



Ouch! That Hurt!

Stephen Harrison, PMP

© Harrison International Ltd, 2006. All rights reserved.

Abstract: Communicating with others is rife with pitfalls, misunderstanding and potentially hurtful outcomes. Here are some strategies for handling hurtful communication and creating a more positive outcome.

It amazes me sometimes the things that are said and done by people, supposedly for the help and benefit of others, but which are frankly rude, hurtful and/or damaging. I have recently been a witness to a very unpleasant exchange that has arisen between two "friends" and it is a stark reminder that intentions, motivations, values and perspectives can be very different and play a powerful role in our communications with others. In an exchange of emails one of the participants sought to take a rational path, clarifying perspective by stating their intentions, explaining their motivations, and seeking open dialogue to work through any misunderstanding. Everything was written from an "I feel..." or "My intention was..." perspective. The response was condemning and written as "It is obvious you felt...", "I know your intentions were..." and fascinatingly accused the first person of being aggressive. I was involved as a coach to the first person, in this instance not to help the relationship but to work through the issues and achieve some positive personal outcome for the hurting individual.

Communications with others is full of opportunity for misunderstanding. In entering a dialogue with others we bring a wealth of personal experience, cultural and personal values, aspirations and intentions, and personality styles. We may be quiet and aloof, bold and brash, warm and welcoming, or any number of other possibilities. And then there is how we view the other and what they have to offer a given situation. Even on a good day, when we put real thought and effort into what we are communicating, and in thinking through how best to present our message, there are misfires, and there can be major breakdowns and misunderstandings. If we fire off messages in an emotional frenzy the likelihood of a positive outcome is LOW.

Relevant to the example I introduced, some principles in communicating that can help create a positive outcome are:

Choose the appropriate medium for your communication. Is it appropriate? Will it maximise your chances of sending a clear, unconfused message that will be understood by the recipients. Do not fall into the trap of believing that sending a clear message means it will be understood.

Harrison International Ltd
PO Box 22-827
Otahuhu, Auckland 1640
New Zealand

Phone: +64 9 277-7756
Email: hlway@harrison.co.nz
Web Site: www.harrison.co.nz

"Encouraging and developing business excellence"

Breakdowns in communication can and do occur with the sender and/or the receiver at any given time.

When communicating the message we send is conveyed 55% nonverbally (i.e. through body language), 38% vocally (e.g. our tone and where we place emphasis) and 7% through the words we use. How many of us resort to using email as our primary means for communicating? We have already reduced our bandwidth for information to 7% of what is possible, assuming we send the perfect message. If you consider the TXTing mentality that is now so prevalent, with its encrypted messages, short forms that are not equally understood, and lack of punctuation, the ability to communicate can only be reduced further still.

If what you need to convey is important or there are sensitive issues or emotional issues around the content, carefully consider a face-to-face meeting which maximises the possibility for understanding, or a phone call that at least maintains verbal content as well as the words.

We live in an information age AND we are really appalling communicators. Don't let technology lull you into a false sense of comfort about the message you are sending or that the recipients are receiving. What you send as a message IS NOT necessarily what they receive!

Neutralise Emotion – internally and expressed. When hurt or angry, walk away and wait a day to respond, if possible (not so easy in a face-to-face situation, but still may be a valid option). As a minimum, take a deep breath, find your own centre of balance and consciously choose the outcome you want from a message you are sending before speaking or writing.

Own your own feelings and express them as "I feel..." There is no condemnation of the other person if you own your feelings and express them as yours. Of course if you state **they made you feel** something you are hitting a difficulty. Remember: no one else can make you feel anything. You choose your feelings. The choosing may not be obvious but it is true. For example, someone hits you. How do you feel? It depends. If the person is or has a history of aggression towards you, says "I hate you" and punches you in the face the result **may** be anger. If a person is thrashing around on the floor in an epileptic fit and in the throws of their fit their fist hits you in the face, you may feel startled, possibly some compassion, but are less likely to feel angry. Circumstance, perspective and values contribute to the feelings you experience. They are your feelings. No one else made you feel them. Something happened. You interpreted the situation. A signal was generated from your brain and a feeling experienced. By owning your feelings you have a choice of changing them and of harnessing them to enhance your personal power.

Assign your own importance to feedback received. Most of us want others to be happy with us. We learn from the moment we are born that if we please others we are more likely to get what we want, or at least have a better experience of life. When we learn that someone is displeased with us the reaction can be pronounced as we struggle with our apparent failing. From this perspective we place a high value on negative feedback, and often overlook and quickly dismiss the positive.

An important phase of personal growth is when we shift our measures of success as a person internally and base it on our intentions, our motivations, the values we hold and outcomes we sought, and less on what others say to and about us, negative or positive. With a solid internal touchstone, we can receive external assessments of who we are, how we are viewed and judged, and compare them against our own assessment. Consider there may be truth in anything we receive, but not necessarily, and do not accept negative (or even positive) feedback simply because it has been given.

Feedback can be provided for a variety of reasons. For example:

- to offer constructive critique
- to create motivation to change
- to unsettle and create opportunity for a victory
- to be spiteful and deliberately hurtful.

Just because feedback has been given by someone does not mean you have to receive it. Positive feedback from someone greasing your palms because they want something is of less value than honest negative feedback from any source. When we are still caught in the need for external approval we like to be surrounded by those who shower us with adoration and struggle when negative comments are made. We may feel devastated when false accusations or assaults on our character are made. As we internalise the touchstone for personal assessment, and we base approval on our values etc, feedback from others becomes information to receive, consider, discard or keep and use as appropriate. I have learned that my integrity does not always need defending. I used to vociferously defend any accusation made against me, felt terrible that someone could consider I was "bad", and then one day an acquaintance said, "Why do you need to defend your integrity?" Wow! That took me back. I realised that I did out of a feeling of inadequacy and lack of self-esteem. Sometimes integrity does need defending. That is what positive use of anger is all about, but sometimes it is enough to know I am integral and in knowing that the other person has no power over me in that instance.

Next time you receive a message, verbal, written or TXTed that inflames you:

- Consider what result you want from your response
- Neutralise your emotion in forming and sending the response
- Consciously determine the merits and significance of any personal feedback received. Keep the worthwhile and discard the dross.

In all circumstances, consider meeting face-to-face or at least picking up a phone rather than relying only on such ineffective communications media as email or TXTing.

May all your communications be fog free! These are some ways of creating and maintaining clarity in communications with the people you interact with.