

“Speaking the Truth in Love...”

Constructive Feedback

Vs.

Destructive Criticism

© 2014 Peter J. Schmidt, LPC

Loving communication is not automatic. It requires deliberate attention to detail. To “Speak the truth in love” as Ephesians 4:15 says, is to build one another up. But it is first important to realize that not all communication does that.

Words are powerful. Sometimes we take it for granted that our *intended* message will be the one received. This unfortunate assumption has been the cause of many misunderstandings, hurts, and damaged relationships. When we get in trouble with our communication it’s often because we’re not paying attention to what we’re doing. Although no one can guarantee how the other person will hear and respond, we can do a few things to increase our chances of being successful.

Constructive feedback is given in the spirit of *servicing* the hearer. It is not simply a ventilation of one’s own opinions or feelings. And it is always given directly to the person to whom it applies, in the spirit of Matthew 18:15:

*“If your brother sins against you,
Go and show him his fault,
Just between the two of you.
If he listens to you,
You have won your brother over.”*

This passage must be one of the most violated directives in scripture! Too often we talk *about* someone, instead of *to* someone. What opportunities for love and growth are missed!

But what if we saw our words as gifts instead of as threats? Proverbs 25:11 shows us the potential we have:

*“A word aptly spoken
is like apples of gold in settings of silver.”*

Wouldn't you like to be offering people “golden apples” as you go through life?

Why is it so hard to do this?

I believe there is one major obstacle to speaking the truth in love. That obstacle is FEAR. We have t-shirts and bumper stickers proclaiming “NO FEAR!” But we're just kidding ourselves. There's plenty of fear influencing people's behavior.

We have a big problem, then, because love and fear don't go together. They're adversaries. *“There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.”* (I John 4:18)

Fear chokes and paralyzes love. It can cause us to withdraw, or to defensively confront; neither is loving. “Love-hate” relationships are ruled by fear. Our main fear is that of being vulnerable. I must approach you and get close in order to tell you something personally meaningful to you and me.

Our fears can begin early in life. The title of a very popular book a while back was *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. While this isn't completely true, it is true that we have learned a great deal about relating to people by the time we arrive at school. Children are expert imitators, and will “absorb” the communication styles of those around them in their early years.

During this process of learning, we each develop our own core beliefs about how communication will work for us. Later in life, we may not even be thinking about what we believe; we're just living it. For instance, a child who has the example of a kind and encouraging parent will more likely grow up with a kind and encouraging communication style. The child unconsciously expects communication to work that way.

However, problematic experiences-become-beliefs can sink in, such as the following:

"If I say 'no' I will hurt someone."

"Why should I speak up, since no one listens to me anyway?"

"If I speak up, others will get mad at me, and I'll be hurt,"

It's dangerous to let one's true feelings be known."

"The best defense is a good offense."

You can see how beliefs like these can lead to inhibited and destructive communication.

We need to help each other out of these negative patterns, by being receptive listeners as well as loving speakers. Too often we pass each other by in our busy, self-sufficient lives, not exchanging vital feedback and encouragement. Or, we mistake a kind of country-club atmosphere of "let's not ruffle each other's feathers" for Christian fellowship. The body of Christ as a whole suffers for it.

Here are a few steps you can take to improve your own ability to speak the truth in love.

1. Acknowledge your own feelings about the situation, at least to yourself and to God. If you don't, your

unacknowledged feelings will drive your communication without your realizing it.

2. Pray for wisdom, love, and self-control in saying what you need to say.
3. Think through ahead of time specifically what you want to communicate. Don't just wing it. You are 100% responsible for your message.
4. Speak face to face. Trying to resolve a difficult issue through texting or e-mail only sets you both up for further misunderstandings.
5. First describe the situation as objectively as you can, without passing judgement on the other person's motives or actions. Avoid put-downs such as "when you made that dumb remark." Eliminate sarcasm or joking at the other's expense.
6. Then, state how the other's actions affected you and how you felt, using "I" statements. For example: "When you said (or did) _____, I was offended and hurt." Note that there is no accusation, judgement, demand, or ultimatum this statement. It simply contains a summary of the facts.
7. At the end of your message, you may want to give the other person some information about what you would prefer to happen next time. If possible, phrase this as something positive happening in the future, that you can both look forward to. For example: "I appreciate hearing accurate information. Next time you have some feedback for me about my job performance, I'd *prefer* to hear it directly from you instead of through the grape vine, so I'm sure I get it right." This is stated as a preference, not a demand.

Remember, you can never make a person respond the way you would like them to. All you can do is offer your message of truth in love, and it is then completely up to the other person to either take it or leave it. You can't force-feed golden apples – you just offer them.

“A new command I give you:
Love one another.
As I have loved you,
so you must love one another.
By this all men will know
that you are my disciples,
If you love one another.”
John 13:34-35