



Multi Step Communication

Combining Thought, Emotion and Action

By Fred Kofman

The multi-step communication process allows individuals to address a breakdown effectively, sowing the seeds to repair the situation and improve the relationship. The steps below provide a canonical form for this process. As with other processes we have mapped before, we offer this proviso: the method outlined is only a template to guide you. It may be useful at the beginning, but as you become more expert, you will need to refine and adjust the process to suit your needs, your capacities, and the specifics of the situation.

At the outset, we want to point out a fundamental aspect of successful multi-step communication processes: the use of “I” statements rather than “you” statements. The person who wishes to make a complaint has a right to his or her own position, emotions, assessments, desires and requests for restitution. He or she does not have a right to tell another person what he should think or do. The complainer’s responsibility is to him or herself, and so, in this process, should emphasize statements that use “I”: I have a belief that you are uncaring; I feel angry; I want better communication in the future; I ask that, from now on, you call when you’re going to be late.

Here are the steps in the multi-step communication process:

1. **Center yourself.** Before you engage in the conversation, take a moment to breathe, gather yourself and find your center. Otherwise the turmoil inside will spin out of control, creating further turmoil outside. The intention here is not to avoid the turmoil, but to harness its energy so you can resolve it. In this step, you are trying to access your “witness consciousness,” the part of your mind that is not engaged

emotionally with the situation and can observe what is happening with perspective. Give yourself permission to experience your experience fully, without judgment, without the need to make your anger reasonable or fair.

If you can find your own disowned behaviors about the issue at hand, you will much more easily give up the righteous edge of your communication. As you remember your own behaviors, consider how those worked for you and what price you had to pay for them in the past. That will engage your empathy and compassion as a complement—but *not a diffuser*—of your anger.

Give yourself permission to experience your experience fully, without judgement, without the need to make your anger reasonable or fail.

Look for concrete events that fuel your anger, being as specific as possible. Notice your emotions, especially how they manifest in your body. Reflect on what’s important to you, consider what you find hurtful and angering, and think about what the issue really is. (Particularly helpful, as you ask yourself these questions, is to also ask yourself, “What is the emotion/issue/concern behind the surface

emotion/issue/concern?”) Then ask yourself what your desired outcome would be from this process in terms of task, relationship and self. These questions can help you define your intention for the conversation ahead.

2. **Set the context for the conversation with your partner.** This step sets the tone for all that will follow. In it, you define the direction and the boundaries of the conversation. Remember that even in setting the context, you should use “I” statements, as well as requests and inquiry (see the articles, “Commitment Conversations” and “Advocacy and Inquiry”). Setting the context is especially important when

there is a power imbalance in the relationship—a parent with a child, a boss with an employee, even a customer with a vendor. In these cases, the balance of power should be discussable. If an employee wishes to state a grievance to his boss, for instance, the boss can help the situation by declaring that he welcomes grievances and that he would appreciate them being brought to him as soon as they arise. Without a declaration of this sort, the imbalance in the relationship can preempt the communication.

3. Make concrete observations about what happened. At this point you make factual statements about the breakdown. This is a time to make statements on which both parties can agree, providing a baseline for the next steps.

4. State any assessments you have about the breakdown. At this step, “I” statements are very important, because assessments are non-factual, subjective interpretations of the speaker. It is essential that you acknowledge that your assessments are your own.

5. Engage in productive dialogue, balancing advocacy and inquiry. Share the reasons for your assessment, your standards, concerns, etc. (see the article, “Advocacy and Inquiry”). Remember that you are not presenting your case to “win” the argument. You are displaying your thought process so the other person can understand your position. At the end of your statement, you may inquire into the other person’s perspective. Alternatively, if you think that an interruption at this point would be counterproductive, you can tell your partner that you are interested in hearing his perspective later, after you have a chance to fully state your case. Either route could work, but if you want to complete your statement before he responds, you need to be explicit about that.

6. State your feelings about the breakdown using “I” statements. This is where the person issuing the complaint gives a damage report about how the breakdown affected him or her emotionally. This is a critical step, requiring a clear understanding about what is appropriate to declare and what is not.

In this step, it is important to declare only your emotions. What is an emotion? A state of feeling: anger, joy, rage, fear, sadness, terror, ecstasy, grief are all emotions. It is appropriate to declare, “I feel angry” or “I feel sad.” It would be counterproductive to declare, “I feel betrayed,” or “I feel that you don’t care about me,” because betrayal or not caring are assessments, and an assessment is not an emotion. Other words that express assessments rather than emotions are: “lonely,” “judged,” “wronged,” “validated,” “undermined,” etc. By the same token, statements that use the word “that” after “I feel” are all assessments: “I feel that this is not the right time for such conversation,” “I feel that John was being rude,” etc. These are assessments, and should be presented as such in step four.

The distinction between emotions and assessments is subtle but tremendously important. In the English language, the word “feeling” refers to at least three different things: a sensation in the body (I feel pain, I feel hunger), an emotion (I feel sad, I feel happy), or an assessment (I feel she is just the right person for the job, I feel left behind). When an assessment appears disguised as an emotion, the conversation can get into serious trouble. Emotions, just like bodily sensations, are what they are; there is no sense in challenging them. Think how ridiculous it would be to challenge the statements “I am cold,” “My left knee hurts,” or, as Harriet Lerner said, “I am thirsty.” Equally ridiculous would be to challenge the statements “I am sad” or “I am angry.” But a statement like “I feel that you don’t respect me” needs very much to be inquired about. “You don’t respect me” is a very significant assessment, an assessment that could be grounded or ungrounded. One can imagine the escalation potential in this confusion: “I feel you don’t respect me.” “What leads you to say that I don’t respect you?” “I don’t have to give you reasons. This is just my feeling and I don’t need to justify it!” “Well, I feel that you are completely crazy! And that is just my feeling so I don’t need to justify it either.”

... define the direction and the boundaries of the conversation.

Two other important distinctions to make in this step are to declare the emotions directly and to take ownership of them. It is disempowering to say, “That makes me feel angry” or “You make me feel angry,” because doing so shifts responsibility and blame (and causal power) onto the breakdown or the other person. According to Lerner, “We begin to use our anger as a vehicle for change when we are able to share our reactions without holding the other person responsible for causing our feelings, and without blaming ourselves for the reactions that other people have in response to our choices and actions . . . (We) often learn to reverse this order of things: we put our energy into taking responsibility for other people’s feelings, thoughts, and behavior and hand over to others responsibility for our own.”

... declare the emotions directly and to take ownership of them.

The most empowering interpretation is that you are responsible for your emotions. If my car hits your car in an accident, for example, your feelings of anger and fear in the accident’s aftermath are yours; they are not my responsibility. That does not mean that you are to blame for your emotions, or that I have no role in the situation out of which they arose. Taking responsibility and ownership for your emotions amounts to recognizing your choice in how to

respond to the situation. This assumption of responsibility is not predicated on any notion of truth or moral hierarchy; it is simply more effective and freeing to own our emotions and release control over others’.

Remember also that you are declaring your emotions in this step, not venting them; and remember that you will also fuel the confrontation if you attempt to admonish the other over how he should think or feel.

7. State your aspirations about the situation. This is a bridge step between declaring your emotions and making a request, which follows in the next step. In this step, using “I” statements, you declare what you want in the situation, but the desire is wholly your own and does not end with a request for action.

8. Make a request. This is the actual step where you ask for what you want. Always use an “I” statement; you own the request.

This last step is the first place where it is appropriate for the other person to speak (unless you agreed to a dialogue in step five), because you not only have a responsibility to your emotions, assessments and aspirations, but also a right to them. It is important to be alert to unskillful moves of the other person and keep your balance. Of course, the other person has the right to say whatever he does, but you also have the right to challenge the usefulness or significance of those statements.

After the request, the conversational partners enter into a conversation where they can clarify assessments, acknowledge emotions and work with request. For an outline of the steps in such a conversation, see the articles, “Advocacy and Inquiry” and “Commitment Conversations.”

To summarize, here is how the multi-step communication process works in its abbreviated form, beginning with step 3 (after you have centered yourself and set the context for the process):

- When I observe you doing “A”
- I assess (interpret, have a story) “B”
- I feel “C”
- What I want in this situation is “D”
- So my request is “E.”

Conclusion

The multi-step communication process tries to minimize the likelihood of explosive confrontations, but they might happen. You might lose your job. But what is the alternative?

According to Brad Blanton, “usually what happens is you get a lifeless, depressing job and an unhappy family life for your effort. Eventually, even that trade-off doesn’t work. We have an oversupply of cowards with lousy, dead, depressing jobs and lousy, dead, depressing family lives. We don’t need any more.” (For more on the consequences of avoiding difficult conversations see the article, “Public and Private Conversations.”)

A similar dynamic plays out in relationships. Many of us believe that if we expressed our anger to a loved one, it would destroy our relationship. But let’s ask again, how is that working for us? Without the permission to be fully present with our truth, our relationships lose vitality and dwindle. As Brad Blanton says, “When we express only our appreciation and withhold our anger, we lose our ability to be fully present with the ones we love and, sooner or later, we become less able to appreciate them. This is often why relationships end and families break up. Repressing anger to control other people’s behavior

(in this case, to keep them from leaving) is ultimately what leads to our inability to make contact with them. Repressed anger blocks the flow of love and creativity that we once experienced around them, and generates a flurry of thoughts for us to get caught up in. The more we are caught up in our thoughts, the less present we are to the other person and to what is happening in our own moment-to-moment experience.” The more we avoid clearing our resentment, the more we relate to our ideas about the person, rather than the actual person.

Honoring relationships as process is as important in business as in personal relationships. Many companies have found that the desire for control and insurance policies have deadened their managers and workers. So, they have shifted from a commitment to employment to a commitment to employability. Instead of promising that the company will be a secure place to stay for the rest of one’s life, the company’s promise is to support the learning and evolution of its people so that they remain at the leading edge of their profession, becoming highly marketable. The paradox of an intention toward togetherness and an acceptance of the mystery of the process creates the web of relationships that can support a true learning organization.

... the other person has the right to say whatever he does, but you also have the right to challenge the usefulness or significance of those statements.