

Which Communication Problem Is It?

Read the article first. This worksheet accompanies *Is Communication Really the Problem in Couples Counseling?* at ThoughtsFromATherapist.com, which argues that communication is a medium, and that most of what we call a communication problem is something else failing to move through it. Search “is communication really the problem” on the site to find it.

We take one conversation that did not work, recent and specific, and run it through three questions: what was it for, did the message get through, and did the needed response follow. The answers point at where the work is, and it is often not in the words. Choose a conversation that comes up more than once. A few words per space is enough.

PURPOSE ONE Influence	Changing what the other person does. The dog-poop problem. What is usually missing is a behavioral response, not understanding.
PURPOSE TWO Strategy and coordination	Getting a task done together. The table assembled wrong, the boat to North Dakota. Missing: information, clear directions, or attention.
PURPOSE THREE Connection and intimacy	Feeling known and important. Missing: attunement, the question that shows we are following, letting the other person matter.
PURPOSE FOUR Agency and boundaries	Saying yes and saying no. Missing: a clear no, held back by fear or self-worth, or respect for a no that was clearly said.
PURPOSE FIVE Negotiation and shared decisions	Deciding together when preferences differ. Chinese or Italian. Missing: tolerance for two valid positions at once.
PURPOSE SIX Entertainment and play	Enjoying each other. Missing: receiving the offer and adding to it, instead of correcting Wednesday to Tuesday.
PURPOSE SEVEN Shared meaning and culture	Discovering what matters to us. Missing: self-reflection, a position of our own to bring.
PURPOSE EIGHT Repair	Restoring the bond after harm. Missing: sincerity, and the resilience to sit in discomfort while someone describes what we did.

THE THREE QUESTIONS THIS SHEET ASKS

Question one: what was the conversation for? Question two: was the message sent and received? Question three: did the response the purpose needed follow? A skill problem lives in question two. Most of what gets called a communication problem lives in one and three.

We turn on the faucet and no water comes out. We can perfect our technique with the handles all afternoon, and we still have to find out why there is no water.

The conversation

One specific exchange, as it happened. Three questions, answered for the same conversation, separate a skill problem from everything else.

WHAT HAPPENED

The conversation, in a few lines. What I said, what they said, how it ended.

QUESTION ONE

What was it for?

Which purpose was I serving when I started? Check one or two. If two, which one mattered more?

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|---|---|
| ☐ Influence: I wanted a behavior to change | ☐ Strategy: we had something to get done |
| ☐ Connection: I wanted to feel known | ☐ Agency: I was saying yes or no |
| ☐ Negotiation: we had to decide together | ☐ Play: I wanted us to enjoy it |
| ☐ Shared meaning: I wanted to know what we value | ☐ Repair: I was hurt, or I had caused hurt |

QUESTION ONE, THEIR SIDE

What did my partner think it was for?

The purpose they answered, judging by what they gave back. A reflection answers connection. A plan answers strategy. A correction answers accuracy.

QUESTION TWO

Was the message sent and received?

Did I say what I meant, in words whose meaning we share? Did they understand it? If the trouble is here, this is the one place a communication skill is the fix.

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| ☐ I did not say it, or said it sideways | ☐ I said it clearly and it was misunderstood |
| ☐ I said it clearly and it was understood | ☐ I am not sure it was understood, and I have not asked |

QUESTION THREE

Did the needed response follow?

The response the purpose required, not the one I got. For influence, a changed behavior. For connection, attunement. For agency, a respected no. For repair, a felt apology.

THE RESPONSE THE PURPOSE NEEDED

THE RESPONSE I GOT

What got in the way

Directions: most conversations fail at discomfort before they fail at wording. We look at our own moves first, then at where the work is.

MY MOVES WHEN IT GOT UNCOMFORTABLE

Check what I did. These are the same move in different clothes: get out of the discomfort.

- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ Avoided the subject | ☐ Insisted everything was fine |
| ☐ Started blaming before they finished | ☐ Took care of their feelings and dropped my position |
| ☐ Turned contemptuous or sarcastic | ☐ Explained, minimized, or defended |
| ☐ Gave a reflection when a change was asked for | ☐ Corrected a detail when play was offered |

UNDERNEATH THE MOVE

What was uncomfortable

The fear, shame, or disagreement the move was protecting me from. Am I allowed to want this? If I say no, do I lose you?

THEIR MOVES

What my partner did with the discomfort

Described, not rated. What did they do when it got hard, and which purpose did that move serve or interrupt?

UNDERSTOOD, AND STILL NO RESPONSE

When the message was understood and the response still did not come, clarity is no longer the missing variable. What is? Check what fits and say more below.

- Competing priorities*
- Limited capacity right now*
- Missing information*
- Unwillingness to change*
- My experience is not allowed to carry weight in their choices*

TWO DIFFERENT CONVERSATIONS?

If the purpose I started and the purpose they answered are different, the words may have been fine. They belonged to different conversations. Which two?

WHERE THE WORK IS

Given all of the above: a skill in the words, a response that has not followed, a purpose we misread, or something one of us does with discomfort. Which one, and what would attending to it look like this week?
