

The Two Skills For Instant Understanding

Courtesy of eHarmony Marriage

More than any other measure, couples gauge the depth of their connection by the satisfaction of their conversations. And rightly so. It is an excellent barometer of a couple's bond. Study after study indicates that improving your communication increases the quality of your relationship more than anything else you do.

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

Step One: Clarify Content

Consider this example. A wife walks into the family room and says to her husband, "I feel like such a failure when this place isn't picked up, and I know your mom is dropping by tomorrow."

Pretty straightforward, right? What's to clarify? Well, what is she saying exactly? It may not be what you think. Simply by asking for some clarification, the husband can avoid some miscommunication that could lead to conflict. Here's how the clarification works:

Husband: Sounds like you think the house is a mess.

Wife: Oh, no. It's always going to be like this until the boys are older.

Or

Husband: You sound a little depressed. Are you alright?

Wife: I'm not depressed. I think I'm mostly upset that my boss wouldn't give me tomorrow off.

Or

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

Wife: Actually, I'm thrilled that she'll be here. I just wish I had the energy to vacuum tonight.

See how it works? A simple inquiry to make sure you understand the message goes a long way. Clarification keeps you from jumping to conclusions. It ensures that you stay in step, dealing accurately with the intended message.

The husband in this example 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 would have been wrong. That's why this fundamental skill is so essential.

Step Two: Seek Understanding

When we get stuck in a communication meltdown, we get out our “cheat sheet.” It's a small card reminding us of the most important summary of good communication skills we know. It gets us back to the fundamentals, and it only contains 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. We know it sounds simple, but it is profound. And it works. Once you reframe your predicament to 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.

So the next time you find yourselves stepping on each other's toes in a conversational dance, practice the two-step: clarify content and seek understanding.