



THE ART OF COMMUNICATING

**A discussion of the arts of
THINKING — CONVERSING — LISTENING**

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Part 2 of 2

I turn now to the skills—the techniques of communication.

Let me first distinguish two kinds of talk, because one is so difficult that I am going to deal with it very briefly, though I know it will interest you as human beings. However, it will not interest you professionally as salesmen, or as members of the community—as citizens.

The first kind of talk, which I say is so difficult that no set of rules really helps one to do it well, is something the name for which you know. It is the heart-to-heart talk. If I were to distinguish the other kind of talk from the heart-to-heart talk, I would call it mind-to-mind talk. But no one uses that phrase, curiously enough. We do speak of heart-to-heart talks. A heart-to-heart talk usually involves

just two persons; it seldom involves more than two. It also involves the emotions or the personal concerns, the deep, private and personal concerns, of the individuals involved. It is the kind of talk that parents have with children, that wives have with husbands, and husbands with wives, and that lovers often try to have and sometimes fail to succeed in having.

In my own experience, this kind of talk is so difficult that no one should go into a heart-to-heart talk without days of preparation for it. One should not suddenly turn to one's wife and say, "Let's have a heart-to-heart talk." One should say, "If you have time next Sunday, Mary, I would like to talk to you about something that is on my mind," and give her a little notice about what it is about so that she can prepare for it, too.

In preparing for it, a real kind of anticipatory rehearsal is involved. You have to hear in your mental ear what you are going to say and imagine what the other person is going to say and prepare for the turns and contingencies in that conversation. It is difficult. It is very seldom successful.

In the heart-to-heart talk, you have to understand yourself first. For the individual who is engaged in talking about his own emotions in relation to somebody else or somebody else's emotions, it is important that he should have some real insight into the springs of his own feelings. To engage in a heart-to-heart talk with a certain blindness about one's own emotional condition is, I think, futile. (Let me say here, just as a minor digression, that after long years of studying psychiatry and psychoanalysis, I have come to the conclusion that a neurosis is a failure in communication within the person. The person is not able to talk to himself well. All the neurotic symptoms are a kind of substitute language, a way of expressing what the individual cannot say to himself in the ordinary social language. He has a split soul, and that split soul is represented by two different languages. The whole business of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis was called by Freud initially "the talking cure." It is an elaborate technique for making the person able to talk frankly to himself in one language, not two. When that happens, the psychiatrist says that the person has insight.) I am saying that without insight, you cannot talk well to yourself. If you deceive yourself or conceal from yourself what you are like, you cannot talk emotionally in the heart-to-heart kind of talk well with anybody else.

You also have to be concerned with the other fellow. You not only have to have insight into your own condition but you have to pay attention to his. You have to pay close attention to the feelings and

conditions of the person to whom you are talking.

We have in our acquaintanceship lots of men and women whom we call friends. In some sense of the term they are friends, but few of them are in the deepest sense of that term. When I tell you what I would mean by a friend, I think you will see that most of us have very few friends. It is very difficult to have more than a few. In the highest sense, a friend is a person to whom one can say anything without fear of being misunderstood. Our friends are those persons with whom we have the greatest ease—not perfection, but the greatest ease—and success in communication. We think we understand them. We think they understand us. We have a feeling that communication succeeds.

Let me now turn to the other type of conversation, whether it be the sort of discussion which happens when you are selling something or which takes place at a business meeting, or which happens around the dinner table, where we have gathered to talk about something.

It is this kind of talk that I can give you some specific rules for. I would like to do that now. The rules will appear simple. What is difficult is applying them accurately and concretely in practice. They do involve thought. Thinking is a hard and painful process. The reason why most of us do only a little of it is because it is so difficult to do.

Let me divide the rules that I am going to give you into three groups.

A discussion, like any living thing that takes time, has a beginning, a kind of middle or a center, and an end. You have to get into it. You have to carry it on. You have to conclude it. It has a course in time.

The different rules or the different pieces of advice I want to give you are related to these different temporal phases or aspects of discussion, conversation, or communication.

The first set of rules has to do with the beginning or the opening of a discussion.

The first rule is to pick the right occasion. Not all time is a good time for talk. When you walk into the office of a man that you have expected to spend half an hour or an hour talking to, and you find him distracted by something that happened that day, either in

his business concerns or in his family, you should realize that this is not an occasion on which you will get his best attention. If there is any way of getting out of his office quickly, you will be doing both him and yourself a favor by doing so.

Sometimes this is not possible. Sometimes you have to take the occasion as given. Sometimes you cannot reject it. However, if it is within your power to set the occasion up in which you have freedom from interruptions, freedom from distractions, ample time for the purpose, and some feeling that the persons that are engaged are going to be patient with one another, then you have the right occasion for communication or conversation.

It is also necessary, in initiating talk, to pick the right people to talk to. The theme of discussion or whatever is under consideration may be capable of development with a different group of people than the ones that you have chosen.

Let us take a perfectly obvious example of this. All of us have the experience of being hosts in our own homes and at dinner parties and we have made the mistake of broaching the wrong theme for that particular group. Two things happen. It either falls dead as a doornail, or you have picked the wrong people in the sense that you have stepped on toes, and aroused prejudices and that makes good talk impossible.

A judicious selection of the persons engaged in whatever talk is going to take place is important, as is a judicious choice of the right occasion.

Of these preliminary rules, the most important of all, and one by the way that I think many of us violate, is the rule which calls upon us to know the objective that we have in mind.

The objective we have in mind in talking to anybody, (leaving out now the heart-to-heart talk) may be learning—either our learning or their learning. If our conversation is for the sake of changing minds, let me call that kind of discussion or communication theoretical. It is to be contrasted with practical communications, where the result aimed at is in the world of action. Political speeches, political debates, economic round tables, conferences, all acts of persuasion, salesmanship—these are practical communications where we are not concerned with learning anything, really. Learning may be involved as part of the product, but the end result is in action.

There is a good reason for distinguishing these two which I should

like to have you recognize. If some action to be taken is the end result aimed at, then the conversation or discussion must have a time limit. It must come to an end. Action is something that must be done. You cannot go on forever. This is not true of learning. Learning is indefinitely continuous. A conversation which has learning as its objective need not be completed today. We can have dinner and talk and have to go about our business and we can say, "Let's pick this up some other time and carry it further," Many people, I think, prevent themselves from learning what they could learn, by applying to the theoretical kind of communication the same impatience that they have with respect to practical matters. Where our talk is for the sake of learning, we should have indefinite patience. It need not be learned today. It can be learned tomorrow. If not tomorrow, the next day. As long as we live, we can go on learning and as long as learning is the end that we have in mind, we should go on talking. The point is not to reach a conclusion today. So many people have a conversation and think that it is fruitless because a conclusion has not been reached. If we were in a practical conversation—a business meeting where a decision had to be reached—it would be fruitless if the decision were not reached. However, in conversations of a different sort, where we are trying to enlighten ourselves, stretch our minds, deepen our understandings, it need not happen immediately. We can come back next week or a year from now and go on talking with the kind of patience that is appropriate to the life of learning.

I say this because our lives are not entirely business lives. We have other things to do with our minds beyond success at some practical venture. In my judgment, the most important thing we have to do with our minds, all our life long, is to learn and learn by talking with and to our fellow men. We must have patience for it.

Let me make one more point here. If the aim of conversation is learning, we should keep our personal interests out of it. People who engage in this kind of conversation often argue with one another and sometimes they make the mistake of thinking that the purpose is to win the argument. I assure you that if the aim is learning, the purpose of the talk is not to win the argument, because there is no point in winning the argument if there is any chance of you being wrong, as there very likely is.

One should not allow one's personal aggressions to get into the picture. If the aim is learning, one should, so far as one can, really make everything one does subject to that aim.

If the aim is action rather than learning, then I think the opposite

mood can prevail within the bounds of honesty.

In both kinds of conversation, there are two things to which I want to call your attention before I pass on to more specific rules. These are so general that I want to talk about them now before I state the more specific rules.

One has to do with the business of talking and listening. You all have listened to or sat on the sidelines or maybe even taken part in a conversation which goes something like this: Brown talks first and Smith stands there seeming to be attentive. Actually, he is not. He is simply thinking of what he is going to say as soon as Brown stops talking. When Brown stops talking, Smith then talks and Brown takes the apparently attentive role. Again, he is quite impatiently waiting for Smith to stop so he can resume what he was saying. This goes on for some time. They both then shake hands and part, each not having heard the other at all.

I do not think I am exaggerating this. I think this happens very frequently. Obviously, this is not communication at all. It is the illusion of it or a deception of it.

If you asked me what is most important for successful communication, my answer is not our being able to use language well or to speak well or to present one's own point of view. It is, on the contrary, being able to listen well to the other person's point of view, to hear what the other fellow says. This is much more difficult than any of us realize.

I can give you one experience of mine which explains this. I can lecture for five hours. There is no strain on my mind to speak that long. I can speak for five hours without any difficulty. However, when I conduct a seminar for two hours, I am exhausted. It is not that I have talked as much as I would be talking if I was giving a lecture that ran for five hours. It is that I am listening. There is a tremendous amount of energy involved in listening—let us say as I would in an executive seminar, where I may have twenty men from different corporations or businesses around the table, with different vocabularies, different points of different interests. Listening to them for two hours intermittently, while trying to address myself to what they have said—this is a most fatiguing task,

It is not talking that is hard. It is listening that is hard.

Let me make one further point about this. In a seminar, if I ask a question (as you often may ask a question in a business conversa-

tion, and not listen carefully to the answer) how can I ask another good and relevant question without first listening to the answer?

You may have three questions, but you cannot really ask the second question that you have in mind to ask unless you have absorbed the answer to the first.

One question will not do. That first question is merely the initiation of a questioning process in which you have to hear the answer. By hearing the answer I mean sympathetically standing inside the Mind, so far as it is possible to do so, of the person who is answering, and try to understand what he is saying.

Often, when I have patience, I will say to the person answering, "Let me see if I understand what you are saying. Your answer is this," and I restate it. If he says, "No," I get him to say it again or I try to say it again, but I do not ask the next question because the goodness of my next question absolutely depends upon its relevance to his answer.

Let us suppose a conversation in which each question elicits a relevant answer and each relevant answer a question relevant to that answer calling for another relevant question—a chain of relevant questions and answers. This almost never happens outside the field of artistically written discourse. The dialogues of Plato are brilliant instances of it. No one can perform this well. Plato was a master at writing a discussion down on paper, but to create one spontaneously is much harder.

If I could write a book about the art of listening, I could make a million. But I would have to tell you how to be relevant; I wish I could tell you that. If that were easy to do, if there was a simple set of rules for being relevant, this would solve many of the problems we face.

Relevancy is not a simple thing. The word suggests that there is a close relation and intimate bearing between one thing and another. I think I can spot irrelevance, and I know that, when I have, people are annoyed. They are unaware of relevance. I may say to them, "Sorry, but that's irrelevant." People do not like to be told they are irrelevant. Unfortunately, in most conversations in which I have taken part, there is much irrelevance.

I do not know any rule for being relevant. All I can say is that you must sensitize yourself to what is being said and talk to it, not about something else. We forget that communication is a two-way

process. We tend to think that the whole show is set up for us to be heard. We are telling the other fellow. Even though he is talking part of the time, it is not important that we pay attention to what he is saying. But, if we regard it as a two-way process, as dancing is, we may succeed. Can you imagine irrelevant dancing? Talking should be like dancing. If we managed to achieve the same kind of relevancy in talking that people who dance well with one another as partners achieve in stepping, how successful the life of communication and conversation would be!

The other general rule that I want to state very quickly is a rule about questioning. Most of us are, I think, lazy questioners. Most of us ask a question one way and only one way. Often it is necessary to ask a question in four or five different ways before you find the phrasing of the question that catches the other fellow's mind. Almost any question that is worth asking can be rephrased to give different examples of the point and set up different frameworks in which to ask it. I have had this experience again and again in teaching and in other forms of communication. Unless you keep at it, put a great deal of energy into questioning, you often fail to get to first base in the business of catching the other fellow's interest or mind.

By the way, questions are the heart of the matter. Questions are always more important than statements. The other fellow is much more interested in the questions you ask him than the statements you make. Questions at least invite him to speak. Statements that you make invite him simply to listen. Questions invite him to listen and speak. If you can use questions rather than statements, you succeed better.

Let us now suppose that a conversation or discussion is going on. There are a number of simple rules for carrying it on well.

For relevancy's sake, it is important for all the persons concerned to know what the issue is or the subject under discussion. Often in conversations the conversation has gone on for quite a long time before what is being discussed has been made explicitly clear.

We often take too much for granted. We often assume too much understanding on the part of people we are talking to or talking with. We should make a little more effort to be explicit about what is being talked about, the point under discussion, the thing to be decided, the problem to be solved. Getting it verbally explicit and before everybody's mind, would increase, I think, the amount of relevancy in the course of conversation itself.

Let me say in general that most of us assume too much. Think of two persons coming together, knowing each other slightly, and trying to talk. Each has an entirely different biography, different experiences, different backgrounds, different prejudices, different commitments, and different assumptions. Much of what they say is colored or motivated or influenced by these divergent biographies, and they are unacknowledged for the most part. How much improvement would be gained, if in any conversation or discussion the two persons could quickly pick out of their past that part of it which was relevant background for the present conversation and make it explicit.



"That's amazing—I was just thinking the same thing."

If one of these fellows said, "We are talking about this, and while we are talking about this, let me say that my experience on this kind of thing has been thus and so," and the other fellow said, "Well, about this kind of thing, I have a deep prejudice which I might as well tell you at the beginning," it would be extremely helpful.

Most of us, because life is short and it is difficult to do, take for granted much that ought to be acknowledged explicitly in order to achieve excellence or effectiveness in communication.

There are a number of perfectly obvious logical fallacies which affect communication. Let me just mention a few of them.

One is the mistake of not knowing that you should never argue about facts. Never, never, never argue about a matter of fact. If the

question is how far the shores of Miami are from Cuba, that is something not to be discussed. You cannot settle it by talk. The Atlas settles it for you.

On most matters of fact, there are ample reference books, almanacs, dictionaries to be consulted. Yet many people waste endless periods of time wrangling about questions of fact that cannot possibly be settled by talk.

Whenever, in discussion, a question of fact comes up, table it, or do something even more important, which is very easy to do. Just say, "Look, the fact could be this or that. Let us for the moment assume this. Why do you think it is this? What difference would it make if it were that?"

The important thing is not the fact, but what would follow if the fact were true. Without even bothering to go to the dictionary or to the reference book, you can carry on the discussion, exploring the consequences of either state of fact. When you find the state of fact later, you have reached a conclusion because both of you can agree that if the fact is such and such, one set of consequences would follow, and if the fact is otherwise, another set of consequences would follow.

Another mistake we often make is that of trying to settle arguments or differences of opinion by citing authorities. Many people think they can settle a point by saying, "This is so, because so and so said it." Authorities never settle anything. They themselves hold opinions which, even if they are experts, have to be qualified by the opposition of other experts. It is always unfair, as well as essentially wrong, to try to settle something by appealing to authorities.

It is also unfair and wrong when a group tries to settle something by taking a vote. "How many agree with me, raise hands." That does not settle it. The majority is not always right. A minority of one can sometimes be the one right man in the group. Taking a vote and counting noses or raising hands does not settle anything.

The most important rule that I want to leave you with at this point is one that brings me close to my conclusion. It is a rule that we all violate. If I can just get this one thing clear, I would feel that the morning has been useful to you and worth my while.

The rule is as follows: You should neither agree nor disagree with another person until you are sure you understand what he is saying.

This rule is violated whenever we say, as most of us do, “I don’t know what you’re talking about, but I know you’re wrong.” To agree with someone you do not fully understand is inane and to disagree with someone you do not understand is impertinent.

The simple practice we can all adopt is as follows. I have tried it on occasions and it works wonderfully. I just wish I could say that I always do it, but I have not always managed to do it and regret it when I have not done it.

When I have presence of mind enough and patience to do what I should, I will turn to the other fellow and say, “Let me see if I can understand what you are saying and repeat it in my own words. You tell me if I have got the point.”

Then I try, not to repeat his words, because that would prove nothing except that I was a good parrot. Instead, I use my own words, and I say what I think he has said. “I think what you said is this.” If he says to me, “Just right, you have my point perfectly,” then I am entitled to say, “I agree with you,” or “I disagree with you.” If he says, “No, that is not quite right” or “That is quite off my point,” then I must say, “You try again to tell me what your point is.” He does it again and I must try once more to see if I have it now. If I do, then I can go on. If I do not, I am not entitled to say that I agree or disagree.

You can measure yourself on this. With how many people have you agreed or disagreed long before you got to that point of their full and complete assent to your understanding of what they are saying?

Let us suppose you got that far, and you disagree. Then there are only four more things you can say, and these are all quite polite ways of disagreeing.

The first thing you can say to the person with whom you disagree is, “You are misinformed. I disagree with you because you are misinformed,” meaning that there are some facts or principles relevant to this matter about which he is incorrect. When you do this, you are obligated to state for the other fellow the point on which he made a wrong statement of fact.

The second statement is a little different from the first. It is not that he is misinformed, but that he is uninformed. He simply lacks information. Had he the information, he would again change his mind, you think, in your direction. Again you are obligated to give

him the information which you think he lacks.

The first two may not be operative. The third thing is to say that you are neither misinformed nor uniformed but that you have made a mistake in your reasoning. “In the light of the facts and the evidence that you offer, you should have concluded *this*, but you concluded erroneously *that*.” When you do this, you must show him where his error in reasoning is, and you must show him how the correct process of reasoning would lead him in the opposite direction or to an opposite conclusion.

In the fourth place, you can say, “You are incomplete in your analysis. You have not gone far enough. Let me show you that there are further conclusions that you might come to beyond what you see.”

All the other rules are moral rules. They all boil down to a virtuous mastery or discipline of your passions. The emotions have no place really in discussion. They have a role to play in heart-to-heart talks, but not in business or public or theoretical communications. There is no reason for getting angry. There is no reason for getting impatient. There is no reason for aggressively attacking the other person’s character. There is no reason for making fun of him. There is no reason for teasing, baiting, being sarcastic.

All these things we do because we allow our emotions to get involved where they have no place. If possible, the emotions should be kept out. If you cannot keep them out, at least keep track of them. Do not let your emotions get out of hand. One can make the best use of one’s mind when one’s emotions are controlled.


I would like to conclude by just saying one thing. I have talked about communication in our personal relationships. I have talked of it in terms of business and teaching. I assure you that it affects the problems of the world at large. The problems of war and peace are deeply affected by communication. In fact, I would like to leave you with the notion that peace depends upon it more than anything else.

War in our private lives (when it takes the form of divorce in families) war in our national life (when it takes the form of revolution and violence as we have seen it within the last year in various parts of the country) war that takes place between nations—all of these instances of war as opposed to peace, are instances of failures in communication.

Cicero, a long time ago, said that men differ from the beasts of the jungle in that they can settle their differences in two ways. Animals can settle their differences in only one way, only by fighting—by violent means. Men, being animals, do this too, but men can also settle their differences by talk.

My definition of peace—of the kind of peace we enjoy when we live together in a community under government—is simply a situation in which men have conflicts of interests, but in which these conflicts can be settled by talk rather than by violence.

When foreign correspondents cable back to their newspapers from England or from France and say, “Conversations are rapidly deteriorating,” you know that war is imminent. When the final cable reads, “Conversations have completely broken down,” you know you are at war, for when that has happened, there is nothing left for nations to do, except to mobilize and drop bombs.

Even the UN, which is a shadow of government, is an instrument of peace, because government in any form is a vast machine for keeping the conversation going. Law in all its forms, assemblies in all their forms, every aspect of organized political life, is a way of talking out one’s difficulties. This is what we mean by living at peace with our fellow men. If we could do this with all the men in the world, if we could do it across the barriers of the iron curtain now, there would be no cold war. If we could do it in such a way that we could sustain it forever, we would have permanent peace. That is how important communication is. 

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