

and skill, then you can make a clear decision about whether that person's preference is one you will also adopt, since the two of you will be talking about personal experience and opinions, not objective matters of right and wrong.

## COMMON MISTAKES IN COMMUNICATION

Healthy communication about a difficult subject doesn't have to end in agreement. In fact, one benefit of regular conversation with someone who doesn't agree with you is the discovery that your disagreement can actually be stimulating to both of you.

But open-mindedness is essential. Each of you must be willing to listen to what the other is saying. When you find yourself in a conversation with someone else about a sensitive and potentially explosive subject, do you make any of the following common mistakes?

- **Talking too much.** When you need to talk with someone about a difficult personal problem between the two of you, it's possible that you'll begin by talking around the subject—being vague, trying to be polite, and hoping that your listener will somehow pick up your meaning. There's also the risk that as you talk and talk, you'll say something that the listener will react to defensively. But the fewer words you use to open the conversation and explain the problem as you see it, the better off you both will be.
- **Assuming that you have all the facts.** When you feel strongly about something, you're usually convinced that you have all the facts and know exactly what's what. You're also quite sure that you know who's right (you) and who's wrong (the other person), so you go into the conversation primarily to get the other person to agree with you. Then, the more the other person resists (perhaps in an effort to offer his or her own viewpoint), the harder you push to get your way. But you rarely, if ever, know all the facts, and you can't always be right. Go into the conversation prepared to listen to and consider the other person's point of view. And show that you're listening by nodding, saying "I see," and rephrasing the other person's key points ("So what you're saying is . . ."). The purpose of repeating what the other person has said in your own words is not to be a parrot but to create communication and dialogue, not to mention to give yourself a way to remember what the two of you talked about.

- **Not seeing your own role in the problem.** It's tempting to see every problem as someone else's fault. But if you're involved in the situation, then you're part of the problem in some way, and you need to remember that your role is at least as great as the other person's.
- **Jumping right into action.** When a problem is difficult, it's tempting to offer an immediate solution so the conversation can end quickly. But slow down. You need to hear the other person's side of the story, and the other person needs to know that his or her opinions and feelings have been heard. If you push too quickly for your own solution, the other person probably won't be committed to it, and the outcome will show that disengagement. You'll think you've solved the problem, only to find that nothing has changed and you're quickly back to square one.
- **Not understanding the importance of how you sound.** The feeling conveyed in your voice will have more of an impact and be remembered longer than the words you actually speak. If you yell, you may think you're forcing the other person to listen, but what's more likely is that he or she is waiting for you to pause so they can lash out with a defense against your verbal attack. Raising your voice creates the kind of stress and tension that provoke anger. The louder your voice, the more intense the anger, and the greater the risk of a physical confrontation. Be sure to modulate your voice so that its volume and tone don't deliver a message of aggression or dominance.
- **Being oblivious to personal space.** You can make the other person uneasy if you stand or sit too close. But if you stand or sit too far away, you can come off as cold and uncaring. Watch the other person's movement toward you, and especially away from you, for clues to getting the distance right. If you see that you're too close, pull back a little.
- **Not understanding your purpose in communicating.** Ask yourself what you hope to achieve by talking with someone else about a difficult problem between the two of you. Do you see the conversation as your chance to win an argument? Or is it about finding a solution and deeper understanding? If all you want to do is prove something, get even, or make yourself look good, then that's not communication—it's grandstanding.