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Chapter 8: Twelve Steps to Intimacy, Cooperation, and Trust

Whether we are talking to a friend or a lover or a colleague at work, and whether we are talking to a child, a stranger, or a person suffering from an emotional or cognitive disease, the following communication strategies will ensure the best dialogue possible. When we choose our words carefully, we enhance the comprehension of the listener in a way that fosters compassion and increases friendly cooperation. But the words we speak and listen to are only a small part of the communication process. It is the *way* we say them and the *way* we listen to them that makes all the difference in the world.

To improve our conversational skills we have to do several things. First we need to recognize that the way we normally speak is inadequate, filled with habituated patterns that were mostly set in place in adolescence and early adulthood. Then we have to consciously interrupt those speaking and listening habits, over and over again. And finally we need to replace those old communication styles with new and effective ones. This requires experiential training, and training takes time.

Fortunately, the twenty-minute exercise we explain in the next chapter will guide you through these twelve strategies and allow you to practice them with a partner. Even a few rounds of practice will be sufficient to give you enough experience to take these strategies and incorporate them into your conversations at home and at work. They will significantly improve your ability to empathize with others, and, according to our research studies of similar types of exercises, you should be able to alter the structure and function of key areas in your brain that relate to improved social awareness, enhanced cognition, and greater emotional control in eight weeks or less. You'll be actually rewiring your brain to communicate more effectively with others.

The Twelve Components of Compassionate Communication

In this chapter we'll review the evidence supporting each of the strategies that we want you practice when talking and listening to others. The first six steps are preparatory. They're what you do before you enter a room to engage another person in a conversation, and they are best carried out in the following order:

1. Relax
2. Stay present
3. Cultivate inner silence
4. Increase positivity
5. Reflect on your deepest values
6. Access a pleasant memory

These steps create an inner state of intense awareness and calm, which is essential for engaging in one of the most crucial aspects of communication:

7. Observe nonverbal cues

If you are not conscious of the subtle changes in the other person's tone of voice, facial expressions, and body gestures, you are likely to miss important clues that tell you what that person is really thinking and feeling. You won't know if the person understands you or if they're even paying attention to what you say. Then, when you engage in dialogue, the following five strategies should be consistently adhered to:

8. Express appreciation

9. Speak warmly

10. Speak slowly

11. Speak briefly

12. Listen deeply

How many people conscientiously apply these techniques on a daily basis? Far fewer than we would wish. It's like weight loss: we all know what's required, but we easily slip back into our old habits. It's human nature, and it takes a lot of neural energy to interrupt an old behavior. To build a new habit, we have to repeat a new behavior hundreds and hundreds of times. Eventually, it will become second nature. It begins by taking a few deep breaths and relaxing as you consciously bring your fullest attention and awareness into the present moment.

Step 1: Relax

Stress is now considered the number one killer in the world. Stress generates irritability, irritability generates anger, and anger shuts down the ability to communicate and cooperate with others.¹ So before you enter a conversation with anyone, spend sixty seconds doing any variation of the following relaxation exercises.

First notice which parts of your body are tense. Assign a number on a scale of one to ten (with ten being extremely tense) to signify your state of relaxation or stress. Write down the number on a sheet of paper.

For the next thirty seconds, breathe in slowly to the count of five, and then exhale slowly to the count of five. Repeat this three times. Now, if possible, yawn a few times and notice if your level of relaxation has increased. Assign it a number between one and ten and write it down.

Now slowly stretch your body in any way that feels comfortable and pleasurable, and see if you can immerse yourself completely in the sensation of each stretch. Begin with the muscles of your face, scrunching them up, then stretching them out. Then move down to your shoulders and neck, gently moving your head from side to side and from front to back. Scrunch your shoulders to your ears and let them drop, pushing them down toward the floor.

Next tighten up all of the muscles in your arms and legs. Hold them tightly as you count to ten; then relax them as you shake your hands and feet. Take a few more deep breaths and rest. Once more assign a number to your state of relaxation and write it down,

noticing how much you've improved.

Can a brief exercise like this really change your brain in ways that will measurably improve your communication skills? Yes! Several fMRI studies have shown that a one-minute relaxation exercise will increase activity in different areas of the cortex that are essential for language, communication, social awareness, mood regulation, and decision making.² If you increase the length of this relaxation exercise, additional parts of the brain will be activated that help you become more focused and attentive at work.³ Cortisol levels will drop, which means that your levels of biological stress will have decreased.

Research also shows that just watching the patterns of your natural breathing will change your brain in positive ways, and if you coordinate your breathing with another person, it will help the two of you to feel more calm and caring toward each other.⁴ At the end of his book *Emotions Revealed*, Paul Ekman (the facial expression expert) writes, "I previously couldn't understand why focusing our awareness on breathing would benefit emotional life." But then, "like the proverbial bolt out of the blue," he explains, he had an insight:

The very practice of learning to focus attention on an automatic process that required no conscious monitoring creates the capacity to be attentive to other automatic processes . . . We develop new neural pathways that allow us to do it. And here is the punch line: these skills transfer to other automatic processes—benefiting emotional behavior awareness and eventually, in some people, impulse awareness.

In conversations that get heated, the person who is capable of remaining calm will benefit the most. So by all means learn how to focus on your relaxation and breathing when difficult issues are discussed.

Step 2: Stay Present

When you focus intently on your breathing and relaxation, you pull your attention into the present moment. When we become completely absorbed in something as simple as breathing or relaxing a specific part of our body, the inner speech of everyday consciousness stops, at least momentarily, and this allows us to become aware of the subtle things that are immediately happening around us. We hear sounds we rarely notice, we feel more sensations in our body, and if we bring this "presentness" into a conversation, we hear more clearly the subtle tones of voice that give emotional meaning to the speaker's words.

Here's a little exercise, created by the renowned author and spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle, that you can do right now to experience the power of the present moment.⁵ Begin by concentrating on your right hand; then ask yourself this question: how can I really know, at this very moment, that my hand exists? The more you think about this question as you focus on your hand, the more sensations you'll begin to feel.

If you don't feel any difference after a minute or two, close your hand, very slowly, into a fist, and hold it tight for thirty seconds. Then spend the next thirty seconds slowly opening it back up. Pay attention to every sensation in each finger and your palm.

You'll notice that in this deep state of concentration, your mind has become silent, and although you may not realize it, your blood pressure will have dropped. Being

relaxed and in the present moment is beneficial to your heart.

Keep focusing on your hand and compare its “aliveness,” as Tolle calls it, to your other hand. Using this technique, you can bring that enhanced awareness to every part of your body, whenever you choose. You can also bring it into the conversations you have with others.

Using fMRI technology we can actually watch how this moment-to-moment awareness of the inner and outer world alters the functioning of the brain. Our everyday consciousness shifts into a meta-awareness that allows us to experience a larger and more unified perception of the world.⁶

If we bring this moment-to-moment awareness into our conversations with others, we will experience the interaction with greater clarity, and we’ll be less likely to be knocked off balance by the other person’s emotional state. We’ll feel their pain and respond with compassion because we have been able to remain relaxed.

Being in the present moment has an interesting side effect: because you’re less likely to control the direction of the conversation, it can lead to unexpected dialogues. If sadness comes up for you or the other person, and you remain in the present moment, the conversation will focus on those feelings and the previous topic will fade away. It’s a very intimate experience, and thus very appropriate for conversations with family members and friends, but in business it’s essential to stay focused on the specific topic of discussion. Being in the present moment, however, will allow you to quickly recognize when a conversation begins to go astray.

Step 3: Cultivate Inner Silence

Most of us are only able to stay relaxed and in the present moment for brief periods of time. Soon it gets interrupted by our inner speech. Research shows that you can suppress those distracting feelings and thoughts, but you have to practice doing it over and over until you gain control.

The more you consciously think about *not* thinking—as a formal training exercise—the more you gain voluntary control over the brain’s spontaneous cascade of inner speech and cognition.⁷ As researchers at Emory University found, thought suppression can even protect the brain “and reduce the cognitive decline associated with normal aging.”⁸

We specially need to develop the skill to remain silent so that we can give our fullest attention to what other people say. Unconsciously they will know when we’re distracted by our inner speech, and the lack of interest they perceive will make them distance themselves from you. Thus in active communication silence is not the enemy. It’s your friend.

For many people, learning how to remain in a state of inner silence can be difficult because the temporal lobes of the brain are designed to constantly listen for something. And something is always making some degree of sound.

Here’s a technique that we and other teachers use to show people how to cultivate a deeper state of silence. You’ll need a bell that when rung will resonate for at least fifteen to thirty seconds. If you go to <http://www.mindfulnessdc.org/bell/index.html>, you can activate an online mindfulness bell that is perfect for this exercise. Push the button to “strike” the bell, then focus intensely on the sound. As the tone fades, you’ll notice that you have to give more attention to your listening. Then, when the sound disappears, continue to listen deeply to the silence, which, as you will discover, is filled with a

variety of subtle sounds. You might even become aware of the sound of your breathing, and this is an excellent sound to focus on (it provides substantial benefits to your brain).

Ring the bell again, and listen even more closely than you did before. Continue several more times as you train yourself to recognize the special state of awareness it puts you in. This is the state of attentiveness that we would like you to use when listening to another person speak. The online mindfulness bell will also aid you in the practice of the compassionate communication training exercise described in the following chapter.

Step 4: Increase Positivity

Before you begin any conversation, take a mental inventory of your mood. Are you feeling happy or depressed, tired or alert, anxious or calm? Any negative thought or feeling you have interferes with the parts of your brain that are involved with language processing, listening, and speech.

Research shows that the three previous steps are usually sufficient to eliminate negative feelings and thoughts. But if they still remain, consider the following choices: repeat the exercises above, or consider postponing the meeting, especially if it's related to work. When a colleague, employer, or employee senses your exhaustion or stress, they will know that your ability to have a meaningful, productive dialogue is compromised. So why take the risk?

Even if you feel calm and relaxed, ask yourself this question: do I feel optimistic about this meeting and the person I'm about to converse with? If the answer is no—if you harbor any significant degree of doubt, anxiety, frustration, or even an inkling of anger—then again, if possible, you should postpone your dialogue until a later date. If you can't postpone the dialogue, at least spend a few moments focusing on a more positive idea, because any negative state can generate mutual defensiveness and distrust.

Here's something to do when you have concerns about an upcoming meeting. Mentally rehearse what you think could happen. Have an imaginary conversation with the person you want to talk to, as if you were an actor reading from a script, and see where the dialogue goes. When you do this, it is easy to spot statements you might make that would undermine your intention and goal.

If you still feel upset or worried, then take the fantasy conversation to the next level and imagine how the other person might respond if you told them how you really felt at the moment. If it doesn't make them smile or bring a tear to their eye—if it doesn't make them feel like you respect them—then you'll know ahead of time that the conversation will likely fail.

To make any conversation truly satisfying and successful, you need to generate heartfelt positivity, for yourself and the other person. As Barbara Fredrickson, a distinguished professor of psychology at the University of North Carolina, says, positivity is our birthright,

And it comes in many forms and flavors. Think of the times you feel connected to others and loved; when you feel playful, creative, or silly; when you feel blessed and at one with your surroundings; when your soul is stirred by the sheer beauty of existence; or when you feel energized and excited by a new idea or hobby. Positivity reigns whenever positive emotions—like love, joy, gratitude, serenity, interest, and inspiration—touch and open your heart.⁹

Fredrickson identified one of the most important factors for predicting success in both personal and business relationships. It's called the three-to-one ratio, and it's a comparison of the number of positive thoughts and negative thoughts you generate when you engage in a conversation with someone else. If you express fewer than three positive thoughts or behaviors for each negative one, the relationship or interaction is likely to fail. This finding correlates with Marcial Losada's research with corporate teams¹⁰ and John Gottman's research with married couples.¹¹

Fredrickson, Losada, and Gottman realized that if you want your business and your personal relationships to flourish, you'll need to increase your ratio by generating at least five positive messages for each negative utterance you make (for example, "I'm disappointed" or "That's not what I had hoped for" count as expressions of negativity, as does a frown or gesture of contempt). Someone with a positivity ratio that falls below three-to-one is likely to be diagnosed with depression.¹²

We suggest that in preparation for a serious dialogue you use your imagination to visualize and rehearse a conversation that is filled with positivity, kindness, and optimism. As researchers at Purdue University found, when you enter a conversation with optimism both you and the listener will likely be more satisfied with the interaction.¹³ And if you consciously visualize a future success, it will enhance your motivation to achieve it.¹⁴

The research is substantial: positive imagery can reduce a negative state of mind, whereas negative images will maintain or enhance a negative mood.¹⁵ In fact, positive mental imagery, when compared to other forms of verbal processing, has a greater impact on reducing anxiety.¹⁶ Negative imagery, however, will amplify it.¹⁷

This raises an interesting question: can you arbitrarily create an optimistic attitude by manipulating your own thoughts? Researchers at the University of Toledo say yes,¹⁸ and you can even undo negative memories from childhood by "rescripting" the event and imagining a different outcome or solution.¹⁹ So by all means, prime yourself with positive feelings and thoughts before you engage in conversation.

However, as Martin Seligman, the founder of positive psychology, points out, "Merely repeating positive statements to yourself does not raise mood or achievement very much." Instead, he says, you have to embed optimism in your brain "through the power of 'non-negative' thinking."²⁰ This means that you will need to consciously identify, then root out, the negative beliefs that have been unconsciously stored away in long-term memory.

You can begin this process by asking yourself what evidence there is to support your negative belief or fear. Often you'll find that your doubts are based on an exaggerated view of the situation. If you take a moment to pull yourself into the present moment, these old negative voices will lose their power.

Over time you can transform a helpless and pessimistic outlook into a realistic and lasting optimism. Positivity won't eliminate periods of depression, anxiety, and self-doubt, but it will dramatically reduce the number of incidents.²¹ And this will improve every dimension of your relationships with others.

Step 5: Reflect on Your Deepest Values

In the previous chapter, we explored the transformational power of knowing your inner values. To set the right tone for a conversation, two other values that we've briefly

mentioned need to be consciously addressed: your innermost relational value (for yourself in general and specifically concerning the person you're about to engage), and your deepest communication value (likewise, both for yourself and for the conversation you're about to have). Together these three values will create the best possible scenario when it comes to dealing with problems and achieving desired goals.

Few people hold anger and violence as values, but research confirms that sociopaths and people with antisocial and deviant behavior place the highest value on material gain and instant gratification.²² Sometimes money and pleasure are their only values. Obviously, such people make bad risks for relationships that demand trust, integrity, honesty, kindness, and fairness—values that are essential in business and love.

If our personal, relational, and business values are not aligned with those of the person we are involved with, trouble is unavoidable. This suggests that we should ask others about their inner values as soon as we possibly can. But there's a catch: sociopaths are very good at reading other people's minds, and they can tell you, with great accuracy, what you hope to hear. They can also mask the nonverbal cues of deceit, so they're very hard to spot.²³

However, when people become angry they act a little crazy. Like the sociopath, they become emotionally unpredictable, which makes it difficult to have a constructive dialogue. How do you communicate compassionately with angry people, staying true to your own inner values? It's difficult but not impossible. You have to identify, and then speak to, their underlying suffering and pain. You have to look *beyond* the anger. When you do this, as highly empathetic people can do, it will become easier to generate a compassionate smile that will help to defuse the anger being expressed by the other person.²⁴

Ideally, when anger erupts a time-out should be called. But sometimes you can't do this. In such situations, it may help to focus on this question: what do I value most about this person? Then speak to those qualities. If you feel like you're about to lose your own patience or temper, then consider extricating yourself from the interaction as quickly as possible. Let the person know that you'll be happy to reengage when everything calms down.

Even if you enter a conversation with calmness, the other person's negativity may have more power because the primitive parts of your will brain kick into defensive and aggressive survival mode. They'll suck you in, and your positivity will vanish. Then what? Research says that you can deliberately suppress these negative reactions and arbitrarily impose a series of positive thoughts—on yourself and on the other person. This technique has been proven to be more effective than most of the other strategies that are used in anger-management training.²⁵

Remember that verbal interaction often presupposes a goal-directed intention by the speaker.²⁶ To make a conversation balanced and fair, both parties need to be clear and up front, about values, intentions, and goals. Sharing these will make the communication process more efficient.

Step 6: Access a Pleasant Memory

It's best to enter a conversation with an inviting expression that conveys kindness, compassion, and interest. But as we explained in the previous chapter, this facial expression cannot be faked. It can be elicited by tapping into a pleasant memory, Excerpted from *Words Can Change Your Brain* by Mark Waldman and Andrew Newberg, MD. 7

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particularly one that involves people you deeply love and respect. This memory softens the muscles around your eyes and evokes a gentle half smile on your face.

When another person sees this expression, it stimulates a feeling of trust in their brain. The recollection of pleasant memories will also release pleasure chemicals throughout your own body and brain, and this will take you into an even deeper state of relaxation. When you look directly into the other person's eyes as you maintain this loving memory, they will *want* to engage you in a dialogue. Their facial expression will resonate with yours, and this will deepen the sense of contentment and satisfaction in both of you. As researchers at Loyola University Chicago demonstrated, contentment gives rise to mutually benevolent engagements.²⁷

Why not just keep your face relaxed? Well, it turns out that a very relaxed face looks somber, which is why old photographs from the 1800s looked so unhappy. Back then, it took several minutes for an image to become fixed on the photographic plate, so a state of deep relaxation was the best way to keep a person's face still. In the early 1900s, when shutter speeds were faster, photographers were capable of capturing fleeting expressions of contentment.

Now you are ready to engage another person in a meaningful conversation, and it only takes about four minutes of preparation: a minute to stretch, relax, and yawn; another thirty seconds to bring yourself into the present moment; a moment to observe your inner speech and suppress it so that you can enjoy a few seconds of silence; another minute to fill your mind with positivity as you focus on your deepest values and goal; and finally the recollection of a memory that fills you with pleasure and joy.

With a little bit of practice, you'll be able to enter that exquisite state of heightened awareness in less than a minute or two.

Step 7: Observe Nonverbal Cues

"Keep your eyes on the ball." It's an expression used in sports and often applied to business, but when it comes to interpersonal relationships, it's essential to keep your eyes on the individual you are conversing with in order to discern the many nonverbal messages we constantly send to others. However, this does not mean that you should gaze unceasingly at the other person—that could feel invasive—but if you maintain softness in your eyes, generated by a pleasant memory, the other person won't want to take their eyes off you!

Eye contact stimulates the social-network circuits in your brain.²⁸ It decreases the stress chemical cortisol, and it increases oxytocin, a neurochemical that enhances empathy, social cooperation, and positive communication.²⁹

Most people can recognize the seven basic facial expressions—anger, fear, sadness, disgust, surprise, contempt, and happiness—even though they remain on a person's face for just a few seconds. But as Ekman explains, you need to stay completely focused, making sure that you aren't distracted by your inner thoughts.³⁰

If a person wants to conceal a feeling—out of embarrassment, discomfort, or the desire to deceive—the true expression might only appear for a quarter of second. Reading micro-expressions is not essential for effective communication; it simply gives you an edge. Nor will your impressions necessarily be accurate. You'll have to look for additional clues, and then ask the person if you are correct. But there's a problem: when you do this, the other person can feel violated. It's very disturbing when you discover that

someone can read your mind.

Micro-expressions can only tell you that a true emotion is hidden, but it won't tell you why. Nor will it tell you whether the person is consciously or unconsciously concealing it. To ferret out these important bits of information, you'll have to talk more deeply with your partner.

When you learn how to read micro-expressions, says Ekman, "it gives you an edge in business because it allows you to communicate more effectively with business partners." We suggest that you visit Ekman's website (www.paulekman.com) to see how well you can detect micro-expressions using the microexpression training tool. Ekman is currently using his research on facial expressions to help people cultivate emotional balance.

Step 8: Express Appreciation

The first words you speak will set the tone for the entire conversation, and a single compliment may be all you need to enhance cooperation and trust. Yet few people begin their conversations on a positive note. In fact, we're more inclined to speak out when we are bothered by something, not realizing that complaints immediately create a defensive reaction in the listener. So we have to train ourselves to bring as many expressions of appreciation into the conversation as possible. Every appreciative comment is a powerful form of affirmation and can reduce the negative mood of the recipient.³¹

Of course the compliment must be genuine, extending beyond the mere formality of a polite comment. As the staff at the Mayo Clinic emphasizes, "Relationships need nurturing. Build up your emotional account with kind words and actions. Be careful and gracious with critique. Let people know that you appreciate what they do for you or even just that you're glad they're part of your life."³²

Our suggestion is to begin each conversation with a compliment but make sure that you end it with another compliment that conveys a deep sense of appreciation for the person and the dialogue you just had. Research shows that people respond better to compliments received at the end of an interaction than those given at the beginning of a dialogue.³³

To make sure your compliments and statements of appreciation are genuine, we suggest you ask yourself this question: what do I really value about this person? As you contemplate that question, write down everything that comes to mind, and then ask yourself which, of all those attributes, you respect the most. Keep your answer in mind as you talk, and listen for an opportunity to share it. If such a moment doesn't occur, consider sending the person a note. An unexpected note of appreciation will rarely be perceived as a ploy.

Whenever I, Mark, turned in a manuscript to Jeremy Tarcher, my former publisher and personal friend, he always complimented it before suggesting how to make it better. The compliments always felt so genuine that I would fully embrace his suggestions. One day I asked him, "Do you really mean it when you compliment my writing, or are you just saying it because it's what an anxious writer needs to hear?" His response startled me: "Mark, I really don't know!" The moral of this story: when you make a habit of showing constant appreciation, even if it begins as a courtesy or subtle manipulation, your own mind comes to believe it's true.

Step 9: Speak Warmly

We cannot overemphasize the importance of speaking warmly—of conveying your compassion and sensitivity—but little research has been conducted on this element of communication. We know that different tones are registered and responded to by different language centers in the brain, but we're only beginning to identify which kinds of sounds reflect specific emotions and feelings.

In 2003 researchers doubted that we could map the human voice the way Ekman did with the face,³⁴ but now they feel more confident that emotions can be ascertained from nonverbal sounds. These “affect vocalizations,” as they are called, may even be superior to facial expressions when it comes to telegraphing anger, contempt, disgust, fear, sadness, and surprise. However, facial expressions seem to be more accurate expressions of joy, pride, and embarrassment.³⁵ Today we can identify many of the characteristics of vocal sound that express emotions and correlate them with the speaker's facial expressions.³⁶

By looking for discrepancies between the face and the voice, we can come closer to identifying a speaker's truthfulness, sincerity, and trustworthiness, but we still do not have a documented way to train people to recognize many of the basic emotions concealed in tone of voice.³⁷ However, we can take some clues from actors, who have often been used in the research mentioned above. When actors need to project a warm demeanor, they do it by recalling a compassionate dialogue from their past.

If you drop the pitch of your voice and talk more slowly, the listener will hear and respond with greater trust. This strategy was developed and tested in 2011 at the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders at the University of Houston, and it has been used to help oncologists present bad news to patients in the most supportive way possible. When the doctors reduced their speaking rate and pitch, the listener perceived them “as more caring and sympathetic.”³⁸

Ted Kaptchuk, of the Harvard Medical School, also discovered that using a warm voice would double the healing power of a therapeutic treatment.³⁹ Kaptchuk actually uses many of the strategies of compassionate communication to improve the health of his patients, and these, he states, are the key elements of success: “A warm, friendly manner; active listening . . . ; empathy . . . ; twenty seconds of thoughtful silence . . . ; and communication of confidence and positive expectation.”

We use our words to express our wounds, and we use our words to heal. Thus it makes great sense that we train our voices to speak warmly, with confidence, empathy, and hope. Organizational psychologists at the University of Amsterdam concur: A strong, harsh, or dominant voice may impel others to comply with our wishes, but it will generate resentment that leads to weaker performance. A warm supportive voice is the sign of transformational leadership and will generate more satisfaction, commitment, and cooperation between members of a team.⁴⁰

The Power of Emotional Speech

Study of the neural circuits associated with emotional speech gives us helpful information about strategies for speaking more empathetically.⁴¹ For

example, if you want to express joy, your voice needs to become increasingly melodic, whereas sadness will be conveyed by a flat and monotonic voice. When we are angry, excited, or frightened, we raise the pitch and intensity of our voices, and there's a lot of variability in both the speed and the tone.

However, if the vocal emotion is incongruent with the words you are using, it will create confusion for the listener.⁴² You can test this by saying "I am angry" with a warm tone of voice and a sweet expression on your face. It creates a distinct pattern of neural dissonance. The same would be true if you heard "I love you" said in a loud, harsh tone of voice. At first the message would be confusing, but because the power of a negative word or sound trumps the power of a positive expression, the harshness would cause reactions of anger or fear in both you and the listener.⁴³

Step 10: Speak Slowly

Slow speech rates increase a listener's ability to comprehend what you are saying, and this is true for both young and older adults.⁴⁴ Slower speaking will also deepen that person's respect for you,⁴⁵ and if you are speaking to someone with any form of language disability, it is essential to proceed slowly, articulating one word at a time.⁴⁶

Interestingly, faster speakers are often viewed as more competent than slower speakers.⁴⁷ But we believe that this is a culturally learned behavior, and one that can easily be taken advantage of to mask a speaker's true intentions and inadequacies. Jeremy Dean, a researcher at University College London, suggests that we be particularly wary of the silver-tongued talker because "the fast pace is distracting and we may find it difficult to pick out the argument's flaws." He also adds that we should slow down when addressing our peers concerning matters of mutual agreement.⁴⁸

Speaking slowly is not as natural as it may seem, and as children we automatically speak fast. But you can teach a child to slow down by speaking slowly yourself because they'll match the rate of your voice.⁴⁹ A slow voice has a calming effect on a person who is feeling anxious, whereas a loud, fast voice will stimulate excitement, anger, or fear.⁵⁰

When we train people in compassionate communication, we ask participants to practice speaking extremely slowly so they can become aware of their speaking styles. The true power of speaking slowly is in the increased *consciousness* it brings to an otherwise habituated process.

Step 11: Speak Briefly

As you know by now, in compassionate communication we have a basic rule: whenever possible limit your speaking to thirty seconds or less. And if you need to communicate something essential to the listener, break your information into even smaller segments—a sentence or two—then wait for the person to acknowledge that they've understood you.

It's a hard concept to embrace. Why? The best reason we know of is that our busy minds have not been able to clearly formulate the essence of what we want to convey, so we babble on, externalizing the flow of information generated by our inner speech.

In centuries past, this problem was addressed by writing. If you really had something important to say, you wrote it in a letter or posted it in the community newspaper. Writing

itself is a great way to consolidate one's thoughts, and so we recommend that you write down the major points of what you want to say, especially before an important meeting.

Although we've covered this point several times already, it bears repeating: our conscious minds can only retain a tiny bit of information, and for thirty seconds or less. Then it's booted out of working memory as a new set of information is uploaded. Our solution: honor the golden rule of consciousness and say only a sentence or two. Then pause and take a small deep breath, to relax. If the other person remains silent, say another sentence or two, and then pause again. This allows the other person to join in whenever they feel the need to respond or to ask for clarification. If you must speak for a longer period of time, forewarn the listener. This will encourage them to pay closer attention to you and to ignore their own intrusive inner speech.

Ideally, we suggest that you explain this rule of communication to your partner, and then invite them to experiment with you, each taking turns speaking a sentence or two for thirty seconds or less. If your partner agrees to this strategy, you'll find that you can accomplish an enormous amount in a short period of time, even if you don't use the other components of compassionate communication. This is the key strategy we teach to people who are involved in complex negotiations and conflict resolution, and it's especially effective when mediating volatile dialogues between opposing parties.

Step 12: Listen Deeply

To listen deeply and fully, you must train your mind to stay focused on the person who is speaking: their words, tone, gestures, facial cues—everything. It's a great gift to give to someone, since to be fully listened to and understood by others is the most commonly cited deep relationship or communication value.⁵¹

When the other person pauses—and hopefully they'll have enough self-awareness not to ramble on and on—you'll need to respond specifically to what they just said. If you shift the conversation to what you were previously saying, or to a different topic, it will interrupt the neurological “coherence” between the two of you, and the flow of your dialogue will be broken.⁵²

When practicing compassionate communication, there's usually no need to interrupt. If the other person doesn't stop talking, they may be giving you an important clue. Perhaps their mind is preoccupied, or perhaps they are deeply caught up in their own feelings and thoughts. If this is the case, it's unlikely that they will be able to listen deeply to what you want to say.

But what if you have to convey something important, and your time is running out? Neurologically, this is a dilemma, because the listener will feel your interruption as an intrusion. There's no simple solution to this problem, which is why we encourage people to formally agree to speak briefly. If you must interrupt, you can apply the other strategies of Compassionate Communication. For example, you can quickly interject an apology and a compliment, using a warm, slow voice as you maintain a gentle gaze: “I'm sorry to interrupt since I do value what you are saying. But unfortunately I have a meeting I have to attend, and I want to make sure I'm able to tell you what I need to convey.” For most people, this form of imposition will be met with appreciation.

It's also important to realize that most people are unaware that they are hoarding the conversation. They get caught up in their inner dialogues, and they are often impatient to speak lest they forget something important. In fact, research shows that most of us begin

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to speak *before* the other person has finished talking. Even doctors, who are trained to listen carefully for important medical information, tend to interrupt patients within twenty-three seconds, long before the patient's concerns have been stated!⁵³

Our advice: if you are engaged in an important discussion, and it becomes clear that the conversation is taking too long, you can suggest to the other person that you both take turns speaking only a sentence or two. You'll be surprised at how quickly an entire business plan, a medical treatment, or even a social event can be laid out.

Bad Listening

According to Lisa J. Downs, former president of the American Society for Training and Development, bad listening behaviors include daydreaming (thinking about unrelated topics when someone is speaking), debating (having an inner argument about what is being said), judging (letting negative views influence you), problem solving (yearning to give unasked for advice), pseudolistening (pretending to be a good listener), rehearsing (planning what you want to say next), stage hogging (redirecting the conversation to suit your own goals), ambushing (gathering information to use against the other person), selective listening (only responding to the parts of the conversation that interest you), defensive listening (taking everything personally), and avoidant listening (blocking out what you don't want to hear).

If the other person keeps going on and on, and there's no need to interrupt, you can use this as an opportunity to study that person in detail. You can observe and at the same time watch how your own inner speech reacts. Allow yourself to flow with the words you hear and the facial expressions you see, and don't worry about what you may remember or forget. You'll actually be practicing a form of meditation that is neurologically enhancing and emotionally relaxing—a far cry from what we usually feel when we are bored by someone speaking.

The Power of Intuition

There you have it: twelve steps and strategies that can transform any conversation into a remarkable event by fostering trust, empathy, and cooperation through the process we call neural resonance. But it will take practice to change the familiar patterns of dialogue that you are used to.

Effective communication demands a conscious, concerted effort, lest we slip back into old behaviors. So we ask you to practice these strategies at every chance you get and to share them with your family, friends, and colleagues. Discuss the twelve steps and decide which ones make sense for you. If you want to change them, by all means do, and if you find a strategy you believe is essential, please let us know. Compassionate Communication is a process and an "open source" experiment that hundreds of people have contributed to, and we expect that the process will continue to evolve.

This brings us to our final piece of advice, drawn from many years of research into the nature of human consciousness and the hidden powers of the mind: trust your intuition, and do what feels right for you.

Every person is unique, every interaction is unique, and every conversation is unique. Some strategies will work for some people at certain times, while other strategies will be called for with other people at other times. So we have to trust our intuition, which, from our perspective, contains a vast reservoir of insight that is rarely expressed in casual conversation.

Somewhere inside us—behind all the noise of everyday consciousness—there is a calm, observant self capable of making wise decisions. We can exercise this inner voice by practicing the twelve strategies of compassionate communication and following the advice of the inner wisdom of life.

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