

# *The Seven Challenges*

## Cooperative Communication Skills for Success at Home and at Work

(as featured on [www.NewConversations.net](http://www.NewConversations.net))

*a structured, intensive exploration of seven challenging skills for a lifetime of  
better communication in work, family, friendship & community*

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### OVERVIEW OF THE SEVEN CHALLENGES

**Challenge 1.** Listen more carefully and responsively. Listen first and acknowledge what you hear, even if you don't agree with it, before expressing your experience or point of view. In order to get more of your conversation partner's attention in tense situations, pay attention first: listen and give a brief restatement of what you have heard (especially feelings) before you express your own needs or position. The kind of listening recommended here separates acknowledging from approving or agreeing. Acknowledging another person's thoughts and feelings **does not have to mean** that you **approve of** or **agree with** that person's actions or way of experiencing, or that you will do whatever someone asks.

Some of the deeper levels of this first step include learning to listen to your own heart, and learning to encounter identities and integrities quite different from your own, while still remaining centered in your own sense of self.

**Challenge 2.** Explain your conversational intent and invite consent. In order to help your conversation partner cooperate with you and to reduce possible misunderstandings, start important conversations by inviting your conversation partner to join you in the specific kind of conversation you want to have. The more the conversation is going to mean to you, the more important it is for your conversation partner to understand the big picture. Many successful communicators begin special conversations with a preface that goes something like: *"I would like to talk with you for a few minutes about [subject matter]. When would be a good time?"* The exercise for this step will encourage you to expand your list of possible conversations and to practice starting a wide variety of them.

Some deeper levels of this second step include learning to be more aware of and honest about your intentions, gradually giving up intentions to injure, demean or punish, and learning to treat other people as consenting equals whose participation in conversation with us is a gift and not an obligation.

**Challenge 3.** Express yourself more clearly and completely. Slow down and give your listeners more information about what you are experiencing by using a wide range of "I-statements." One way to help get more of your listener's empathy is to express more of the five basic dimensions of your experience: Here is an example using the five main "I-messages" identified by various researchers over the past half century:

### The Five I-Messages = Five dimensions of experience

#### Example of a "Five I-Message" communication

1. What are you seeing, hearing or otherwise sensing? *"When I saw the dishes in the sink..."*
2. What emotions are you feeling? *...I felt irritated and impatient...*
3. What interpretations or wants of yours that support those feelings? *...because I want to start cooking dinner right away...*
4. What action, information or commitment you want to request now? *...and I want to ask you to help me do the dishes right now...*
5. What positive results will receiving that action, information or commitment lead to in the future? *...so that dinner will be ready by the time Mike and Joe get here."*

Anytime one person sincerely listens to another, a very creative process is going on in which the listener mentally reconstructs the speaker's experience. The more facets or dimensions of your experience you share with easy-to-grasp "I statements," the easier it will be for your conversation partner to reconstruct your experience accurately and understand what you are feeling. This is equally worthwhile whether you are trying to solve a problem with someone or trying to express appreciation for them. Expressing yourself this carefully might appear to take longer than your usual quick style of communication. But if you include all the time it takes to unscramble everyday misunderstandings, and to work through the feelings that usually accompany not being understood, expressing yourself more completely can actually take a lot less time.

Some deeper levels of this third step include developing the courage to tell the truth, growing beyond blame in understanding painful experiences, and learning to make friends with feelings, your own and other people's, too.

**Challenge 4.** Translate your (and other people's) complaints and criticisms into specific requests, and explain your requests. In order to get more cooperation from others, whenever possible ask for what you want by using specific, action-oriented, positive language rather than by using generalizations, "why's," "don'ts" or "somebody should's." Help your listeners comply by explaining your requests with a "so that...", "it would help me to... if you would..." or "in order to..." Also, when you are receiving criticism and complaints from others, translate and restate the complaints as action requests. ....").

Some of the deeper levels of this fourth step include developing a strong enough sense of self-esteem that you can accept being turned down, and learning how to imagine creative solutions to problems, solutions in which everyone gets at least some of their needs met.

**Challenge 5.** Ask questions more "openendedly" and more creatively. **"Openendedly...":** In order to coordinate our life and work with the lives and work of other people, we all need to know more of what other people are feeling and thinking, wanting and planning. But our usual "yes/no" questions actually tend to shut people up rather than opening them up. In order to encourage your conversation partners to share more of their thoughts and feelings, ask "open-ended" rather than "yes/no" questions. Open-ended questions allow for a wide range of responses. For example, asking "How did you like that food/movie /speech/doctor/etc.?" will evoke a more detailed response than "Did you like it?" (which could be answered with a simple "yes" or "no"). In the first part of Challenge Five we explore asking a wide range of open-ended questions. **"and more creatively..."** When we ask questions we are using a powerful language tool to *focus conversational attention* and *guide our interaction with others*. But many of the

questions we have learned to ask are totally fruitless and self-defeating (such as, parents to a delinquent teen, “*Why????!!! Why have you done this to us????!!!*”). In general it will be more fruitful to ask “how” questions about the future rather than “why” questions about the past, but there are many more creative possibilities as well. Of the billions of questions we might ask, not all are equally fruitful or illuminating; not all are equally helpful in solving problems together. In the second part of Challenge Five we explore asking powerfully creative questions from many areas of life.

Deeper levels of this fifth step include developing the courage to hear the answers to our questions, to face the truth of what other people are feeling. Also, learning to be comfortable with the process of looking at a situation from different perspectives, and learning to accept that people often have needs, views and tastes different from your own (I am not a bad person if you love eggplant and I can’t stand it).

**Challenge 6.** Express more appreciation. To build more satisfying relationships with the people around you, express more appreciation, delight, affirmation, encouragement and gratitude. Because life continually requires us to attend to problems and breakdowns, it gets very easy to see in life only what is broken and needs fixing. But satisfying relationships (and a happy life) require us to notice and respond to what is delightful, excellent, enjoyable, to work well done, to food well cooked, etc. It is appreciation that makes a relationship strong enough to accommodate differences and disagreements. Thinkers and researchers in several different fields have reached similar conclusions about this: healthy relationships need a core of mutual appreciation.

One deeper level of this sixth step is in how you might shift your overall level of appreciation and gratitude, toward other people, toward nature, and toward life and/or a “Higher Power.”

**Challenge 7.** Adopt the “continuous learning” approach to living, making better communication an important part of your everyday life. In order to have your new communication skills available in a wide variety of situations, you will need to practice them in as wide a variety of situations as possible, until, like driving or bicycling, they become “second nature.” The Seventh Challenge is to practice your evolving communication skills in everyday life, solving problems together, giving emotional support to the important people in your life, and enjoying how you are becoming a positive influence in your world. This challenge includes learning to see each conversation as an opportunity to grow in skill and awareness, each encounter as an opportunity to express more appreciation, each argument as an opportunity to translate your complaints into requests, and so on. One deeper level of this seventh step concerns learning to separate yourself from the current culture of violence, insult and injury, and learning how to create little islands of cooperation and mutuality.

**Conclusion.** Hopefully, this information will help you discover that listening and talking more consciously and cooperatively can be fun and rewarding. Just as guitar playing or basketball take great effort and practice, so does communication.