



Introduction:

What is the most important tool in any relationship? Whether we are talking about marriage, dating, parenting, friends, brothers and sisters in Christ, neighbors, co-workers, whatever, what is the most important tool for the success of that relationship? The most important tool is not hierarchy, everyone knowing their place in the relationship. The most important tool is not goals, everyone knowing where the relationship is going. The most important tool is not self-evaluation, everyone just looking at themselves. All of these things are part of good relationships. But the most important tool in any relationship is communication. Consider **Proverbs 18:1**, "Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire; he breaks out against all sound judgment" (ESV). Please understand, these are your two options. You either isolate or you communicate. "Isolate" comes into our language from the French "isolé," which in turn ultimately came from the Latin "insulatus," which means "to make into an island." Think of Simon and Garfunkel's 1965 single, as they sang, "I am a rock; I am an island." Isolation means focusing on personal desires, self-protection, self-promotion, individualism. It means holding your thoughts on the inside. It means not reaching out. It means not connecting. On the other hand, "communicate" comes into our language from the Latin "communicare" which literally means "to make common." When we are communicating, we aren't simply expounding information in hopes that someone might pick it up. When we are truly communicating, we are taking what is inside us and making it common, which also comes to us through the Old French "comun" and Latin "comunis" meaning "shared by all." So, think about this. What happens in any relationship if you don't communicate? You become an island, separated from the others. But when you communicate you build bridges between the islands that develop commonness and connection. You are taking what is inside the individuals in the relationship and sharing it so that it is held in common by everyone in the relationship. Guess what happens in a relationship as you hold more in common with each other? You connect and draw closer. A few years ago, John Maxwell wrote the book Everyone Communicates, Few Connect. In the construction of his book, that was fine, but the reality is if you aren't connecting, you aren't actually communicating and if you are communicating, you'll actually be connecting. So, do you want better connection in your marriage? Do you want better connection in your parenting? Do you want better connection as you are trying to find a marriage partner? Do you want better connection with your parents? Do you want better connection with your friends? Then focus on communication.

Often, when I read about communication, I read about techniques and tools. You know the kind, "Use I statements instead of You accusations." Or "Rephrase the content and reflect the feeling." These are great. The problem is in the moment, I can't always remember how to work those tools or practice those techniques. In the moment, I forget the specific statements I'm supposed to use. So, I'd like to make it a little simpler. If we can develop the proper culture in our relationships, then the tools and techniques won't matter quite so much. If we develop the proper culture, then good communication will happen naturally. With that in mind, I want to share with you the 5 cultures a good communicator LOVES.

Discussion:

I. A Culture of Listening

- A. This may seem odd, but a communication culture does not begin with the ability to speak clearly or even persuasively. It begins with the ability to listen completely. **Proverbs 18:2** explains: "A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion" (ESV). If your "communication culture" is based on self-expression, it is foolish and failing.
- B. The wise begin with understanding. Even if they want to convey some opinion or internal desire, they know that the best way to help share their own mind and heart is to first know the mind and heart of their communication partner. Then they can speak to the mind and heart of their partner.
- C. Consider **Proverbs 20:5**. "The purpose in a man's heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out" (ESV). What is really in another person's heart is deep, complex. But the wise will do the hard work of listening and drawing it out.
- D. That means developing a culture that when someone starts talking, you start listening. A Listening Culture has three keys.
 1. *Undivided Attention*: No doubt, there are low key conversations that can happen while the television is on or while reading a book or while playing a game. But as the level of importance in any communication

increases, so needs the undivided attention. The tv gets shut off. The paper or book is put down. The radio is turned down. And with eyes, ears, and body you focus your attention on whoever is speaking.

2. *Limited Interruptions*: As **Proverbs 18:13** says, if you answer before you listen, it is a shame and folly to you. As our third grade teachers used to tell us, God gave us two ears and one mouth so we'd listen more than we talk. A culture of listening means interruptions are limited to emergencies.
3. *Ask questions for better understanding*: Too often we follow up listening to the first statement someone makes with our own rejoinders, refutations, or responses. Are we sure we have drawn out the deep understandings of the other person's heart? A culture of listening has a lot of questions. "Are you saying this? Did you mean that? What did you mean by such and such word or statement? I heard such and such, is that correct? When you said so and so did you mean such and such?" This is the art of drawing out the deep understanding of a person's heart.

II. A Culture of Openness

- A. The deeper the connection you want to make or need in a relationship, the more open and honest you have to be. The fact is this is the very nature of communicating, connecting, bridge building between our islands of self. The deeper the connection that is needed the more we have to shine the light on what is in the heart and mind. To the degree that we hide things in the caves of our own personal island, to that degree we are isolating and not connecting.
- B. **Proverbs 20:5** works in two ways. First, it works as we listen well to draw out the purposes in another's heart. But the wise also have relationships in which they draw out from the deep wells of their own heart and share it in common with others.
- C. Obviously, the deepest relationship with absolute and complete honesty and openness needs to be with God. Then we start backing up from there. The earthly relationship that should have the deepest connection is marriage. Let me share some principles of honesty and openness that will help you draw out the deep purpose in your own heart and share it with your spouse. Obviously, you don't have to be quite as open with a first date as with a fiancé. I'm going to share with you principles for this deepest relationship and you can limit the boundaries as you apply these principles of openness to relationships where the bridges don't need to run quite as deep.
- D. Willard Harley puts his finger right at the heart of this communication culture when he talks about The Policy of Radical Honesty, which he describes this way: "Reveal to your spouse as much information about yourself as you know; your thoughts, feelings, habits, likes, dislikes, personal history, daily activities, and plans for the future." As he unpacks this, he suggests we pursue four kinds of honesty with our spouses.
 1. Emotional Honesty: be honest and open about your emotional reactions, both positive and negative to life's events, even your spouse's behavior.
 2. Historical Honesty: Reveal information about your personal history, especially the parts of your history that demonstrate weakness and failure. After all, who do you want helping you more than your spouse?
 3. Current Honesty: Keep your spouse apprised of the events of your day. If you have events in your day that you want to keep secret from your spouse, you likely have a problem (yes, of course, I understand the need to keep the surprise birthday party or anniversary trip on the downlow, so long as you are talking about the one you are throwing for your spouse or taking with your spouse).
 4. Future Honesty: Reveal your thoughts and plans about your future activities to your spouse. You know, it is hard to plan a rendezvous with an affair partner if you are committed to radical honesty with your spouse about what your plans for the upcoming day are.
- E. Be this honest with your spouse and don't be upset when they demand and long for this level of honesty. It is good for you. Again, other relationships do not demand this level. You can back off on these requirements to the degree that the relationship demands, but this is a culture of openness that you need to have in your marriage.

III. A Culture of Value

- A. In **Matthew 6:21**, Jesus says, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (ESV). Of course, in that context, He is talking about valuing heavenly things over earthly. However, that statement is a principle that applies to all things. It completely applies to a positive communication culture.
- B. Do you treasure your relationships? Do you treasure connection? Do you treasure communication? If you don't, your heart will never be in it. Relationships are hard, especially the deeper they go. Communication

and connection are hard. Isolation is easy. Relationships are dangerous. The deeper they go, the more potential for hurt you face. No wonder Simon and Garfunkel opted for being an island. "A rock feels no pain. And an island never cries."

- C. Here is what you need to understand. In your marriage, in your parenting, in your submission to parents, in your dating, in your friendships, communication will only happen to the level that you value and treasure the people in those relationships and the connection you have with them. Not to keep beating the same drum, but look again at **Proverbs 20:5**. If you do not value what lies under the surface in the deep well of your communication partner's heart, you want work to draw it out.
- D. If you want communication, you need to develop a culture of value. You need to develop a culture that values the heart and mind of everyone involved in the relationship. Only then will you purposefully pursue the kind of communication that connects with others. Understand this. Communication and connection will not happen by accident.
- E. May I make a point about modern dating habits that are destined to fail relationships and marriages? Sadly our culture has progressed in my lifetime from asking if it is appropriate to kiss on a first date to whether it is appropriate to have sex on a first date. Too many people get in a relationship and jump into making out and even sex. I understand the excitement of those experiences. They are physically thrilling. Here is the problem. There is no communication in simply making out or having sex. There is only the illusion of connection. Don't misunderstand, if a good connection is developed through positive communication, the sexual aspect of a committed marriage relationship can be great and deepen the connection. But, if you skip the connection of communication for the thrill of momentary pleasure and exploratory excitement, you are short circuiting the connection and laying the groundwork for an empty and failed relationship. What is happening in these situations? The people in relationship are valuing the wrong things. If you value emotional excitement and passionate pleasure above deep connection, your relationship will stay shallow, empty, and meaningless. If you value the body of your date or spouse above the deep purposes of his/her heart, you are actually isolating from them in sex instead of connecting with them. Why? Because in that situation sex is about what you can take from them and not what you give, it is about your personal pleasure, not about your service to them. And do you want to know what happens to sex in those kind of relationships? It eventually loses its thrill, passion, and pleasure. Just consider why so many Hollywood marriages between extremely good looking people fail? Because you simply cannot build a good, meaningful, connected relationship on physical pleasure. However, and this is what the world will not tell you and what the devil does not want you to believe when you start dating, when you spend your dating weeks, months, and years communicating and connecting, you will be able to build a great sexual experience with your spouse, especially when you continue that communication in your marriage.

IV. A Culture of Empathy

- A. Sympathy is the ability to have similar feelings about something as someone else. Empathy, on the other hand, is being able to put ourselves in the experiences of the other. Sympathy is often merely expressed in feeling sorry or sadness for others. Empathy goes the deeper level that says, "I've been in your shoes. I get it. I feel it because I've spent time seeing it from your angle, background, perspective, and experiences."
- B. This is taking the "Golden Rule" of **Matthew 7:12** to its ultimate level. Too many of us limit this "rule" by thinking, "This is what they would want if they were like me." The ultimate of this "rule" is to rather think, "This is what I would want if I were like them."
- C. The practical outworking of this culture of empathy is through gentleness. After all, do you know anyone who wants you to respond to the open communication of what is deepest in their heart with harshness, cruelty, yelling, raging? Of course not.
- D. This is why proverbs about communication promote gentleness. "A gentle tongue is a tree of life" (**Proverbs 15:4**). "Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body" (**Proverbs 16:24**). "With patience a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue will break a bone" (**Proverbs 25:15**).
- E. If you develop a culture of putting yourself in the shoes of those you are communicating with, watch as gentleness and patience start to govern your communication.

V. A Culture of Safety

- A. Okay, I admit it. I put this one last so it would fill out the acronym. Can you imagine if I had told you to develop a culture of SLOVE? But I hope you recognize, this key is the foundation. I put it last not just to fill out the acronym, but because I hope you remember it. Listening, Openness, Value, and Empathy will only happen in safe relationships.

- B. If your communication partners start to draw out of the deep well of their heart and you yell at them, mock them, judge them, critique them, belittle them, do you know what will happen? They'll stop drawing out of the deep well of their hearts. Think about it this way. If every time I stick my hand out it gets slapped or stepped on, what am I going to quit doing? I'm going to quit sticking my hand out. If every time I stick my heart out it gets stepped on, what am I going to quit doing? I'm going to quit sticking my heart out.
- C. Think for a moment about David as a sheep of the Good Shepherd in **Psalm 23**. What allowed this sheep to walk through the valley of the shadow of death? Why could he lay down in green pastures? Why was his soul restored? How could he even handle the rod and staff? Brothers and sisters, this is the praise of a sheep that feels safety. He moves from the sheep to the guest at the table before his enemies because his host not only won't attack him, but is protecting him from the attacks of others. I want you to see the relationship David had with His Shepherd because of the sense of safety.
- D. If you want a spouse, a child, a parent, a brother, a sister, a friend to walk with you in connected communication, you have to have a culture of safety. They have to know that their heart will not get trampled. I know of one television news correspondent who likes to tout his show as a "spin free zone." If you want to have great connection and communication with someone, you have to develop a similar kind of zone. It needs to be spin free, judgment free, criticism free, rage free, etc. Oh, I know that there are times when what we have to communicate is going to be hard (see **Proverbs 27:6**). But when a culture of safety is established, even those hard things will be seen in a better light, just like David was able to see the rod of his shepherd as a good thing.
- E. Do you want your spouse, children, parents, friends, date, to be vulnerable and open with you? You have to make it safe for them, even when their openness says negative things about you.

Conclusion:

Don't be an island. Build bridges. Communicate. Connect. Watch your relationships grow. Watch your family strengthen. Watch your marriage improve. Watch every relationship get better.