



## Barriers to Every Day Communication

by [Nancy J. Foster](#)

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One of the most common complaints from clients entering mediation is that they cannot communicate with each other. All of us have experienced, at one time or another, the frustration of feeling misunderstood and being unable to make ourselves understood by another person. In mediation, the first step toward resolving a conflict is for the mediator to understand the point of view of each person, and then to help the parties understand each other. The more people understand each other, the more likely they can resolve their conflict. However, this requires both listening and assertion skills which are different from our typical ways of communicating. Therefore, such skills must be learned. Here at the Northern California Mediation Center, we spend a good deal of time teaching these skills in our trainings and modeling such skills with our clients. The response has been so positive that we would like to share some of these basic communication skills with you in this series of articles.

This article introduces the concepts of good communication and discusses some of the common barriers to communication. Future articles will address what is good listening and constructive assertion, and how to do each effectively.

Good communication skills are mutual respect skills. Ideally, each person will show respect for the other as well as respect for self. You show respect for the other person by listening fully and demonstrating that you "get" what that person means; and you respect yourself when you assert or "give" your own legitimate self-interest without aggression. To have a complete communication, each person must both "get" and "give."

Let us look at some of the conversational bad habits which often interfere with full and complete communication. Anything which blocks the meaning of a communication is a barrier to communication. These usually fall into one of three categories: judging, sending solutions or avoiding the other person's concerns. Some common examples follow:

**CRITICIZING** "Well, you brought that on yourself."

**NAME-CALLING** "You bullheaded, stupid jerk."

**DIAGNOSING** "You are only saying that because you feel guilty."

All of these responses judge the other person and therefore impose the speaker's point of view. The other person will often feel misunderstood and unsafe, and is more likely to react in a defensive or self-protective manner.

**ORDERING** "Go fix that right now."

**THREATENING** "If you don't agree to these terms, I will sue you."

**MORALIZING** "You ought to apologize to her."

**EXCESSIVE/APPROPRIATE QUESTIONING** "When did it happen?" "Are you sorry?"

**ADVISING** "If I were you, this is what I would do..."

Each of the above are attempts to solve the other person's problem. They are variously direct, manipulative, self-righteous or coercive. Even when caringly intended, the solution is often proffered without a full understanding of the problem. Such responses may make the problem worse, or create a new issue without resolving the original problem. They also demean the other person's capacity to handle his or her own problems, and are likely to foster anxiety and resentment.

**DIVERTING** "If you think that's bad, let me tell you what happened to me."

**LOGICAL ARGUMENT** "If you leave your keys in the car, you can expect someone to steal it."

**REASSURING** "You have the tools to handle this. You'll get over it."

The last three responses avoid the other person's concerns and enable us to keep an emotional distance from the person or from an uncomfortable topic. By using such responses, we often are trying to make ourselves feel more comfortable, rather than truly being helpful to the other person.

The barriers to communication listed above do not always have a negative impact on communications. However, they are high-risk responses when people are interacting under stress. They tend to block the feeling of the other person, who then is less likely to express his or her true feelings in a constructive way. Rather than fostering understanding, they may diminish the other's self-esteem, or foster resentment, defensiveness, withdrawal or dependency in the other, and inhibit their problem solving ability. Unfortunately, it has been estimated that people use these responses 90% of the time when they are discussing a problem or need.

In the next article in this series, we will discuss effective responses to substitute for the above barriers. The essence of good communication is understanding each other's meaning which requires effective listening. And that is where we will begin.

Sources: Robert Bolton, *People Skills*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979). Thomas Gordon, *Parent Effectiveness Training: The "No-Lose" Program for Raising Responsible Children* (New York: Peter H. Wyden, 1970).



## Biography

**Nancy Foster** is Director of the Northern California Mediation Center and has been mediating divorce, family, business and organizational disputes since 1988. She received her law degree from the University of Michigan Law School and specialized in the practice of commercial litigation, securities and real estate law for over ten years prior to becoming a mediator. She also teaches training seminars and workshops in conflict resolution and mediation, and has presented or coached skill-building trainings in communication skills and how to deal with difficult people, to bar associations, law schools, trial lawyers, mediation groups, continuing education classes and church groups. Nancy serves on the mediation panels of the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California and California Lawyers for the Arts. She is Past President of the Northern California Mediation Association, Past Vice President of Marin County Women Lawyers, a member of the State Bar of California, the Marin County Bar Association, (including the Alternative Dispute Resolution Section and the Family Law Section), and an

Approved Consultant and Practitioner Member of the Academy of Family Mediators.

[Email Author](#)

Website: [www.ncmc-mediate.org/](http://www.ncmc-mediate.org/)