

The Life Coach

Francine Campone

Can You Hear Me Now?

Why the question that phone guy keeps asking can help keep the lines clear in life.

MOST OF US ARE PRETTY FAMILIAR BY NOW with ads that feature a fellow standing in some remote place and speaking on a cell phone, asking “Can you hear me now?”. I thought about him quite a bit on a road trip with Ed this summer. As we drove through the deserts of Nevada, the salt flats of Utah and mountainous regions of California, I tried to connect on my cell phone to finish up an editing project with a looming deadline. There are still big stretches of territory that the phone guy has yet to visit where there’s no signal at all or, at best, an intermittent one. This experience got me to thinking about face-to-face communication, a frequent topic in conversations with clients. Like cell phone coverage, we all have places in our lives where it’s a challenge to effectively connect. Our personal version of the Nevada desert often involves a spouse or life partner, a parent or a co-worker. Like cell phone failures, interpersonal communication glitches tend to take one of two forms: no signal or roaming signals with crossed-wires.

“No signal” communication is embodied in the individual who relies heavily on psychic communication- that is trying to intuit what the other person wants, thinks or will do- instead of asking outright. In this no-signal zone, these psychic connections are supposed to work both ways with the other person expected to be equally intuitive. The classic household example looks like this (actual words in quotes, actual meaning in parentheses):

“Honey, the garbage in the kitchen smells bad.” (Honey, I’d like you take out the garbage right now.)

“OK” (I don’t smell it. What do you want?)

“What are you waiting for?” (I want it out right now, not later! Why don’t you listen to me?)

“In a minute.” (I’m in the middle of something and will get to the trash soon. Just wait and stop bugging me.)

Usually, this kind of conversation goes from no-signal to complete disconnect pretty quickly.

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There's a simple strategy for heading off this kind of miscommunication: 1) define exactly what you're requesting; 2) own it as your own desire; 3) ask for it directly, in the form of a request and open to the possibility that you may or may not get what you want. At least you've sent and received a clear signal.

A second form of communication challenge is "roaming, with crossed signals." This is the kind of conversation in which two people appear to be talking to each other but there are some spaces where the signal is lost or other voices filter in. A client recently (and somewhat ruefully) shared an example. In this instance, he was meeting a date for the first time. Here's a sample of his send/crossed wires/disconnect exchange.

(The send) She says, over dinner, "I'm trying to lose a few pounds."

(The crossed-wires) She is wondering if he finds her attractive. He hears a request for some advice.

(The disconnect) He says "Have you tried doing aerobics?"

(Static on the line...she hears that he thinks she's overweight; he notices a certain iciness creeping into her conversation. Click! End of date.)

Clients have brought in similar examples from the workplace. One supervisor, for example, had just had a meeting with a staff member in which the staffer expressed a desire to move up the management ladder. What baffled the client was that this staffer's performance was inconsistent with the expressed aspiration. The client proceeded to explain what this person would have to change in what he was currently doing. The staff member's responses dwindled to one and two word sentences. Parts of their conversation made sense yet clearly there were crossed wires in a few places.

In cases of "roaming with interference", it's helpful to revisit what you think you heard and check it out for accuracy with the person who said it. My well-intentioned bachelor, for instance, might have turned the hazardous statement around for clarification by asking the lady why she would

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even think of losing any weight. The supervisor in question might get a better picture of what the staffer sees as his future by inviting more details- “What kind of responsibilities would you see yourself taking on and how might you prepare for that?” Face-to-face communication also offers other cues such as body language, facial expression and tone of voice. The woman at the check-out who says “Have a nice day!” while yawning in my face probably doesn’t much care about my day at all.

Cell phones have a great deal to teach us about communication in face-to-face life: we can’t always be sure that the signal is clear and we don’t always make good use of our free minutes. And it’s not a bad idea to occasionally check in and ask “Can you hear me now?”

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