

TRANSCRIPT: Roadblocks to Communication

Words are powerful. They can have a lasting impact on a conversation and a relationship. Typically we focus on the content of the message rather than the consequence our choice of words may have on the interaction. Robert Bolton suggests that there are 12 roadblocks that create communication barriers and can be high risk responses for interpreting an interaction.

The first four of roadblocks can be categorized as judging statements. When we criticize, we are evaluating or making a judgment. The communication partner can take the message personally and quickly become defensive. This can stop the conversation or send it into a downward spiral.

Bolton's second roadblock is name-calling. Statements that categorize people or that could be viewed as a stereotype or judgment of character can halt a conversation. For example, the term "sorority girl" can have different connotations depending on one's experience or perception. If the term is offensive and considered to be a negative judgement, communication can be stopped.

The third roadblock in this category is diagnosing or analyzing a person's behavior. Analyzing can imply authority or superiority and cause defensiveness. The fourth roadblock is praising evaluatively. We seldom consider praise as something that would halt communication, but if it is done with a hidden agenda or felt to be manipulative, it causes the communication partner to be less trusting of the situation. "You are such a good artist. I know you wouldn't mind creating some therapy materials for me."

The next five roadblocks are messages that impose solutions. Ordering someone to complete a task can cut communication short if the word choice isn't considered. Threatening or attempting to control another's actions by giving a negative consequence stops productive communication. Moralizing or telling someone they should do a task will make one defensive and can cause an argument or for the communication partner to withdraw from the interaction. Excessive or inappropriate questioning will interrupt communication. Close-ended questions lead to quick answers. If the speaker continues to fire more questions, it feels like an interrogation and can lead to an abrupt end to the conversation.

The ninth roadblock is advising. Often our intentions are good when offering advice, but individuals typically are not asking us for our opinion. They just want someone to listen. A helpful thing to remember is that unsolicited advice is criticism. It is received as an evaluation or a judgement.

This next group of roadblocks illustrates examples of how we can avoid the concerns of our communication partner. A person's concerns can be pushed

aside by diverting the topic. One type of well-meaning diversion is the me-too statement. We want to show that we empathize with the person, and so we share a similar experience. However, it often diverts the attention away from the speaker and doesn't allow them the opportunity to share their concerns or feelings. Not everyone is comfortable with someone expressing emotion. There are two roadblocks that could convey that one's concerns or feelings aren't important. One is to respond with logic and not acknowledge the person's feelings. The other is to provide reassurance that things will be better and negate the current situation. Rather than try to cheer them up, it may be best to acknowledge that the current situation is sad, awful or scary. In other words, identifying and acknowledging the feeling can encourage the communication partner to continue talking rather than shut them down. "You always do this. This is why we can't have a productive conversation."

Bolton has added a thirteenth roadblock, which is telling someone that their communication pattern is preventing productive communication. Once we are aware of these conversation stoppers, it can be tempting to bring them to the attention of the communication partner and essentially blame them for the disruption in the dialogue. Virginia Satir proposes that there are words that need to be used with caution. The first is being aware of the use of "I" and "you" messages. Using "I" clearly means that you are taking responsibility for what you say. "I am saying that the moon is made of red cheese." This is your opinion. Using "you" can be felt as an accusation when only reporting or sharing is intended. "You are making things worse." Likewise, the use of "they" is often an indirect way of talking about "you." It also can be a loose way to spread gossip. "They said that you are the toughest supervisor on staff." It is important to be clear as to who "they" are, so that the message is concrete and understood.

Messages need to be clear, and so Satir includes the word "it" in the list of caution words. The clearer your "it" is, the less the listener fills in with his or her own meaning. Using the word "but" in a statement will negate the first part of the sentence. "That was a great session, but next time I suggest you reinforce his responses more quickly." The student hears the second half of the sentence and doesn't know that it was a good session. Try substituting the word "and" for "but" and make two like statements, not contradicting statements. "You never put away your materials" or "You are always late to our meetings." The words "never" and "always" can impose guilt and feelings of inadequacy. The last two caution words are "ought" and "should". These are trap words and imply that there's something wrong with you, that you have failed. They impose guilt or imply stupidity. An alternative is to reword the statement with an option or choice. "I can study now or I can take a break and study when I'm more focused" versus "I should study."