



COMMUNICATING FROM THE HEART

A Practical Guide by Moreah Vestan, M.A.

How many times have you kicked yourself for how you said something or how it was received? Your intentions may have been good, but the other person ended up feeling hurt or angry or worse. You ask yourself, "What could I have said so no one had bad feelings?" You know you are not responsible for their hurt. They have interpreted what you said, and have experienced it as pain. Still, you wonder how it could've been better.

I've been studying and practicing empathic or compassionate communication (read Marshall Rosenberg's *Nonviolent Communication*) for a couple years. I don't always succeed, but when I've used it, I feel better about the results and usually the other person does also.

Let's use some examples. Think of a situation where you wish a verbal exchange had gone better. Perhaps you told your boy friend "I'm tired of you going out with the guys every week. You don't take ME out every week!"

Maybe you said to your Mom, "It's none of your business. Don't tell me what to do!" How about the time you said to your friend, "I'm tired of hearing the same complaint. If you don't like your job, leave it!" What about when you shot back

at your brother, "Well, I can think of a couple times you've been pretty selfish, too!"

On the one hand, you're just being honest. And, you defend yourself, "honesty is the only way to go." You won't hear me saying honesty is NOT the way to go. But I do want to urge honesty from the heart, not just from the head. One of the best models I know for that is empathic communication at the Center for Nonviolent Communication (<http://www.cnvc.org/>). Rosenberg uses a 4-step model of observation, feeling, need, request. (OFNR--think of doing it oftener, if that helps your memory).

Let's do the four scenarios above by Rosenberg's model. Instead of the complaint about not being taken out enough by her boy friend, the woman could say, "When I hear about you going out with the guys each week, and sometimes I don't see you for ten days, I feel hurt and disappointed because I need to know I am important to you. Would you be willing to make a Fri. or Sat. date with me every week?" In this case, he's not likely to feel defensive, because she's expressing her feelings, and not making accusations. He's likely to feel motivated to keep her from feeling hurt, even though he didn't MAKE her feel that way. Let's do another one.

In the second situation, you're upset because you feel your Mom interferes in your life. How would she feel if, instead, you said, "Mom, when I hear you telling me what I ought to do, I feel frustrated and angry, because I need to feel respected for the choices I make. Would you be willing to ask me, when you have advice, if I am open to it, and only tell me what you think if I am open to your thoughts?" Mom may still feel she has good ideas but she's not likely to want an angry or frustrated son or daughter, so she'll probably think twice next time. If she forgets--habits don't change overnight usually--it's fine to say, "Mom, when I hear you give advice without my asking for it, I feel like walking away from you, because I need to have my wishes honored. Would you please wait until I ask for your advice?"

When you tell your friend, "If you don't like your job, leave!" she may feel hurt and defensive. Maybe you could say, "When I hear you talking about how hard it is to deal with your job, I feel concerned and anxious about you, because I need to know you're doing what is right for you. Would you let me know what you're doing to feel better about your work life so I can relax about it?" Here the job holder hears real concern and knows someone is rooting for her. She's less likely to grouse in the future because she will be reminded to think of a solution rather than just the problem with her job.

When you've defensively told your brother he's been selfish too, you might have said, if you could separate yourself from any rationalizations or excuses, "Bob, when I hear you say that I'm selfish, I feel hurt and a little scared, because I need to know that the family sticks together. Would you be willing to tell me in a more matter-of-fact way that there might be another way to look at it, and ask if I'd consider it?"

And Bob, if he's communicating from the heart, might let you know he heard you. This is where mirroring can come in. It's a way of listening so closely that you can repeat back what you've heard. So Bob might say, "I heard you say you're hurt and scared when I say you're selfish, and you'd like me to ask in a matter-of-fact way if you'd consider another way to look at things. Is that correct?" If you say yes, Hendrix would even go a step further: Bob could ask "Is there more?" That makes you feel safe enough to add, "Yes. Could you tell me something you appreciate about me?" or "You know how direct I am. How can you help me know when my words need softening?" or "I feel embarrassed right now because most of the time I think you're a perfect brother" or "I feel ok now; is there anything else you need to say to ME?"

You may be thinking right now, "That takes too much time." My reply would be to notice how much time it takes to try to smooth wounded feelings or get a hurt friend to communicate with you again. Would you rather spend an extra five minutes now or five days or months or years mending what happened when you were "just being honest and telling it like it was. Maybe you object, "I don't want to have to follow a formula" or "That doesn't sound natural." Might I suggest you introduce empathic communication and mirroring to your family, friends, co-workers, etc. and ask if they'd be willing to practice it with you. If it is not okay with the other person to do this, you might start out an uncomfortable communication with "I don't know how to say this without possibly hurting your feelings. Are you open to listening as I try to say this without blame?" If your listener sounds defensive, ask if he'd be more open to it another time or by email.

There are always many options for saying what you want to say. If your communication is getting ragged, and friends and family are withdrawing or distancing themselves in various ways, what do you have to lose? Better yet, what do you have to gain? Your desire for communication from the heart is an excellent first step, AND it will take practice. As long as the other person knows and feels your desire to connect with respect and caring, your chances for effective and loving communication are greatly enhanced. So ask yourself right now: "Who would I love to have a closer relationship with?" If there has been a rift or a misunderstanding, contact him or her today. You can say, "I notice we don't seem as close as we used to and I feel sad about that, because I need to stay connected to people I care about. Would you be willing to accept my apology/ talk about how you're feeling/ get together and explore how we can work out our differences?" (or whatever is true). This assumes taking responsibility for the relationship and your role in it. It implies that you are being genuine and that you are willing to come down from your throne of being right, if that is where you have been. One answer that should make it all worthwhile: How will I feel, how will my life be enhanced, when I use compassionate or empathic communication? Even the "I statements" ("I notice we don't seem as close" vs. "You never call any more") can make a huge opening for the other to really hear you. You are being vulnerable, and when you open your heart, you are likely to experience the other person's heart opening also. Do it now!

If you'd like to practice, give me a call at 206-938-8385. I offer a free 30-minute telephone coaching session on any area of your life in which you want more focus, clarity, or change to support you in living a more fulfilling life. No step is too small. Even 5 minutes a day or one interaction a day practicing compassionate communication will give you huge benefits. Put up post-it notes with "observation, feeling, need, request" or OFNR. Attach a label with OFNR to your telephone or computer or your dashboard. And especially, notice what goes on in your heart when you open it to others in loving communication.

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To learn more from the Author – Moreah Vestan, you can contact her directly at <http://MoreahVestan.com/contact> She offers personal communication coaching and workshops from an experienced viewpoint.