learn that you've negatively affected someone's life. Also consider that defensiveness tends to trigger defensiveness. That means you might unexpectedly find yourself feeling hostile – but try not to act on that feeling. It's easy for an attempted assertion to turn into a defensive back-and-forth between two people. When that happens, the asserter's needs often remain unmet, and both people's self-esteem suffers. The skill of sending effective assertion messages, then, isn't just in delivering the message. It also includes dealing with defensive responses. The author found that a six-step assertion process tends to yield more successful results than merely sending an assertion message. The first step is to write out the assertion message in advance, making sure it's brief, appropriate, and non-blaming. Ask yourself whether you've built a base of trust with the other person. This may not always be the

case – but an assertion message sent before establishing trust is more likely to adversely affect motivation. At the beginning of assertion training, it's important to choose situations in which you're likely to be successful. Then you can work your way up to more difficult assertions. When it's time to send the message, don't engage in small talk – step two is to get right down to business. Your body language should demonstrate seriousness, but also respect, for the other person. Once you've sent your concise, respectful assertion message – stop. That's step three. Give the other person a moment of silence to think about what you said. Let them express their defensiveness. Next, it's time for step four: practice reflective listening. When defensiveness is reflected with respect, it typically subsides. You may discover that the other person has a strong need that conflicts with yours. In that case, you can switch to collaborative problem-solving, which we'll look at in the next blink. After you've gone through the first four steps, you're ready for step five: cycling through the process again. It typically takes three to ten cycles before the other person truly understands and is willing to find a way to meet your needs. Effective assertion requires a balanced rhythm of asserting and reflecting. This shifting between roles is the most demanding communication skill the author teaches. If the other person reacts defensively and you strike back instead of listening, the interaction becomes aggressive rather than assertive. Likewise, if you get stuck in a listening role and fail to reassert, the interaction becomes submissive. Finally, step six is to focus on the solution by making sure the other person's proposal meets your needs – and by speaking up if it doesn't. If you're satisfied with the solution, paraphrase it back to the other person. Then arrange a future time to check in and make sure it's working.

Resolve conflicts productively by centering emotions and using collaborative problem-solving.

Even for the most skilled communicators, conflict is unavoidable. In the best-case scenario, it's disruptive; in the worst case, it's highly destructive. But some forms of conflict can also be beneficial to a relationship's growth. So how can you approach conflict in a way that minimizes potential damage? Before diving into details, it's important to note that there are two major types of conflict: nonrealistic and realistic. Nonrealistic conflict is unlikely to be productive. It's rooted in issues like ignorance, historical tradition and prejudice, and needless competition. Therefore, your objective when faced with a nonrealistic conflict is to prevent it from escalating. Manage this by using fewer roadblocks, practicing reflective listening and assertion, and cultivating acceptance for other people. A realistic conflict, on the other hand, can be resolved constructively. It arises when two parties have opposing needs or values. Realistic conflicts can be broken down further as conflicts of emotions, conflicts of values, and conflicts of needs. When you're dealing with a conflict of emotions or values, you can utilize the three-step conflict-resolution method. First, treat the other person with respect. Then, listen until you can empathize with them – which becomes possible as you reflect feelings, content, and meaning. Finally, briefly state your own views, needs, and feelings. The conflict-resolution method helps diffuse tension and allows both parties to release pent-up emotions, which usually subside quickly. One or both persons may change their minds, and even if they "agree to disagree," their emotional bond is often strengthened. Now, if you're dealing with a conflict of needs, you'll want to use the collaborative problem-solving method. Collaborative problem-solving requires use of

all the communication skills you've learned thus far: listening skills, assertion skills, and, finally, the conflict-resolution method. Let's consider a situation in which everyone in a household wants to use the car to attend separate activities on the same day. With collaborative problem-solving, once everyone discovers their conflicting needs, they can work together to devise a solution acceptable to all. This involves six steps. First, the group redefines the problem in terms of needs, not solutions. In this case, the problem isn't that everyone needs the car – it's that everyone needs some form of transportation. Second, everyone brainstorms to find novel alternatives, suspending critical judgment and going for quantity over quality. Third, they select the solution that will best meet everyone's needs. Each person chooses their favored solution, and they all see which choices coincide. Fourth, the group plans who will do what – when and where – and they write it all out. Next, they implement the plan. Last, they evaluate the process and then, at a future date, discuss how well the solution turned out. If the problem-solving method doesn't work the first time, they cycle through it again – making sure to avoid roadblocks!

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: While conversational roadblocks aren't always negative, most of us overuse them – thwarting our attempts to connect with others. You can improve your communication by avoiding roadblocks and building better habits like reflective listening and assertion. These two complementary skills are necessary when resolving larger interpersonal conflicts and engaging in collaborative problem-solving. And here's some actionable advice to use right now: Fine-tune your emotional sensitivity in conversation. The next time you practice reflective listening, be aware of the speaker's feelings. Do this by focusing on the feeling words they use, observing their body language, and asking yourself, "If I were having that experience, what would I be feeling?" When you reflect feelings back to the speaker, carefully consider the feeling words that you use. Try to be as accurate and specific as possible. For example, if you infer that the other person is sad, ask yourself why, or in what way? Maybe they're "heartbroken" or "crushed" – or they feel "left out."