

The Better Communication Technique

A tutorial for adults

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Last updated: November 11, 2009

About the Better Communication Technique

It's not a terribly scientific or sophisticated conclusion that you can improve your relationship with another person simply by communicating better. And when I say, "relationship," I mean every type of relationship. That means your primary relationships-- your relationship with your spouse, your boyfriend or girlfriend, family members, friends, bosses, and coworkers as well as other relationships, such as with your doctor, your plumber, and your auto mechanic. Even when you are talking with a clerk at a retail store for only a few minutes or a waiter at a restaurant, you establish some kind of relationship with that person, even though it's usually a very limited and brief one. We've all had "bad relationships" with store clerks and waiters at times, right? If you learn how to communicate better, you will not only improve your primary relationships with your family, friends, and coworkers, but you will also find that you relate better to clerks and waiters and, consequently, receive better treatment from them.

Just as importantly is the fact that how happy or miserable we feel in general is largely shaped by our successes and failures in relationships. If we have relationships that are rewarding, deeply personal, and lasting, we feel good. On the other hand, if we end up in arguments or fights often, or we simply distance ourselves from others and are not close with them, then we don't feel very good and may often feel sad or even miserable. Having good relationships with others brings us peace and happiness whereas having poor relationships results in our suffering strife and depression.

Perhaps the most interesting, and the most important, aspect of communicating more effectively is that it improves relationships and how we feel about ourselves, regardless of how well the other person in the relationship communicates. In other words, you can improve a relationship by communicating more effectively, even if the other person is not communicating effectively. I have heard numerous people blame the other person in the relationship for all the problems in that relationship. As I've long said, though, it takes two people to make a relationship. Both people need to work at it. Blaming others does not solve problems. If you

communicate more effectively, you will be doing your part to make things work and, consequently, you will see the relationship improve, even if the other person continues to communicate poorly.

This tutorial will explain precisely how to communicate more effectively. I will explain the technique completely, giving you specific words to use when communicating with another and how to use them. And yes, you CAN learn it, anyone can-- ANYONE! Better communication does NOT mean learning new or fancy words, learning better grammar, or going back to school. All you have to do is learn my simple technique.

It sounds simple enough, right? Like many things though, "it's easier said than done." The key to learning the technique is practice, as you will see.

One last note before I begin-- my communication method is simple and straightforward. Surprisingly, people find it difficult to use at first. I suspect that the only reason it is difficult for them to use initially is because it is so different from how they have been communicating in the past. You, too, might find it difficult to use in the beginning, but you CAN and WILL master the technique, if you simply keep trying. Remember, the more you try and the more work you put into using it, the faster your relationships will improve and the faster your life will improve overall.

The Underlying Belief

To begin explaining my technique, I will divide communication into three parts: "Requesting," "Responding," and "Telling." Requesting occurs when one initiates a request to someone else. For example, "Can I have the last slice of pizza?" In that case, the request involves asking someone for something. "Did you call me?" is another example of Requesting because it requests information.

Responding is simply what you say in response to someone else's request. "Sure, you can have the last slice of pizza." "Yeah, I called earlier, but didn't leave a message."

The third part of communication-- Telling, covers everything else. Telling refers to the part of the conversation in which you simply state facts or opinions about various things. In other words, you tell someone something. Please note that Telling does not involve asking the other person for anything and, thus, it does not require any response.

My observation of human behavior is that people worry excessively about Telling. "What am I going to tell him?" "Have you told her that?" "Are you going to tell them in that way?" Universally, people labor under the delusion that telling people things is the most important part of a conversation. They believe that it is the part that determines how well they will get

along with others. It is for that reason that people usually stop short from telling others what they may not want to hear. "I don't think he'll handle that news very well, so I just won't tell him." "If she knew how I truly felt, she'd be really angry, so I'll just keep it to myself." Sound familiar?

As contrary and counterintuitive as it may seem, what you tell other people actually isn't that important to the relationship. The astounding lesson that took me years to learn is that it's what you don't say that will hurt or destroy a relationship a lot faster than what you do say. By that, I am referring to our feeling inhibited from saying what we want and what we don't want, which I will discuss shortly. While it is true that we can anger others intensely by stating facts or opinions that are offensive to them, learning discretion is more a matter of maturity than of communication technique. In short, Telling is a necessary and important part of communication, but it has little to do with forming and maintaining relationships.

It is my belief that the parts of communication that are used to forge relationships and resolve problems in them are Requesting and Responding. Therefore, my communication technique explains how to request and how to respond more effectively-- it does not address Telling at all. I leave Telling to your discretion.

Because Requesting and Responding each use different parts of the communication technique, I will address them separately. I shall begin by explaining Requesting.

Requesting

When Requesting, use "I want..." statements. For example, if you want someone to fill up the tank of your car with gas, say to that person, "I want you to fill up the tank, please." Do *NOT* say, "Gee, it would be great if the car had a full tank of gas" or, worse yet, complain loudly, "I guess *I'M* going to have to fill up the car again!" These last two statements are manipulative, while the first statement is assertive.

This part of the technique is already familiar to a lot of people, as it is often suggested by relationship coaches and counselors. Not every agrees with this approach, however. For example, people routinely ask me during presentations whether they can begin a Request with, "I would like you to..." or "Would you please...", rather than "I want...." I always reply that if they feel the need to tone down their language, it is far better that they do so and begin using the Technique than not trying it at all.

Imagine a target, with the words, "I want..." in the bull's eye. In the next ring appears the words, "Would you please...", which is almost as direct in requesting what you want. In the outermost ring of the target appears the words, "I would like you to..." because they still convey

a sense of what you want; however, they do not form a direct request. The words, "It would be great if you..." are not assertive, and therefore appear to the side of the target rather than on it.

Regardless of the exact words you use, it is important to keep the exact Technique in mind as a guide when choosing your words. Anytime we shy away from being assertive and instead choose more manipulative language, we are censoring ourselves. While we may need to censor ourselves at times to maintain certain relationships, such as with an insecure boss, we do damage to ourselves and others when we do so, as is explained in Chapter Six of my book, "The Fine Print of Happiness."

Moreover, the particular words you choose are not the most important concern when trying to be assertive. Someone at a presentation once told me that starting a sentence with the words, "I want...", sounds very demanding, like a general barking out an order. I replied that if you shout it while you have a scowl on your face, then yes, it would be demanding. But then, it is the body language and tone of voice that are intimidating, not the words. If you state your request in a calm manner, the other person will not perceive it as aggressive or manipulative.

Plan for Gradual Development of Assertiveness: Saying What You Want

At first, telling people what you want may be frightening. One way to overcome this fear of being open with others is to develop your assertiveness gradually. The following is a simple plan for developing your ability to speak freely concerning your desires. Start with the highest step you are willing to try, and when you are comfortable with it, move on to the next step:

Step 1. When you want something from another person, simply write down your feelings in a journal. Do not share your feelings with that person.

Step 2. Tell a friend about it.

Step 3. Tell the person what you want. Say nothing more.

Step 4. If the person refuses your request, seek a compromise. If you find your requests continually being denied by the other person, consider the value of continuing the relationship.

Making requests the "I want..." way may require some effort at first, especially if you are used to saying things in a round-about way. Perhaps you can create a method for reminding yourself to make requests in this way. It may sound silly, but one method to remind yourself would be to write the statement, "I want..." on a small piece of paper and place it where you will see it first thing in the morning every day, such as the bathroom or on the refrigerator door.

It, probably, will not take nearly as long as you might think to change the way you make requests to others. Lastly, please do not beat yourself up when you mess up because that will

accomplish nothing, except for making you feel bad. Keep trying- you'll get it.

Responding

The greater part of the communication technique is Responding. It is usually that part of the conversation where things go from bad to worse, and where relationships truly start to falter and deteriorate. People may not always make requests in a kind, considerate manner, but how you respond to their requests almost always makes the difference between smoothing over differences or heading for a train wreck.

Keep in mind that when you are Responding, the other person generally wants to know that the request has been heard and what you think about the request. Their first priority is making sure that they have been heard, while their second item of business is negotiating for what they want. Because of this priority, the first thing you must do in your response is to summarize what you heard and say it to the other person. Try not to repeat the exact words. Instead, paraphrase what the other person said. For example, if someone tells you that you are driving her/him mad by constantly changing the channel on the television, you can respond with a brief summary of the complaint: "You seem to be upset by my changing the channel a lot." By telling the other person what you heard, you are assuring the other person that you are truly listening to that person's concerns.

After you have summarized the other person's request, tell the other person what you think about it. First, tell the other person what you are willing to do to satisfy the request. Continuing with our example, you might say, "Ok, I won't change the channel again until I ask you first." Second, you must then explain what you are not willing to do. "I'm not willing to stop changing the channel altogether." It's vitally important that you respond in this order because if you state first what you are not willing to do, the other person will start focusing on that part of your response and will not listen as carefully to the part in which you explain what you are willing to do. Sadly, the other person may cut you off and derail the conversation as soon as you say what you are unwilling to do.

Thus, Responding can be summarized as follows:

1. Summarize what the other person wants, (**Summarize**)
2. Tell the other person what you are willing to agree to (**Willing**), and then
3. Say what you are unwilling to agree to (**Unwilling**).

In brief, it's **Summarize (S), Willing (W), Unwilling (U)**, or **SWU**.

Please note that after Responding initially to a Request, the other person then responds to the Response. In other words, the conversation continues with more Responding, and then with

some additional Requesting as needed. And, to be sure, there will be a lot of Telling along the way, as people see fit. The conversation ends when there is agreement, even if it is simply to agree to disagree. Consequently, the final Response will include only what you are willing to do and, possibly, a summary, if needed.

Plan for Gradual Development of Assertiveness: Saying What You Don't Want

Disagreeing with others may also feel frightening at first. The following is a modified version of the prior plan for gradually developing your ability to speak assertively. If you fear confrontation greatly, start with Step 1. Otherwise, start with the highest step that you are willing to try. After you become comfortable performing a step, try moving on to the next step:

Step 1. When you feel you disagree with something someone said or did, simply write down your feelings in a journal. Do not share your feelings with that person.

Step 2. Tell a friend about it.

Step 3. Tell the person with whom you disagree, "I hear what you're saying, and I respectfully disagree," or, "I saw what you did, and I respectfully disagree." Say nothing more.

Step 4. Disagree respectfully, and explain how you feel about it. If the other person responds, just listen and do not argue.

Step 5. Disagree respectfully, and advocate for your position, meaning, ask for what you want.

Step 6. Finally, try to reach compromises; and, if unsuccessful, consider the value of continuing the relationship.

Mantra: "Take the guesswork and clutter out of communication"

Arguably, the most important aspect of this technique for Responding is that it leaves no room for unwanted, irrelevant communication. For example, in response to someone's complaint that you turn the channel too often, you might be tempted to respond, "Well, you drink directly from the milk carton!" This response is an attack, and it will fuel a fight. More importantly, though, it simply fails to respond effectively to the other person's wants and needs. By following the Better Communication Technique closely, you will not say things that wreck the conversation; instead, you will say things that significantly improve it.

Another example of an irrelevant and ineffective response is a defensive answer. "Change the channel too often? I'll get bored if I don't!" This response merely defends yourself, it does not

address the other person's concerns. It may surprise you to learn that you never need to defend yourself when responding. In fact, I strongly recommend against explaining, justifying, or excusing yourself, unless someone asks you for the reasons behind your choices. Thus, the Better Communication Technique does not include any method for defending yourself, although it certainly allows you to explain your reasons by responding appropriately to a request for that information.

The other person wants to know what's going on in your head: what you want; what you are willing to do to get it; and what you are unwilling to do. If you withhold some of that information or give a false response, you are attempting to manipulate that other person. At that point, your relationship is no longer honest and genuine. In a sense, you don't really have a relationship with that other person-- you are merely pretending to have a relationship. The other person does not know where you stand. Never forget-- the whole purpose of the Better Communication Technique is to take the guesswork and the clutter out of the conversation.

Please note that I have presented the Technique as a somewhat rigid format-- a Request in the form of "I want...", followed by a Response in the form of Summarize, Willing, and Unwilling. This format is the distilled essence of assertive communication. It is designed to guide your thinking, even if you chose different words to express what you want and what you don't want. I fully expect that over time you will learn how to incorporate the elements of the Technique into your conversation in less rigid, more natural ways. For example, summarizing what the other person said can often help communication when making a Request. Nevertheless, it will probably help you to learn the Technique by following the format exactly, even though it might be somewhat awkward initially.

Learning the Better Communication Technique

As you have seen, none of the tasks involved in the Better Communication Technique-- such as summarizing or saying what you are willing to do, are difficult to learn. These are all things you have said before many times. The difficulty lies in saying these things when you are supposed to, in the order specified, and without adding anything else to the Requesting and Responding parts of the conversation.

If you find trying to use the Technique daunting at first, try breaking it up into pieces, as suggested by the two plans above for gradual development of assertiveness. Although everyone knows how to summarize, some of my clients have experienced difficulties summarizing what others say in the heat of a conversation. Here are some phrases you can begin your responses with in order to help ease you into the practice of summarizing what others say:

"It seems like...."

"It sounds like...."

"So, I think you are saying...."

"Ok, what I'm hearing is that....Is that right?"

Additionally, even I have found it difficult at times to remember to use the Technique when I'm embroiled in an argument with someone. Thus, it is helpful to practice using the Technique first in situations that are not stressful. As you practice it, you will find it easier to use in more trying circumstances.

Finally, it will probably help to have a copy of the following Quick Reference Chart with you as you learn the Technique. I have no further suggestions or tricks to make learning the Technique easier. It's really just a matter of forcing yourself to keep trying it, over and over, in as many conversations as you can.

Quick Reference Chart

Requesting: "I want...." NOTE: You can also **Summarize** what the other person wants before making a **Request**.

Responding: SWU

Summarize (S) – *Summarize* what the other person wants,

Willing (W) – say what you are *Willing* to do or agree to, then

Unwilling (U) – say what you are *Unwilling* to do or agree to.

Following are examples of use of the Better Communication Technique.

Examples

The following examples illustrate how to use the Better Communication Technique. In each example, the conversation is written first as an example of poor communication. Then, it is rewritten using the Technique. I mark up the text to highlight how the parts of the Technique are used in conversation, sometimes very naturally. Please keep in mind that the examples demonstrate only one possible way to use the Technique; they are not intended to be memorized or repeated in conversation. You will have to use the Technique as it best fits with your personality.

NOTE: I have tried to make my examples as realistic as possible and, consequently, some of

the situations and language used may be controversial or offensive to you. One important lesson that life has taught me is that the more willing you are to face controversy and offensiveness, the better able you will be to relate to others. I warmly encourage you to study all of the examples, regardless of what you think about the situations or the language used.

Example 1. Washing the dishes

Nick and Julie are talking at the dinner table, just after they've eaten:

Nick: Thanks, honey, dinner was great. I'm going to watch some TV.

Julie: It wouldn't kill you to wash some dishes. They won't wash themselves.

Nick: What the hell has gotten into you tonight? You're such a crab.

Julie: Go to hell, Nick!

Obviously, this interaction did not go well. Let's try it again, but with both people using the Technique:

Nick: Thanks honey, dinner was great. I'm going to watch some TV.

Julie: I'm glad you liked it. Would you mind doing me a favor? I want you to wash the dishes tonight, ok? [*Request*]

Nick: I wouldn't mind doing the dishes, [*Summarize and Willing*] but there's a special on the history of beer making coming on, and I really want to see it. [*Telling-- not a part of the Technique*] Is it alright if I do the dishes later? [*Unwilling-- to do them immediately*]

Julie: I can understand that you prefer to do them later. [*Summarize*] I'd be really happy if you did. [*Willing-- to have them done sometime*] I don't want to wait until tomorrow morning. Will you promise to wash them sometime tonight? [*Unwilling-- to wait long*]

Nick: Sure, I'll make sure to wash the dishes before I go to bed. [*Willing-- final response*]

Please note that Nick's final response contains only his willingness to agree to Julie's last request-- that he do the dishes sometime that evening. Thus, there was nothing that Nick was unwilling to do in his final response.

Example 2. Choosing a Movie.

Robert and Steve are talking about going to see a movie:

Robert: There are plenty of movies to see at the Metroplex. Why don't we go there?

Steve: Sure. You know, I want to see that new action movie about the guy who breaks out of prison to kill the guy who murdered his sister.

Robert: (Says quietly) Ok.

They go to the theater, see the movie, and then meet their friend Vicki at the coffee shop:

Vicki: Hey, where have you two been?

Steve: We saw this awesome pic, "Brother Avenger." It was way cool. Right, Robert?

[Steve looks at Robert, but Robert says nothing]

Vicki: Hey, Robert, what did you think about it?

Robert: It was mindless-- the usual.

Steve: Huh? You didn't like it?

Robert: Not really.

Steve: I thought you wanted to see it, too?

Robert: You know I get tired of those shoot 'em up movies with no plot.

Steve: But you said you wanted to go to the movies.

Robert: I did.

Steve: So, what did you want to see?

Robert: That new docudrama, "Killing Our World Softly."

Steve: How come you didn't say anything earlier?

Robert: Because every time I suggest a movie, you start a fight.

Steve: (Says angrily) Start a fight? Why the hell haven't you ever said this before?

Vicki: You know, I'm supposed to meet my cousin. I'll just let you two talk.

[Vicki leaves Robert and Steve to their argument]

Ever see this kind of behavior? Someone is passive at the time a decision is made but, later, criticizes the person who made the decision. This is an example of another kind of manipulative behavior. Let's rewrite the conversation, assuming that Robert has learned the Technique and has decided not to be so passive. The purpose of having only one person use the Technique is

to demonstrate that you can improve communication and your relationship, even if the other person still communicates ineffectively:

Steve: I want to see that new movie, "Brother Avenger." [*Request*]

Robert: "Brother Avenger" does sound like your kind of movie, [*Summarize*] and I do want to see a movie, [*Willing*] but I really don't want to see that one. [*Unwilling*] Would you be interested in "Killing Our World Softly?" [*Request*]

Steve: Not really. Too political. [*Unwilling*] How about that comedy about the talk show host who is actually a ghost? [*Request*]

Robert: Oh, that sounds funny. Let's go. [*Willing*]

Please note that the conversation went much better, despite the fact that only Robert was using the Better Communication Technique.

Example 3. Switching a Day Off with a Coworker

Phil and Karen are coworkers:

Phil: Karen, are you working on Saturday?

Karen: Yep, sure am.

Phil: So, next week, you have Saturday off, right?

Karen: (Beginning to get annoyed) Yes, Phil.

Phil: Hmmm....

Karen: (Says angrily) I know you, Phil-- you're obviously asking for a reason. What the hell do you want?

Phil: You have to trade with me. I need Saturday off next week.

Karen: Why don't you try asking instead of telling me?!!

Phil: Screw that-- I need that Saturday off and you owe me.

Karen: I already have plans, sorry.

Phil: (Says loudly) You owe me!

Karen: Go to hell!

Phil: (Under his breath) Bitch.

This is not what we would call a friendly office environment. Let's see what happens after the Relationship Fairy sprinkles some Better Communication Technique dust on Karen:

Phil: Next week, you have Saturday off, right Karen?

Karen: Yes.

Phil: Hmmmm....

Karen: Phil, is there something you want? Why don't you just ask me? [*Request-- for information*]

Phil: You have to trade with me. I need Saturday off next week.

Karen: So, you want me to take your Saturday off this week and let you have Saturday off next week, right? [*Summarize*]

Phil: Yes.

Karen: I'm certainly willing to trade days off in general, and yes, I do owe you, Phil, [*Willing*] but next Saturday I already have plans that I really don't want to cancel. [*Unwilling*]

Phil: But you owe me!

Karen: You're right, I do owe you. [*Summarize and Willing*] And I will trade with you, [*Willing*] but I want to go to a special event and don't want to miss it. [*Unwilling*] Can we please switch some other time? [*Request-- for compromise*]

Phil: I guess. (sighs) [*Willing-- although reluctantly*]

Phil is disappointed, and Karen might feel a bit uneasy, but they still have an acceptable relationship. This conversation may well likely have been the best outcome possible, given their conflict. Remember, the Better Communication Technique doesn't promise that everything will be wonderful. What it does promise you is significant improvements in your relationships. Phil and Karen have a conflict that cannot be resolved-- they both want the same Saturday off, and apparently they cannot both take it off. The Better Communication Technique cannot resolve all conflicts completely, but it can help prevent a conflict from escalating into an argument or a fight that destroys a relationship.

Example 4. A Partner's Complaint about Working Late at the Office

Lucy and Frank are partners. Frank has been staying later and later at the office for the past five months:

Lucy: Frank, I want to talk to you about something.

Frank: Ok.

Lucy: I don't know where to start.

Frank: What do you mean?

Lucy: I just feel so bad.

Frank: Why do you feel so bad?

Lucy: It's just that...[starts crying].

Frank: I'm sorry.

Lucy: Frank?

Frank: What?

Lucy: Why do you stay so late at the office?

Frank: I told you. I've got so much work to do.

Lucy: Are you having an affair?

Frank: What? No!

Lucy: You can tell me if you are. I need to know.

Frank: I swear, I'm not having an affair. I'm just working late.

Lucy: Do you still love me, Frank?

Frank: Yes, I do.

Lucy: Then why don't you come home?

Frank: I just have work to do.

[Lucy continues to cry while Frank tries to hold her.]

This is a tragic situation, mostly because there was no resolution. Lucy is still worried that Frank might be having an affair, and Frank feels guilty for making Lucy feel so bad. At this point, probably the most helpful thing would be for them to talk things out, but as we have just seen, they both seem to struggle in the conversation. Neither of them knows what to say or how to say it and, therefore, they are unable to resolve their problem.

For the revised conversation, we will assume that Frank learned about the Technique and convinced Lucy to study the tutorial with him:

Lucy: Frank, I want to talk to you about something.

Frank: Ok.

Lucy: I don't know where to start.

Frank: What do you mean? [*Request-- for information*]

Lucy: I just feel so bad.

Frank: Why do you feel so bad? [*Request-- for information*]

Lucy: I'm afraid that you're not really staying late at the office. I'm afraid that you're having an affair. [*Telling-- which is an appropriate response to a Request for information*] Are you? [*Request-- for information*]

Frank: I can understand that you're suspicious. [*Summarize*] I just want you to know that I'm not having an affair.

Lucy: If you were having an affair, would you tell me? [*Request*]

Frank: Yes, I would. [*Willing*]

Lucy: I appreciate your being honest with me, [*Summarize*] but I still feel bad. Would you come home earlier? [*Request*]

Frank: Ok, I can appreciate that you want me home earlier. [*Summarize*] I can work less hours-- you're right. [*Willing*] I just don't want to get in your way. [*Unwilling*]

Lucy: You think you're getting in my way? [*Summarize*] Why do think that?

Frank: Because it just seems like you want to do a lot of things that don't involve me, like going out with your friends on Thursdays.

Lucy: I do go out with my friends, [*Summarize*] but that's just sometimes. I really want to see you and that's why I want to be home with you. I didn't realize that going out with my friends was such a problem. Let's talk about it, ok? [*Willing*] I'm not willing to stop seeing them, [*Unwilling*] but I'm sure we can work out a schedule. [*Request*]

Frank: Ok, we can talk about it. [*Summarize*] I'll certainly accommodate you seeing your friends. [*Willing*]

Lucy: Thank you, Frank; that's all I ask. Right now what I really want more than anything is to see you. [*Request*]

Frank: Thanks for telling me that, Lucy. I'm really glad to hear it. I'm not sure that's always true.

Lucy: Of course it is. Even when I'm mad or upset, I love being with you.

This is a really great “happy ending” that we all want, and it *is* possible, but only if you work at it. Why is it that people expect perfect relationships to just fall in their laps? That kind of thinking is unrealistic. What you get out of something is almost always the result of what you put into it.

Example 5. Sexual Practices

The Better Communication Technique applies to every situation, including discussions about touchy subjects such as sex. Jan and Tom are talking in their living room:

Jan: What's wrong with you? You never go down on me anymore!

Tom: Nothing I do is ever right. All you do is complain.

This is an example of poor communication. As you can see, Jan and Tom's relationship has deteriorated to the point where it would not be surprising if one of them suggested breaking up.

Let's rewrite the conversation, this time assuming that Tom has learned the Better Communication Technique, but Jan has not:

Jan: What's wrong with you? You never go down on me anymore.

Tom: It sounds like you would like me to go down on you more often, right? [*Summarize*] I'd be happy to, [*Willing*] but I have a concern. I don't like to do that if we haven't both taken a shower first. [*Unwilling*] Ok?

Jan: You know, that's an insult. I'm not a filthy pig!

Tom: I never said you're a filthy pig, you're not. [*Summarize*] Like I said, I would like to please you orally, [*Willing*] but I'm just not willing to do it unless we shower first. [*Unwilling*] Can you live with that?

Jan: (Rolling her eyes) Yeah, alright.

As you can see, the communication has improved greatly-- both people were able to express what they wanted and what they were willing to do to meet the needs of the other. They may not be totally happy, but they certainly aren't thinking about breaking up. Think how much better the communication would be if Jan had learned the Technique too!

Example 6. Asking Someone to Stop Snoring

Ellen and Harry are married. This morning, they are talking in the kitchen:

[Harry walks into the kitchen, Ellen ignores him.]

Harry: Good morning! Got any coffee?

Ellen: Check the coffee maker.

Harry: Oh, ok, sure. Did you get a mug out for me?

Ellen: Get it yourself.

Harry: Hey, is something wrong?

Ellen: The same as every day.

Harry: And what's that?

Ellen: No sleep- that's what!

Harry: Sorry to hear that. Why didn't you sleep?

Ellen: Because you kept waking me up with your damn snoring!

Harry: I was snoring?

Ellen: You sound like a freight train almost every night!

Harry: I didn't know. How come you never told me?

Ellen: What can you do about it? I was just hoping you would stop.

Harry: Well, I don't know. I'll ask my grandma; she knows about stuff like that.

Ellen: Great. Ask her how I can get a divorce while you're at it.

Harry: Alright, Ellen-- I'll call her today!

Let's try that again, but this time Harry will utilize the Technique. We will also suppose that both Ellen and Harry have learned the technique during a family therapy session, but Ellen has been skeptical about trying it. Harry's use of the Technique, however, inspires Ellen to try it:

Harry: Good morning! Got any coffee?

Ellen: Check the coffee maker.

Harry: Oh, ok, sure. Did you get out a mug for me? [*Request-- for information*]

Ellen: Get it yourself.

Harry: Hey, what's wrong? [*Request*]

Ellen: The same as every day.

Harry: So, please tell me what's wrong. [*Request*]

Ellen: No sleep-- that's what!

Harry: You're not sleeping? [*Summarize*] I'm sorry to hear that. Is there anything I can do to help? [*Request*]

Ellen: Yeah- you can stop your damn snoring!

Harry: I'm snoring and interrupting your sleep, is that right? [*Summarize*]

Ellen: Yes!

Harry: I'm very sorry, Ellen. I didn't realize I was snoring or keeping you up, but I would be happy to fix the problem. [*Willing*] In the meanwhile, maybe I should sleep in another room, because I can't control it. [*Unwilling-- Harry acknowledges being unable to stop immediately*]

Ellen: Ok, Harry, thanks. I appreciate your willingness to try. [*Summarize-- Ellen starts to use the technique*] I guess we can sleep in separate rooms for now [*Willing*], but I want the problem fixed so we can sleep together. [*Unwilling-- Ellen refuses to allow sleeping in separate rooms as a permanent solution*]

Harry: Ok, I'm glad we agree on something temporary. [*Summarize*] And yeah, I don't want to keep snoring, either. Let me call my grandma, she knows about stuff like this. [*Willing-- to take action*]

Ellen: I think calling your grandma is a great idea. [*Summarize*] I'll try to be patient, [*Willing*] but can you call her today? [*Unwilling-- to wait and Request*]

Harry: Sure, I'll call her today, right after work. [*Willing*]

Ellen: Great, thanks!

One interesting aspect of this example is that the solution-- asking Harry's grandma about how to stop snoring-- is the same in both conversations. In other words, Harry and Ellen arrived at the same solution, regardless of their communication styles, but the first conversation resulted in their both feeling angry and hurt. In the second conversation, using the Better Communication Technique, they still manage to solve their problem together, but they also feel better about each other and their relationship.

Example 7. Asking a Roommate (or a Child) to Put Away Clothes

Darren and Luis are roommates. Darren is very neat, but Luis...well....Darren confronts Luis in their living room:

Darren: Hey, man-- when the hell are you going to put your clothes away?

Luis: What are you talking about?

Darren: All your clothes, they're all over the friggin' floor, man!

Luis: I don't have clothes on the floor.

Darren: What drugs are you on? Look at that pile [points to a small pile of clothing in the living room].

Luis: Oh, that's just a few things. You've got clothes around here too, man.

Darren: What??? Where??? I keep all of my clothes in my room.

Luis: Me, too.

Darren: Yeah, well, what about all these clothes?! You've got clothes in the dining room, near the TV, in the bathroom. You even have a pile of clothes next to the back door in the kitchen. Clean it up! I'm sick of this shit.

Luis: Don't worry, I'll get my clothes. I've got something to do right now.

Darren: Like what?? You're just listening to your stereo! You need to clean this mess up now!

Luis: :Later.

[Darren storms out of the apartment angrily and slams the door shut.]

Conversations like these aren't good for anyone's blood pressure. Let's change the conversation by having Darren learn the Better Communication Technique:

Darren: Hey, man, I'm concerned about something.

Luis: Yeah, what?

Darren: I don't mean to dog you, but I'm upset because you have so many clothes lying around in the apartment.

Luis: I don't have clothes lying around.

Darren: Yeah, you do. See that pile? Those are your clothes, not mine.

Luis: Oh, ok, that's nothing.

Darren: Well, you're right, it is a small pile of clothing, [*Summarize*] but it's only a part of the problem. You've got piles like that in other parts of the apartment, and it's really starting

to bug me. I thought you were going to clean them up, but you haven't. I would like you to put your clothes in your room. [*Request*]

Luis: Oh, man, I don't have time for that, I have something to do.

Darren: I understand it might not be a good time for you. [*Summarize*] I would like you to do it sometime today. [*Request*]

Luis: I don't know if I can do it today.

Darren: I know, I know-- you're busy. [*Summarize*] I can wait until you have a minute, [*Willing*] but I want it done soon. [*Unwilling-- to wait for long*] How soon can you get to it, you think? [*Request*]

Luis: Alright, man, I'll do it tonight, after my TV show.

Darren: Thanks, man; I appreciate it.

Note that Darren will summarize often, sometimes before making a request. Summarizing is always useful in giving the other person the message that you are paying attention to what the other person is saying. Also note that because Darren was willing to see Luis' point of view, Luis was more cooperative.

Example 8. Budgeting for a Joint Bank Account

Julia and Patty are life partners who want to open a joint bank account in order to share living expenses. Both are skittish because they have never done this before, and they have been living together for only six months:

Julia: It's difficult keeping up with who paid for what, and then trying to split it.

Patty: Yeah, I know.

Julia: I think having a bank account together would make it easier.

Patty: I guess so.

Julia: So, should we get one?

Patty: Ok, yeah.

Julia: How do you want to do it?

Patty: I don't know.

Julia: Why don't we get a joint account, and we can both write checks on it?

Patty: What if you write a check and I don't know about it? I might write a check for more than what's in the account.

Julia: Oh, yeah. Well, we'll keep up. It'll be cool.

Patty: I guess.

Julia: So, do you want to go to the bank today?

Patty: I don't know. I'm just worried about all those checks because we can both write them.

Julia: Don't worry, Patty, it'll all work out.

Patty: Ok, but not today. I have to be somewhere.

As it turns out, Julia and Patty have this same conversation, over and over again. They keep having it because Patty always makes up an excuse for not going to the bank to open the joint account. She is nervous, and rightly so. Unfortunately, Patty is also afraid of communicating openly with Julia, and this fear prevents her from working with Julia to resolve the problem. Let's assume that Patty has attended a workshop on the Better Communication Technique, and she feels more confident to speak her mind:

Julia: It's difficult keeping up with who paid for what, and then trying to split it.

Patty: Yeah, I know.

Julia: I think having a bank account together would make it easier.

Patty: I'm glad you want to do that. I was thinking the same thing. A joint account would make it so much easier. [*Summarize*]

Julia: So, you're willing to get one?

Patty: Yup! [*Willing*]

Julia: How do you think it should work? I was thinking that we could both write checks.

Patty: Well, we could both write checks, [*Summarize*] but I'm afraid that would create problems. What if you write a check that I don't know about, and then I write a check for more than is left in the account?

Julia: Oh, yeah. Well, we'll keep up. It'll be cool.

Patty: I appreciate your confidence that everything will work out, [*Summarize*] but I'm still worried. What if we get debit cards instead? [*Request-- for compromise*] We can always check the balance before we buy something, so we won't overspend.

Julia: Ok, why not? That sounds better than writing checks all the time, but what about our rent? We still have to write a check for that.

Patty: Yup, you're right, we will still need to write some checks. [*Summarize*] I would be happy to write the checks to make sure we don't overdraw the account. [*Willing*] I'm not crazy about us both writing checks. [*Unwilling*]

Julia: Ok, well, I'd be happy to write the checks, too, if you want.

Patty: Thanks for offering. [*Summarize*] I really don't care who writes the checks, [*Willing-- to let Julia make this decision*] just as long as we make sure the other knows about it. [*Unwilling-- to permit a lack of communication*]

Julia: I'll tell you that night if I write any checks and you do the same, cool?

Patty: Yeah, but what if we forget? We should try to tell each other, [*Summarize*] but maybe there's a better way. What if we use only one checkbook and we get checks that always make carbon copies? [*Request-- for compromise*]

Julia: I guess that would be ok.

Patty: Are you sure? Do we need another solution?

Julia: No, that's cool. Do you want to go to the bank today?

Patty: Sure, cool.

A little later in the day, Julia and Patty went happily to the bank together to open their joint account. They were able to communicate effectively and find a solution that worked for them both because of the Better Communication Technique.