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Learning From a Complex Communications Experiment in My Own Home

By Carolyn Massiah
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I am living in what I believe is the most complex communications experiment that could be designed by researchers.

I have a 15-year-old son. He is very much like me. He is witty but also sometimes very direct in his communication style. I can appreciate talking with him, though, because I am never left second-guessing what he is saying to me – or at least that is what I think. However, his communications come in large but sometimes very spaced-out amounts.

I also have a 19-year-old son who is home from his first year of college. While away, he called and/or texted me nearly every day. I consistently heard from my friends that this is out of the norm for many sons away at college. So I enjoyed the constant and open communication.

I particularly enjoyed it because when he is home, he is mute. Painfully mute. He is extremely conservative with every word he chooses to spare with others. I am surprised, though, because he was so talkative during the year while he was away. I am hoping our communication pattern will return to the new normal once he returns to his university for the fall semester.

In addition to my two wonderful sons, I have a new husband whose native language is Portuguese and who is working on mastering English. I speak English and French. So in this first month of marriage, I have discovered the intricacies of translation and back-translation between English and Portuguese.

Then there is me. As an academic, I am a person who professes for a living. So I tend to pride myself in my communication skills. That is until this present great experiment.

The past few months of life in my home have taught me one very important lesson: There is a major difference between hearing, listening and understanding.

Actually, after immersing myself in a living communications experiment in my own home, I now know there is less of a difference between hearing, listening and understanding as there are different engagement levels of communication.

Level 1: Hearing – Merriam-Webster defines hearing as “the process, function, or power of perceiving sound.” When we are communicating in order to hear each other, we are merely making certain that our ears are receiving the words that the other person is projecting towards us. This form of communication is much like Charlie Brown listening to his teacher talk to him in the *Peanuts* TV specials. There are just incomprehensible sounds coming from her and being received by him.

True communication occurs only if we receive and then attempt to decode the sounds that our ears have heard. The challenge is that most of us are not decoding. We are receiving the words only because we are waiting our turn to send words back. In this instance, we are only communicating with our ears. This is the lowest level of communication – just hearing.

Level 2: Listening – I recently sent my 19-year-old to the grocery store. One of the items I asked him to purchase was a cereal that was a buy-one-get-one deal of the week. I specifically said, “Please buy this cereal. It is a BOGO this week.” He acknowledged that he would get the cereal. Later that evening, I saw only one box of the cereal in the pantry. I asked why he did not get two boxes of the cereal. He replied, “You did not say get two boxes.”

He was right. I had not specifically stated that to him. He received the words I spoke to him, but he failed to decode the “BOGO” word to mean that if it is buy-one-get-one-free deal, then he should indeed pick up two. Merriam-Webster defines listening as “hearing something with thoughtful attention.”

So, listening is a step above hearing in that the receiver of the words with their ears is now using their mind to decode the sounds and cultivate a well-developed thought about what was spoken to them. I argue that this use of both ears and mind is the mid-level, one-way manner of communication. At this point, we are hearing and listening.

Level 3: Understanding – I thought, until this past few months of my home-grown communications experiment, that I communicate extremely well. I now know that in actuality I have only achieved, at best, the mid-level of communication. I am particularly adept at hearing what is being spoken to me and then actively listening in order to decode the message. I realize now, though, that my decoding of the original message sometimes does not match the actual message being sent.

Merriam-Webster defines understanding as “the knowledge and ability to judge a particular situation or subject.” So, sometimes, like others, I fail to understand what is truly being said to me. As I stated earlier, I speak English and French. I do not speak 15-year-old high schooler, 19-year-old college student, or new-husband Portuguese. All three of these languages are foreign to my ears and my mind.

As such, I hear what is being said to me and I have to decode the messages, but I have not heard the specific “heart” of either of these three individuals in order to accurately judge them and their situation. I have been communicating with my ears and my mind. I now need to push myself out of my comfort zone and hear their heart with my own heart. True and effective two-way communication is a loop of sending messages

(speaking our heart and mind), receiving messages (hearing), decoding messages (listening) and providing the desired feedback (understanding). The combination of hearing, listening and understanding represents the highest, and most challenging, level of communication

So, I continue my communications experiment at home.

I am pressing myself out of my comfort zone to learn to truly communicate in these three new languages. I continue this journey even though I am woefully aware that in a few short months my 15-year-old turns 16 (and will be driving), my 19-year-old returns to college and turns 20, and my new Portuguese husband will be not so new and speaking even more English.

All of those pending changes will result in three whole new languages for me to learn as my experiment continues...

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