

Clear Communication with Requests

by

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All too often I listen to people trying to communicate ideas, feelings, and thoughts with the best intentions of being heard and having their message received by another person only to find themselves frustrated, misunderstood, or misinterpreted.. This is especially true in the area of requests between people who truly don't know each other well, as in new romantic relationships and newly formed stepfamilies.

Clear communication is defined as people giving and receiving information in a way that the message sent and that received are the same. Unfortunately it is more common to receive some distortion. Misperceptions, while not always harmful or disruptive, and sometimes even funny, can at other times be incredibly damaging in families and other relationships.

People often think they are requesting something when they are unclear, and truly only stating a personal preference, or a wish.

A request consists of three distinct sections, and a fourth makes life a lot more pleasant.

- 1) First a specific behavior.
- 2) Second a specific time this behavior needs to be done.
- 3) Third what the person making the request will do if it is not done.
- 4) The fourth thing is a reward which will happen if the behavior is completed as requested.

A request becomes a threat when the third piece becomes an excessive punishment to the behavior not being done. A request is no more than a wish or a personal preference if there is no time frame, behaviors are vague, or there is no consequence if nothing is done.

Anything which only has two parts to the above can be determined a preference or a wish, but it is not a request.

All parts of the above exchanged need to be negotiable to not be called an order, but orders also need at least the first three pieces of the equation.

EXAMPLE:

One mother was totally frustrated by her stepchildren and her own child leaving their rooms a mess when they left for school. The beds were not made, clothes were strewn about the floor, and dirty dishes from what they had used while studying the night before were everywhere. She had tried to ignore the situation by closing the doors, but this often resulted in their being too few dishes in the kitchen for her to set the table for dinner, a family event that she enjoyed, and hysterical scenes in the morning when the clothes available to the children were only unwashed wrinkled leavings from the messes in their rooms.

The mother was in tears, and wondering if life would not be more pleasant without her new marriage and two added children who appeared to have no sense of responsibility for their belongings.

We spent some time talking about what was reasonable for each child at their ages, and included the husband in the discussions.

It was decided that two plastic laundry baskets could be placed in the hall between the children's bedrooms, one marked colors, one whites. Each child was told that if they placed their clothes they wanted washed and ironed or folded in the hampers, their mother would be glad to take care of them from there. Beds would be made, and dishes returned to the kitchen before leaving for school.

This was part one and two. Specific behaviors, and specific time. Just saying I want you to make your bed and clean up your clothes, with no mention of before school was too vague, and children are quite good at picking up on these voids. Once a week? After school? Saturday morning? All would have been OK if that is what the family negotiated, but it was not.

The issue of the consequence if there was no compliance was hard for the mother and father to agree upon. The consequence needed to be significant enough to matter. The first week they tried the request nothing happened and they returned saying that the suggestion didn't work. The consequence they had come up with was that the children's allowance would be docked one dollar if they did not comply. The children all got generous allowances, and paying their mother and stepmother \$5.00 a week to clean up their rooms was a deal I would have taken also. I said just that jokingly. If she would come make my bed and sort and clean my laundry, clean up my house of scattered dishes for \$5.00 a week, she had a deal!

The next week the consequence was noticed. 20% of the weekly allowance for each child was docked for a disorderly room. The first week nothing happened except that the mother did everything as she always did, but Friday she had \$100.00, which was 100% of the allowance budget, which she normally handed out the children for allowances. She went to lunch with a friend and bought herself some new shoes. Needless to say the children were not amused. But they were listening. If they wanted money for the next week, the father had some chores, such as cleaning out the garage and some yard work they could do to earn their lunch and spending money for the next week. If they did not want to do that, then they could make themselves brown bag lunches to take to school, or be very hungry.

The system had some resistance which both parents needed to kindly and lovingly face and stay firm that first weekend. But the next week the situation was very different. The children were somewhat dramatic about returning dishes to the kitchen and sorting clothes, but the house was easier for the mother to cope with immediately.

It was a win/win for her. She either had less housework to do each morning. Or she had money for a Friday afternoon lunch date with a friend, movie or new clothes. She joked with the kids that either way was good with her. Her housework and chores were either easier or she had lots money to spend on Friday, and then they could work to get money all weekend, or pack their lunches. She was content no matter what their decisions.

As the children got older, the family added responsibilities to the list of things they needed to do, and the request format, not an order one, was used. Rewards such as bicycles, and later computers and cell phones were also added for meeting requests. The children learned to negotiate if they thought things were not fair, and if they were loaded with homework during one week, they often paid their mother in advance to make their beds and take care of their laundry.

This model is the way the adult world works. There are no cleaning fairies who come sort ones laundry and make sure that special sweater has been washed and looks great for a Friday night event. If you

don't want to clean your home you will need to earn the money to do such or live with dirty dishes, dirty clothes, and a mess that few people want to visit.

Other parents have come up with other requests. Even for small children, picking up toys and bringing tricycles into the garage or house can be dealt with without yelling. One parent asked her child who was five to pick up his toys repeatedly as she was tripping over them on the stairs and her husband had already run over one tricycle to the detriment of both his tires and the tricycle.

The request was made

- 1) Behavior: Return tricycle to safe storage place
- 2) Time: Immediately when done playing with it
- 3) Consequence: abandoned tricycle would be “grounded” and unavailable for three days the first time found, a week the second time.
- 4) Positive consequence: both parents gave the child a lot of praise each day that the tricycle was safely put away.

This does not have to involve money; time with a parent who is not picking up after a child can be an immensely satisfying reward. However, it can help children learn long term financial planning to have allowances dependent on participating reasonably and fully in family responsibilities, and if possible have added chores for which they can be paid. Earning money for large ticket items is teaching financial discipline which seems to be missing from the endless gift giving which too often goes on in families where time is scarce, and parents feel guilty about the lack of time they have with their children.

■ If you look at the laws in this country they all have the first three pieces of a request. There are no laws that say you can't do something. They say if you do something and are caught there are consequences and they are delineated clearly. It is actually illegal to make up a punishment or consequence for some behavior after it has occurred. Yet personal relationships are often contaminated with such responses: ex post facto consequences! They are illegal in public life because they seem so unfair. Why not run your personal life with the same thoughtfulness?

■ All jobs and educational systems have all four pieces in place.

- 1) What is expected in terms of performance;
- 2) When work is to be performed or classes happen, papers and projects due;
- 3) What will happen if such does not occur (flunking or being fired)
- 4) What will happen if request is met (paychecks, promotions, good grades, etc.)

I am convinced that part of our problem with the IRS is they are very clear about the first three parts of a request, and never clear about the fourth. If we had signs up all over the place which said thank you for your tax dollars on all the things that such pays for, and a letter from the IRS was more likely to be a thank

you note than an audit, we might not get so negatively emotional about paying taxes. Anyone spending time in a country with little to no taxes realizes that taxes pay for a kind of quality of life not enjoyed by “tax free” places. Poor or dirt roads, corrupt police who get paid not by tax dollars but by bribes, few or no ambulances, no or only untrained/volunteer fire departments do not make a safe life. Imagine having to hire your own private security guards to feel safe; this is more expensive than taxes.

Being clear about what you want, when you want it and all involved knowing what you will do if you don't get your requests met, and what will happen if you do is much more respectful of all than being vague about any of it. All too often the consequence is “Mom will go ballistic!” or “Dad is going to be really angry!” or surprise by the person who unknowingly did not mind read how important something was, or got the behavior or the time wrong because all was a guessing game. This does not honor or respect anyone. Our best relationships always have the four components in the requests that occur, but the first three are at least fair and clear. Only having two is more likely to lead to conflict and hurt feelings as the guessing game on time, how important something really is, and what specifically is needed - all of which can be negotiated - become fuzzy.

As we know our family members over time the “unspoken consequences” may be mutually understood and accurate without being spoken each time something happens. But in stepfamilies where people truly don't know each other well, the importance of clarity until the knowledge is there is exceptionally important.

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