

UNWRAPPING **COMMUNICATION** SKILLS

by Karen H. Whiting



I don't remember what I thought my husband asked me, but he listened to my reply, "because that's where I kept it." He thought the location for this kitchen item a little odd, but even after a few years, he still thought of us as newlyweds. After all, we were still learning things about each other.

This new thought puzzled Jim, but he simply listened and accepted it. However, my being wrapped up in my own thoughts and my lapse in listening circled back to me a few days later.

Company arrived for a week. My friend Cathy and I felt comfortable enough to share the kitchen and chores. One evening my friend cleaned up after a meal while I took off on an errand. She asked Jim where I kept the plastic wrap. He showed the box, neatly sitting on a shelf of the refrigerator.

When my friend questioned Jim about the location, he simply replied, "That's where Karen said she keeps it." Cathy mentally filed a question for later, to ask if this was some new and clever trick I discovered in a woman's magazine. Cathy eagerly anticipated some new tidbit of knowledge! However, by the time I returned, she'd forgotten about the plastic wrap.

A few days later I searched my cupboards for the plastic wrap and asked Cathy if she had seen it. My friend responded, "I'm sure I put it right back where Jim told me you keep it." Cathy lit up and added, "I've been dying to discover why you keep it there!"

Puzzled, I questioned Cathy further, and she explained she took care to put it back on the same shelf in the refrigerator. Then I quizzed Jim only to dis-

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cover I had absent-mindedly placed the plastic wrap in the refrigerator, then failed to listen to my husband's question. So, after days in the fridge, the plastic wrap went back to the cupboard. We all laughed, and I sat down to talk with my husband.

I realized my communication skills needed improvement. Thankfully, we both had a good sense of humor, which goes a long way in covering our lapses in good communication skills.

Past humorous experiences can bring laughter and serve as gentle reminders to both of you in communicating. Jim and I still laugh over the plastic wrap and call out, "Is that where you keep it now?" when one of us thinks the other is not really listening. This little cue brings a smile while reminding us to listen.

Do you have any pet phrases? Are there funny past experiences to draw

on and create a funny reminder phrase? Make sure the reminder is humorous to both of you, not something that teases or cuts down one person. Look at cartoons in magazines, and find one that hits home with both of you. Humor relieves tension and relaxes people, making it easier to open up and talk.

Take time to evaluate your own listening skills, and be ready to accept and find the humor in your faults; then work on improving. Humor is only one ingredient of effective communicating. I constantly work on other basic ABC's of communication skills.

Appreciate the words of others. Consider them a gift. Whether spoken in anger or joy, appreciate the time, energy, and perhaps courage the speaker took in communicating thoughts and feelings. When is the last time you thanked your spouse for sharing his words? You may not agree, but a simple "Thank you for sharing that" or "I've never looked at it that way before" appreciates the speaker's words without imposing your opinions.

Build up the other person with well-chosen words. Criticism and the dripping tap of complaining invites the silence of peace to replace angry verbal exchanges. Complimenting and en-

couragement builds up the other person and reaches out to their hearts.

Think of a few ways to share the same thoughts and say it positively or with humor. The nagging expression, "You still haven't changed the laundry room light!" doesn't elicit the same response as, "I can hardly wait till you have time to shed some new light on my dreary washroom!" or "It was a dark and dreary day. I spent time in the laundry room."

Consider the other person's feelings. Listen to the words and emotions in their speech. Respond not only to words but also to emotions. If the words don't match the emotions, question the person with "It sounds like you feel ..." and fill in the emotion you think you hear, such as frustrated, anxious, excited, etc.

Communication is a continuous ad-

venture in learning about another person and drawing closer to them. It involves caring about the other person as well as sharing information and experiences. Master some basic skills and make communicating with your spouse a joyous journey that lasts a lifetime, filled with memories and laughter. ■

ABC'S OF COMMUNICATION

- Appreciate the words of others
- B build up others with well-chosen words
- C consider the other person's feelings first
- D evelop common interests
- E ffectively use eye contact to look and listen with love
- Faith
- G ive of yourself
- H umor lightens the heart
- I ntegrity: keep confidences
- J oyfully interact
- K indness softens words and hearts
- L ove
- M eet the needs of one another
- N ever nag
- O pen your mind, not your opinions!
- P ositive words and praise prevail
- Q uality of time counts
- R espect the speaker
- S ensitivity toward the other person
- T rust one another
- U se words to unite, not divide
- V alue the speaker
- W eigh words carefully before speaking
- X ray hearing, that is, actively listen!
- Y earn to learn from conversations
- Z oom in on important things and don't get tied up in the trivial

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