

THE TOXIC COMMUNICATOR

Over the years, I have made my living, in large part, through being an effective communicator. I even teach communication in various settings now. Consequently, I have made a point to study communication techniques, styles, patterns, and more, because I have found there is always something to learn and what I learn usually always pays dividends.

In my search for more knowledge, I have found there is a great deal of information on the subject of communication in books, at seminars, and on websites. Yet, evidently, there are those who seem to be missing out on this information and I think I have figured out why. *Ironically, those who are missing out are people who think they are great communicators.* Never mind that no one enjoys talking to them—much less having to listen to them. It is possible you know someone like this. This is the individual who always has a strong opinion—the right one of course—and always dominates the conversation. He (*or she*) may be jovial or charming at times, he usually has some insight to offer, he is often annoyed with others, and he is always right. Communication experts do not like to admit they cannot help him, but they cannot. No one can, because he will not accept help. He does not believe he needs help. His communication style is actually toxic, and in reality, he is not a true communicator.

Can he make a point? Oh, yes! He will drive his point home and break it off in you. Nevertheless, that does not mean he is a communicator. He thinks it does, but he is wrong. Just the same, communication is an exchange, a give-and-take experience, in which both parties share, consider and value one another's ideas, information, feelings, and more. Further evidence of his inability to communicate is that he never remembers or understands what the other person has said. Of course, that is their fault, not his. "If only everyone could communicate as well as *he* does," he often muses.

If this were not reason enough for communication with him to fail, it can actually get worse when he has a complaint against or criticism of someone's actions. This is where all of his communication shortcomings deepen. This is how he handles that scenario: First, he states his complaint, secondly he interprets the meaning of the other person's actions, and thirdly, he assigns moral judgment to their actions or words. All this takes place without ever asking a question or allowing the other person to speak.

Now, when the other person responds, he has already set the agenda and drawn his conclusions. Consequently, nothing the other person says is considered. Instead, point by point he will pick their response apart, defending his position, and explaining how the other person is wrong or lying and/or even how his wrong actions were actually caused by *their* actions. After all, *in his mind*, the case was settled before the other person spoke a word.

So, what does one do? Well, in most cases, forget about communication taking place the traditional way. Therefore, if you do not have to converse with him or socialize with him, do not. When you do have to, do so within a group setting. Do not allow him to corner you or get you off to the side for a conversation. If he tries, excuse yourself to go to the restroom or find another out. Remember, his approach will make

communication impossible, do not let him bait you or lead you to believe he cares about what you think. It is a trap!

If you are in a relationship with him or have to work with him—“may the force be with you.” Otherwise, here are a few tips to keep him off balance or *improve your chances* he will hear what you have to say:

- 1. When dealing with emotional matters, try writing your perspective or feelings down for him to read in your absence.** Curiosity or indignation will cause him to read it over-and-over. Let them argue with your letter, note or email, *not you*. Never text them, they can go for hours.
- 2. As much as you want to, do not avoid them too much.** The lack of attention will send them into attack mode. His philosophy: “Any attention is better than no attention.” Be proactive by scratching his itch for attention by engaging him often on your terms and when you can set the tone and the topic.
- 3. If both of you are standing up, do not sit down unless you both sit down.** Otherwise, he will feel he has the mental high ground and start talking down to you—literally and figuratively. If you are sitting, do not just jump up facing him. That could be viewed as a challenge. Instead, find a reason to get up, such as closing the door or retrieving something, and then remain standing.
- 4. Use the traditional communication tools.** Effective communicators use, “I” statements, such as “I feel” or “I need” to express your perspective. Listen to what he says and ask questions for clarification. Remember, he is not aware he is not always clear. Do not make assumptions. He will make enough for both of you. Have an open mind. He has been right a few times. Convey you care about his feelings even if you do not care for his opinion or approach. Look for common ground, not a win.
- 5. When he is “on a roll,” break his train of thought.** His train of thought can be broken or his thoughts redirected with good questions. Otherwise, the quieter you get the more he is likely to intensify his bombardment.
- 6. Finally, think in terms of training—not teaching.** You can train him to understand what works with you and what does not. Empathy is not his strong suit, in other words the idea he is being hurtful will not illicit compassion, just annoyance that “people are too sensitive.” Most likely, he lacks self-awareness, so you will not be able to “teach” him anything or cause him to see himself as do others. That is why I say, “train” him. He understands cause and effect, such as, “She doesn’t like it when I do or say_____.” Or, “If I say or do _____ people get angry or uncooperative and I don’t get what I want.” Similarly, he can be trained to know *what you do like* and *to what you will respond*.

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