

Are We Talking the Same Language? How Communication Styles Can Affect Relationships

Figuring Out if You and Your Partner Are Speaking the Same Language

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It's pretty easy to identify the most readily recognizable sources of stress in our lives – too many commitments, workplace hassles, financial strain, society's (and our own) oftentimes unrealistic expectations of who we "should" be and how much we "should" be able to accomplish. But not as many people realize that "communication stress" can be one of the biggest sources of stress in relationships. After all, we're all talking the same language, aren't we?

Well ... not necessarily. In a series of books on communication styles, linguistics expert [Deborah Tannen](#) describes how many of us, while seeming to speak the same language, really aren't. As Tannen notes, we all have unique communication styles, influenced by many factors such as age, culture, and geography (to name only a few). However, there are different patterns of communication, and when those patterns clash, it can wreak havoc on our relationships.

What exactly is a communication style? A communication style (also known as conversational style) is the way in which we share information with others through language. Although we all like to think we're saying exactly what we mean, that's not always the case, especially when we're talking to someone who uses a communication style very different from our own.

Much of Tannen's work on conversational styles focuses on "typical" styles of men and women and how these gender differences can lead to conflict, misunderstandings, and stress. However, in my work with high-achieving women, I've found that many women use a style that Tannen identifies as being more typical of males. So as you read on (and maybe even explore more about communication styles on your own), my advice is to not spend too much time focusing on how women *tend* to communicate and how men *tend* to communicate, but rather take the time to figure out how *you* tend to communicate, then use that information to understand how your style may be affecting your relationship (and your stress level).

It's also important to recognize that communication styles exist along a continuum. For example, if you consider how direct people are in their communications, you will find some who are so direct that they are viewed as insensitive and harsh whereas others are so indirect that it's impossible to figure out what they're trying to say. Then, of course, there are those at all points in between. Few people will be at the extremes of each "style" continuum, although for illustrative purposes, it may seem that way.

Communication Styles (for the sake of space, I am using only two examples here; there are more in *High Octane Women*, and even more in Tannen's books): .

* **Competitive versus Affiliative:** If you gravitate toward more of an affiliative style of communicating, you're likely to want to bring people together and work out problems together. For example, when a decision needs to be made, you're likely to bring your partner into the decision-making process and ask his/her opinion before you decide. In fact, you may not stop with just your partner. You may bring family and friends into the discussion to get their input as well. In general, affiliative communicators prefer a more collaborative style of communication and tend to see direct challenges and open disagreements as aggressive, hostile, and often personal. On the opposite end of this spectrum are those who are more oriented toward power, competition, and dominance, and their communication style tends to be directed toward these goals. Their conversations tend to be more direct, assertive, and challenging, and when it comes to decision-making, they prefer to make decisions on their own without much or any input from others.

To figure out which way you tend to lean when communicating, ask yourself these questions:

- Do you speak up readily when you hear something you disagree with, or do you prefer to listen to all sides and either remain quiet or speak up only if the conversation is going in a direction that you can't live with?
- Do you prefer to give directions and make decisions without a lot of input from others? Or do you prefer a more collaborative approach?
- Are you comfortable sharing power? Or do you prefer relationships where there is a hierarchical power structure in place?

The way you answer should tell you something about your style. While there is nothing wrong with either, the differences should help you see why there may be tension in relationships where one

person communicates in one way and the other person's style lies near the opposite end of the continuum.

* **Direct versus Indirect:** When you need something done, there are two basic ways you can communicate that need: directly or indirectly. Some people are very direct. When they want, need, or feel something, they come right out and say it. For example, "I want to move closer to the kids' school." That's pretty direct; therefore, there is little room for misunderstanding what the speaker is saying. There are others, however, who prefer to test the waters before jumping in head first. They don't immediately (or in some extreme cases, ever) say exactly what they want, need, or feel. Examples of indirect communication are: "The school is pretty far from the house," or something a little less indirect like, "I wish we lived a little closer to the school."

The former statement is nothing more than a statement; it doesn't convey a need or a want. Your partner might get the sense that you'd like to move closer, but could just as easily miss the underlying message altogether. The latter statement isn't as vague, but it's not a direct statement either. Depending on the situation, we all use both direct and indirect forms of communication, but most people lean toward one style or another.

When people use direct communication, there is less risk for misunderstanding, yet more risk for offending or surprising the "receiver" by the directness of the message. With indirect communication, there is more risk for misunderstanding, but less risk of offending the "receiver." In either case, though, when the two different styles come together in conversation, there is a greater likelihood for tension and stress in the relationship.

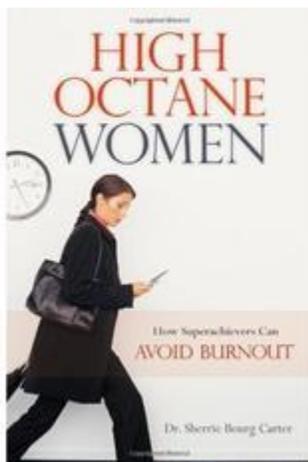
Handling Differences: As I said earlier, there are many more styles than the ones described here, and because they all exist along a continuum, the more polar they are among partners, the more stress they're likely to cause in a relationship. But differences don't need to mean that people who use different communication styles are forever doomed to conflict. In fact, it's often our differences that make us interesting, even attracted to another person. The keys to making differences work are understanding and flexibility.

* **Understanding:** Whenever we're aware of something, we're more likely to pay attention to it in our lives and in our relationships. So if this article makes you stop and think about how your style may come across to others, then you're ahead of the game. The more you know, the better.

* **Flexibility:** The next step is becoming more flexible in how you approach communication. Once you figure out what your typical style of communicating is, you can use that knowledge to try and figure out how your approach may be affecting your relationship and your stress level. If you think different styles may be causing some tension in your relationship, you may want to consider taking a slightly different approach when communicating with your partner. The change doesn't have to be dramatic. In fact, it shouldn't be because a dramatic change will probably come across as superficial and will feel uncomfortable for you. But because communication styles exist along a continuum, there is always room for a little movement up or down the continuum in an attempt to try and ease a little tension. You also may want to share what you've learned about communication differences with your partner. Movement doesn't only have to be in one direction.

However, as is always the case with change, you should be aware that there may be consequences (good or bad) for becoming more or less assertive, more or less affiliative, more or less direct, etc. So if you decide to experiment, think of it as a calculated risk and make sure you take small steps. As the Chinese proverb goes: "It's better to take many small steps in the right direction than to make a great leap forward only to stumble backward."

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Dr. Bourg Carter is the author of [*High Octane Women: How Superachievers Can Avoid Burnout*](#) (Prometheus Books, 2011).

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/high-octane-women/201104/are-we-talking-the-same-language-how-communication-styles-can-affect-r>

