Do you know what it feels like to toss and turn around in bed at night, churning a conversation you had with someone round and round in your head where the only thing that happens is you become increasingly frustrated, angry, confused, irritated, and, of course, tired, since you are not getting any sleep?

Even if you decide to never speak to that person again, be aware that this, too, is communication.

You may be tempted to wait for someone to change in the hope that interaction can improve but a more promising option is to see what you can do to communicate more clearly, confidently and effectively.

Transactional Analysis (TA) is an excellent model to improve communication. It’s the theory of human development, personality and communication, developed by Eric Berne in the 1950s. It offers practical concepts to help shed light on the mysteries of human communication. Berne describes three ego-states that he believes all our behaviour and communication are based on. Briefly, these are the child, parent and adult ego-states.

In the child ego-state one behaves, thinks and feels as though a child. With the parent ego-state you behave, think and feel in ways you copied from your parents. An adult ego-state refers to behaving, thinking and feeling in ways that directly respond to the here and now and use all your grown-up abilities. In every conversation we have, we start it from a specific ego-state (parent, adult, or child) and we address a specific ego-state in the other person.

For example, Anne may say to Bernie in a neutral tone: “What time is it?”, and Bernie may reply: “It’s 9 o’clock.”
Anne and Bernie are both communicating from their adult ego-states.

Anne could also ask the same question in a stern tone, with a frown on her face. Her critical tone indicates that she is speaking from her parent ego-state, and addressing Bernie as a child. If he responds by saying: “I’m so sorry I’m late.,” he is fulfilling Anne’s expectation, accepting her ‘invitation’ to the child position and their communication may continue like this for a long time. People get into communication habits and roles very easily often without realising what they’re doing.

In a normal conversation sometimes things take a surprising turn. Without being totally sure why, we feel irritated and wonder: “What happened here?” This might happen if Bernie doesn’t respond in the ‘child position’ as Anne might be expecting. (in TA-speak you would say that a transaction is being crossed).

Imagine Anne asks Bernie what the time is in a neutral tone, like in the first example, and he replies with an exasperated sigh and rolling his eyes: “It’s very late!” This shifts the tone to parent mode, he is now taking a critical stance which invites Anne to respond from a child position.

There will surely be a pause in the conversation, with irritation on both parts. Bernie has taken the critical parent position and is inviting Anne to respond from a child position (either adapting to his expectations or being rebellious). If Anne unconsciously falls into the child position then she may feel compelled to explain, apologise and what may follow is a lecture on time management by Bernie. This may take up a valuable hour, an hour in which Anne had hoped to finish a presentation for a client. If Anne is aware of what is happening here, she can consciously decide whether she is going to go down that route or say: “I am just busy with the final tweaks in this presentation, which has to be ready at 11 o’clock. I’m almost done and would like to be sure how much time I have left to check that everything is where it should be. I realise we may need to talk about other time-related issues. Can we do this at 2pm, when the presentation is over?”

This kind of crossed transaction (deliberate and conscious) is an important and effective tool, which you can use to influence conversations positively. We all intuitively know how to cross transactions in difficult conversations.

Three steps to more conscious communication:

1. Observe productive and unproductive patterns in conversations you witness.
2. Practice awareness of your own position and communication patterns.
3. Based on 1 and 2, decide how to enter into your next important conversation.

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