

We do it every day, usually without giving it much thought simply because it works. But what do we do when communication isn't working the way we want it to? Or when disagreement or conflict makes it particularly difficult? There are some simple strategies that we can all learn to use to improve communication when it really matters:

WHAT WE SAY AND WHAT OTHERS HEAR IS OFTEN DIFFERENT

How you express yourself is a product of your own personal viewpoint, experiences, assumptions, and judgments. How other people hear you is a product of their own personal viewpoint, experiences, assumptions and judgments. It is a wonder that any of us communicate effectively at all. It is especially important that in contentious situations you sometimes take the time to restate what you thought you heard said so that the understanding is clear and no false assumptions are made. Saying something like, "Did I understand correctly that what you propose is . . . ?" also gives you an extra moment to process the information before responding.

RESPOND, DON'T REACT

A reaction is an expression of feelings. A response is a more thoughtful expression of facts and feelings. For example, if you are an educator and a parent raises concerns about what is happening in the classroom, you may be inclined to react defensively, but a defensive reaction does not encourage communica-

tion. Instead of saying something like "well that's the way we always do it," try responding by saying something like, "Can you tell me more about exactly what it is that concerns you?" You may find that the real concern is not what you immediately assumed it to be, and you will open the door to better communication.

USE "I" STATEMENTS, NOT "YOU" STATEMENTS

Take ownership of your feelings and views. You may be thinking, "You don't seem to care about my child, only about how much it will cost," but instead of saying that, try saying something more like, "I'm hearing concerns about how to make this program work within your budget. Is there a way we can provide the services my child needs more affordably?"

WORK ON LISTENING

Most people think they are good listeners, but often they don't really listen, because they are thinking about what they're going to say next, or something upsetting that was said earlier. Part of good listening is asking questions that will bring out the information you need. Then it is vitally important that you focus on the answer, not on what you think will be said, or how you will respond to whatever it is they say. If you find this challenging, try the strategy of repeating what is said back to make sure you have understood the speaker's intent. For example, "I'm hearing that your biggest concern is . . . Is that right?"

LOOK FOR COMMON GROUND

It is easy to let differences take over and forget what you have in common. It may be cliché, but in almost any parent-school disagreement, everyone has an interest in reaching a solution that is good for the student and in creating or maintaining a good working relationship. Remember to acknowledge the things that are going well or that you feel are being done right. Building on areas of agreement can help to bridge gaps of disagreement.

BE AWARE OF BODY LANGUAGE

There are lots of ways to communicate and body language often speaks louder than words. Be aware of your own body language. Rolling eyes, loud sighing, or other signs of exasperation detract from good communication. If you've ever sat across the table from someone who does it, you know that very well. Do your best to behave respectfully even if you don't feel like it and expect others to be respectful of you. If you are reading body language that is counter-productive, try to turn it around by inviting input from that person and letting them know that they are being heard. If you are feeling too stressed to control your body language well, ask to take a break and find a quiet place to calm down.

NO ONE HAS ALL THE ANSWERS

Don't expect that you always will. It's OK to say, "I don't know" or "I will have to find that out for you." If you are confronted by a person who does seem to think he or she knows "it all," try suggesting that every issue has more than one point of view and that a full discussion of any issue should welcome different viewpoints. If others are involved in the conversation, try to enlist their help in broadening the discussion by inviting their points of view.

ACKNOWLEDGE FRUSTRATION, ANGER, OR OTHER FEELINGS

If you don't acknowledge obvious feelings, they become the "elephant in the room" and everyone becomes invested in avoiding the "elephant" instead of concentrating on the issues that deserve attention. Express your own feelings in a non-confrontational way, such as, "I'm feeling that we are spinning our wheels right now. Could we take a short break and see if that helps us get back to the issues that need to be resolved?" You may also want to offer the opportunity for others to share their feelings. For example, "You seem very frustrated with what is happening. What do you think we can do to improve the situation?"

IT IS NATURAL TO RESIST CHANGE

Remember that change is stressful for most people, particularly if it makes them feel like they are less in control. Routines and patterns that we are used to are comforting and even though we may know changes need to be made, we may have feelings of resistance. Be willing to discuss the "what ifs?" that come up with proposing a new situation and try to work out a plan for change that allows everyone to adjust comfortably. Talk about the positives you expect and what you will do if unexpected problems arise.

TRY NOT TO TAKE OTHER PEOPLE'S REACTIONS PERSONALLY

How other people react to you is often more about them and their feelings of fear, frustration, or insecurity than it is about you. You may need to let the other person vent, but even it seems like a personal attack, try taking a deep breath and counting to 10 before responding. If you are the one who needs to vent, do your best to avoid making it personal and keep it focused on the situation, not the personalities.

WE ALL ENCOUNTER PEOPLE WE FIND DIFFICULT

Sometimes you meet someone and things just click. Sometimes it's just the opposite. If you find you are forced to work with someone that tends to rub you the wrong way, consider your options. In some cases there may be room for another person to fill that role on your team. If it is an essential team member, however, you may have to find a way to work together, but it might be possible to limit your direct interactions, make sure others are also present, or do your majority of communications through other team members. You don't have to like everyone, but you may need to learn to work cooperatively with them for the good of your child.

EVERYONE HAS AN AGENDA

It's a fact, but it isn't necessarily a negative. Our personal agendas help us put forward our goals and also serve to help us protect our own interests. As a parent, your agenda may be simply what you believe is best for your child. Keep in mind, however, that while educators share concern for your child's best interests, they also have supervisors, policies, procedures, and budgetary issues that they can't help but consider. If you don't recognize that others have different agendas than your own, you will have a difficult time understanding their point of view.

STAY POSITIVE

We can choose how we see the experiences in our lives. We all have moments when things that are happening feel overwhelming and out of our control, but if you make an effort to keep a positive focus, you may be able to turn those feelings around and take some control back. Ask yourself if what you are doing is constructive or can help to resolve problems you are facing. Ask yourself what you can learn from difficult or stressful situations, and keep in mind the goal you are trying to reach.

GET TO KNOW YOUR "BUTTONS" AND HOW TO PROTECT THEM

Everyone has certain things (or certain personal characteristics) that "get to you." Prepare for emotional or stressful situations by thinking about what people, actions, or comments tend to "push your buttons" and try to come up with internal thought mechanisms that can help you protect yourself. For example, if you know you are meeting with someone who tends to make you angry by speaking to you in a condescending manner, you might prepare by thinking of reasonably tactful ways to deflect those kinds of comments and maybe even make a list of things you might say to diffuse your stress without blowing up.

COMMUNICATION & RELATIONSHIPS REALLY DO MATTER

You may think that the "squeakiest wheel will get the grease." In the short term, that may be true, but over the long haul, making the most noise or being the most demanding will probably not be as effective an advocacy tool as learning to be a skilled communicator, a good listener, and an active team member and problem-solver.