

# Marriage Partnership

Quarterly Series

ARTICLE

## Avoiding Missteps and Misunderstandings

*How to listen before you leap (to the wrong conclusion).*

By Les and Leslie Parrott, for the study, "Avoid Miscommunication"

"Does Jackson have sun in his eyes?"

This question was Leslie's code—apparently—to tell me that I (Les) needed to pull the visor over our crying baby's car seat.

"No, I think he's just fussy," I responded as I got into the driver's seat and glanced at our son in the rearview mirror. "What are we having for dinner tonight?"

"Dinner! How can I talk about food when I can't even hear myself think?"

Leslie unbuckled her seatbelt and climbed into the back seat to shield Jackson from even the *slightest* ray of light.

"If you wanted me to adjust his visor, why didn't you just ask?"

"I did."

"No," I said with the confidence of a high-priced attorney. "You asked if the sunlight was bothering Jack."

"Exactly. I asked you to make sure the sun wouldn't bother him by pulling up the visor. Apparently I have to spell it out!"

"Not a bad idea," I mumbled under my breath.

"What?" Leslie asked.

I started the car and put it into gear.

By now, our baby had stopped crying (I suppose that had something to do with the visor on his car seat), and Leslie and I both sat silently as I drove.

A couple minutes passed when Leslie uttered a single word: "Tacos."



### The conversational misstep

This conversation occurred yesterday on a carefree drive to a park. We were under no stress—other than a crying baby. Just a cheery little outing with our family—or so we thought. But why the hiccup in our communication?

Truth is, we know better than to let our conversation get tangled up with crossed wires. After all, we've been married for two decades. We counsel other couples. We give national marriage seminars. We have the tools. We know the techniques. We understand the dance steps.

The miscommunication was a tiny stumble on the dance floor of our day. It was quickly filed away as a minor blunder. Or was it?

## Getting in sync

Studies have shown that these seemingly insignificant missteps in communication have an important effect. Each message that breaks down inscribes a note on your relationship: "My partner doesn't understand me." While it may not be conscious or articulated, it is felt. And when a couple suffers enough of these breakdowns, isolation and loneliness are bound to creep in.

On the other hand, when you and your mate are communicating well, there's an indelible inscription on your relationship that's priceless: "I am known and understood."

That feeling of being in sync, of speaking each other's language—fluently—is vital. Couples gauge the depth of their connection by the satisfaction of their conversations. It's an excellent barometer of our bond. Studies indicate that improving your communication increases the quality of your relationship more than anything else.

So what can you do to improve your communication dance? How can you avoid stepping on each other's toes? For us, it often comes down to what we call "the two-step": clarifying our partner's intent and seeking genuinely to understand.

## Step one: clarify content

Consider this example. A wife says to her husband, "This house is a mess—and your mother is coming tomorrow."

What is she saying exactly? It may not be what you think. Consider these clarifications:

*Husband:* Sounds as if you think the house is a mess.

*Wife:* I just feel like a failure when I can't keep the house clean—and I know it's going to be like this until the boys are older.

Or *Husband:* You sound a little depressed, are you all right?

*Wife:* No, I'm upset that my boss won't give me tomorrow off. I have to work the entire time she's here.

Or *Husband:* Is my mom's visit stressing you out?



*Wife:* Actually, I'm glad she'll be here. I just don't have the energy to vacuum.

Or *Husband:* Is the state of the house really bothering you?

*Wife:* I need your help so I'll feel comfortable when your mom shows up.

See how it works? A simple inquiry goes a long way to make sure you understand the message. It ensures you stay in step.

The husband could have easily jumped to a number of conclusions, thinking he knew exactly what his partner was saying: *She wants me to clean this room, or she wishes my mom wasn't dropping by, or she's feeling depressed.* And in each conclusion he may have been wrong. That's why this fundamental skill is so essential.

### **Step two: seek understanding**

Not long ago on a flight from Denver to Seattle, we had a communication breakdown as we were trying to talk about laundry. It started when we were thumbing through a magazine and saw a photo of a super cool stackable washer and dryer depicted in a spotless laundry room.

"Why can't our laundry room look like that?" asked Les.

I (Leslie) felt my body stiffen. This wasn't the first time we'd covered this ground. Throughout our marriage we've tossed the chore of washing laundry back and forth. But recently it's been my responsibility, and with two little boys it was becoming more of a challenge.

"If you want to do the laundry now, be my guest," I snapped.

With that, we were off and running. If you were eavesdropping from the seat behind us, you would have never known that we were on our way home from giving a marriage seminar. We weren't even close to practicing what we preach. So we finally resorted to a strategy we developed for just such an occasion.

When stuck in a communication meltdown, we get out our "cheat sheet," which reminds us what's truly important in communication. It's only one sentence: "Seek to understand before being understood."

That's it. This simple thought, popularized by Stephen Covey in his book [\*Seven Habits of Highly Effective People\*](#), changes our entire mindset and inevitably gets us back on track. It sounds simple, but it's profound. And it works. Once you try to understand your partner *before* you try to get him or her to understand you, your communication skills, no matter how rudimentary, take a quantum leap.

After thinking about that sentence, I relaxed my defensive posture and worked to understand Les's perspective. "You really value having an organized and orderly life. Sometimes I forget how much that means to you."



I could barely believe the words were coming out of my mouth! Les recognized my sincerity and acknowledged the struggle to keep up with our growing family's requirements. Our entire conversation turned around. We were able to get back on track with a civilized and constructive dialogue.

So take it from a couple of very human relationship experts: Next time you find yourselves stepping on each other's toes in a conversational dance, practice the two-step: clarify content and seek understanding.

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