Chapter 12

Partnership Communication

Creating Learning Conversations

Jim Knight

I love communicating with people. I love making people feel good about themselves and what they teach. This is the perfect job to make people feel good about themselves, to feel good about their profession, and to help kids learn.

—Lynn Barnes, instructional coach,
Jardine Middle School

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

The success or failure of a coaching program hinges on the coach's ability to communicate clearly, build relationships, and support fellow teachers. A coach who struggles to get along with others will likely struggle to be successful. This chapter introduces six aspects of effective communication: (a) understanding the communication process, (b) employing authentic listening, (c) understanding our audiences, (d) recognizing stories, (e) interpreting nonverbal communication and facial expressions, and (f) building relationships through emotional connection. Coaches who learn and apply these aspects of communication to their professional and personal life should be better prepared to connect with people in meaningful, healthy relationships.

CREATING LEARNING CONVERSATIONS

We face a crisis of communication. Although we may talk with dozens of people every day, we can go through entire weeks or longer never having a single, meaningful conversation. Margaret Wheatley, author of *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future* (2002), describes our situation as follows:

> We have never wanted to be alone. But today, we are alone. We are more fragmented and isolated from one another than ever before. Archbishop Desmond Tutu describes it as "a radical brokenness in all of existence." (p. 4)

On those occasions when we work up the courage to share a few honest words, we often find that things fall apart. We try to make a simple point, to express a well-thought-through opinion, and find ourselves silenced, or ignored, or inadvertently offending someone whom we meant no harm, or offended by someone who meant us no harm. In a time when many people long for more intimacy, we struggle to find a common language to make meaningful conversation possible. For many, the only place where intimate conversations exist is on the Internet, with strangers.

Communicating an important message can be one of the most authentic, rewarding experiences in life. When we communicate, we learn; we share thoughts, experiences, and emotions; we become colleagues, friends, and soul mates. Words and language, messages sent and received, can build a tie between people that is deep, strong, and even lifelong. Effective communication can enable the kind of faithful relationship that we build our lives around. Unfortunately, words can also destroy relationships. A simple, innocent comment can do damage that may take years to repair, or damage that may never be repaired. Getting our messages through is a messy business.

Our common struggle to communicate is doubly important for ICs (instructional coaches). The ability to communicate effectively stands at the heart of what ICs do, not just inside the walls of a school, but inside every important relationship in which they live. An IC who is a highly effective communicator is well on the way to a successful career. An IC who struggles to communicate effectively, however, faces a world of challenges. We may not be far off the mark if we say that ICs cannot be effective in their profession unless they understand how to be effective communicators.

Lynn Barnes, an IC at Jardine Middle School, believes that communication and relationship building lie at the heart of being an effective coach. "You have to build a relationship before you can do anything. You have to truly care about the individuals and students you are working with. At all times, you have to be compassionate, empathetic, patient and understanding. There's no place for sarcasm with kids or adults."

Lynn Barnes

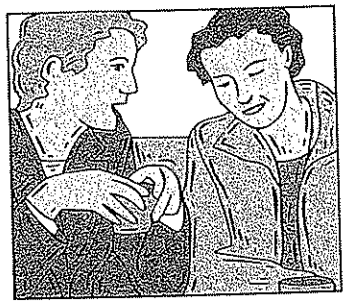
Lynn Barnes, an IC at Jardine Middle School, has a total of 35 years of teaching experience. Of the 35 years, she has been an IC for 6 years and taught language arts for 15 years. Lynn won Topeka's Middle School Teacher of the Year Award and is certified as a Strategic Instruction Model Content Enhancement Professional Developer, a Strategic Instruction Model Learning Strategies Professional Developer, and a Professional Developer for Randy Sprick's Safe and Civil Schools program.

THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

Understanding the communication process can help us see why communication frequently falters and fails. As the figure below illustrates, communication of any sort is more complicated than meets the eye (or ear, I suppose, depending on the way the message is shared) and the process of communication involves several components.

Figure 12.1 The Communication Process

- Speaker
- Message
- Listener
- Interference
- Perceived Message
- Feedback



Components of the Communication Process

Communication usually begins with an intended message, that is, an idea, thought, opinion, or statement that someone wishes to communicate to another person or persons. The person who expresses the idea, thought, opinion, or statement we call the *speaker*, and the person(s) receiving the message we call the audience. As simple as this sounds, a funny thing happens to the message on the way from the speaker to the audience, however. Interference messes with the message. Like static on the radio, interference is anything that stands in the way of us sending or receiving our message.

Consequently, the audience receives a modified version of the intended message—we call this the perceived message. Unfortunately, the perceived message can be quite a bit different from the intended message, but the audience doesn't know that and believes the perceived message is real. Since interference hinders the transparent communication of ideas, a speaker has to evaluate the reaction of his or her audience to ascertain whether or not the intended message has made it through the interference. This reaction, which we call feedback, can be spoken loudly and obviously (laughter, shouts, smiles) or transmitted so subtly as to be almost imperceptible (a momentary look away).

The moment the audience arches an eyebrow, smiles, or breaks into tears, the audience becomes a speaker sending a new message. Indeed, even

if the audience didn't intend to send a message, nothing still communicates something, and any reaction can be understood to convey countless additional perceived messages. Such is the way communication proceeds, with speakers and audiences sending out messages all with the goal of getting the message through interference.

Interference can occur in a multitude of ways. Interference can literally be some real noise that makes it difficult for an audience to perceive a message. If Pandora Radio is playing loudly when your daughter is talking about her applications to college, and you find it difficult to hear her over the music on the computer speakers, obviously the sound is causing interference. If you're leading a two-hour workshop exploring a complicated teaching practice and the school secretary has a riotous time sending out messages over the PA, the sound of the PA would be interference.

Interference is manifested more subtly as well. If your friend applies for an important position in an executive firm and shows up for the interview wearing a Sex Pistols T-shirt, her clothing might interfere with her audience's ability to perceive her intended message that she really is qualified for the job (though there may be one or two settings where that T-shirt might communicate that she is the perfect person for the job).

Interference frequently is invisible, existing in our audience's preconceptions, competing priorities, experiences, prior knowledge, or lack of prior knowledge. Our thoughts, perceptions, beliefs, values, emotions, and prior knowledge can keep us from being effective audiences for others' important messages.

The art of effective communication is finding ways to get around interference so that the message we want to communicate more or less becomes the message that is perceived by our audience.

Partnership Principles and Communication

ICs who ground their actions in the partnership approach find it easier to send and receive messages effectively. If they believe that they are partners with others and that everyone has something to teach them, they are more inclined to be respectful and open to the people with whom they interact. Respect, equality, and openness are good starting points for learning conversations. Lynn Barnes believes that the respect inherent in the partnership approach makes it much easier for her to connect with teachers: "Teachers know that if they tell me something, I won't get upset. I accept their opinions, and as a partnership, we just value each other's opinion, and we are more accepting of each other. They're willing to share ideas; they're willing to meet with me, and they share their kids with me. They don't share their kids if they don't believe and trust you."

EMPLOYING AUTHENTIC LISTENING

If you pick up just about any book on communication, leadership, relationships, or self-help, there is a good chance you will find several pages or

chapters dedicated to the art of listening. Many authors have emphasized the importance of this skill. For example, Robert K. Greenleaf, who first described the concept of servant leadership (1998), states that "the inability to listen may be the most costly of the human relations skills to be without" (p. 71). Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen (1999) observe that "listening well is one of the most powerful skills you can bring to a difficult conversation. It helps you understand the other person. And, importantly, it helps them understand you" (p.163). Margaret Wheatley (2002) even goes as far as stating, "I believe we can change the world if we start listening to one another again" (p. 3).

We need to listen better. We know it, and yet we do not do it. We zone out of conversations, we argue with others before we fully hear what they have to tell us, and we turn the focus back to us when we should be focused on those with whom we are talking. We want to listen, but we just do not seem to be getting much better at it. Or we are blithely unaware of how poorly we listen. And the people around us don't seem to be very good listeners either. If only they'd listen, things could be so much easier.

How Misconceptions Keep Us From Listening

Of course, the problem usually isn't the other person. The problem is that we frequently misjudge our ability to listen. To paraphrase R. D. Laing, if we don't know we're not listening, we think we're listening. If the other person isn't listening well, maybe our best solution is to listen to them. Over time, I have learned that when I listen with great care, the person I'm speaking with almost always becomes a much better listener.

So why is it so difficult to listen? William Isaacs explains that "if we try to listen we find it extraordinarily difficult, because we are always projecting our opinions and ideas, our prejudices, our background, our inclinations, our impulses; when they dominate, we hardly listen at all to what is being said" (1999, p. 84). Our memories, especially, interfere with our ability to listen. For example, an IC who remembers he was criticized by a teacher in a team meeting a month ago may find that memory interfering with his ability to listen objectively in the here and now. Even if the teacher makes a positive statement, the IC's memory might make it difficult to hear the positive comments.

We also struggle to listen simply because we may not want to hear what others are saying. We are usually drawn to those messages that confirm our hopes or affirm our assumptions about ourselves. Even after years of communication training, for example, many find it easier to listen to praise than criticism. David Bohm (2000) explains that if someone examines the way they listen,

> if one is alert and attentive, he can see, for example, that whenever certain questions arise, there are fleeting questions of fear, which push him away from consideration of these questions and of pleasure, which attract his thoughts and cause them to be occupied with other questions . . . can each of us be aware of the subtle fear and

> pleasure sensations that block his ability to listen freely? Without this awareness, the injunction to listen to the whole of what is said will have little meaning. (p. 4)

Attentiveness

In a now famous quotation, Woody Allen reportedly once said, "Eighty percent of life is just showing up." I think that much the same can be said about listening. More than anything else, the defining characteristic of effective listening is being attentive. An IC who truly wants to listen better has to make the effort. Listening is an act of will as much as it is a skill or an art, and no matter how many coaching books ICs read, they won't be effective listeners unless they decide to roll up their sleeves and stay focused on the person with whom they're speaking. Susan Scott (2002) explains the importance of attentiveness as follows:

> Think for the moment about the kind of attention you bring to your conversations. While someone is talking, where are your thoughts? When you are face-to-face, do you look at the individual in front of you or do your eyes roam in a sort of perpetual surveillance? While you're talking with someone on the telephone, do you scan your email? And can you tell when someone is scanning his? (p. 95)

IC Lynn Barnes works very deliberately to pay attention to collaborating teachers when she listens.

> Sometimes when they come with their stories, and there are 15 other things I have to do, I have to tell myself, "put your pencil down, give them eye contact, put yourself in their shoes." I've had the experience happen to me when I was talking to someone and they were typing an email or doing something else, and it was like they could care less about me being with them. I need to value each moment that a teacher wants to be with me. I make sure when someone comes to my office, I make sure that I'm really listening, all there. I'm not thinking about what pressing engagement I have to do. I can't have that distraction. I'm needed. I try to think of them first.

Self-Awareness

Aside from attending to "the kind of attention" brought to listening, coaches should also consider whether or not they are listening in a biased manner. Are they only hearing information that confirms their assumptions? Are their memories biasing them as they listen? William Isaacs (1999) explains, "You can begin to listen by listening first to yourself and to your own reactions. Ask yourself, 'What do I feel here? Or how does this

feel?' . . . To learn to be present, we must learn to notice what we are feeling now" (p. 92).

In order to be better listeners, ICs need to learn to distinguish between experiencing and evaluating during conversation. We need to ask, are we listening through the filter of our personal biases? Do we judge as we hear? Or, when we experience a conversation, do we focus our attention on simply hearing exactly what the other person is saying? ICs who listen effectively do not paint the words of others with their biases; they simply focus on understanding fully what the other person says.

Honesty and Authenticity

No matter how many listening techniques ICs learn, they will not be effective listeners unless they honestly want to hear what others have to say. As Stone et al. (1999) have observed,

> Scores of workshops and books on "active listening" teach you what you should do to be a good listener . . . The problem is this: you are taught what to do and how to sit, but the heart of good listening is authenticity. People "read" not only your words and posture, but what's going on inside of you. If your "stance" isn't genuine, the words won't matter . . . If your intentions are false, no amount of careful wording or good posture will help. If your intentions are good, even clumsy language won't hinder you . . . Listening is only powerful and effective if it is authentic. Authenticity means that you are listening because you are curious and you care, not just because you are supposed to. The issue, then, is this: Are you curious? Do you care? (p. 168)

Empathy and Respect

Stephen Covey (1989) has been very articulate in describing the importance of empathy in the act of listening. "Empathic listening gets inside another person's frame of reference. You look out through it, you see the world the way they see the world . . . The essence of empathic listening is not that you agree with someone; it's that you fully, deeply, understand that person, emotionally as well as intellectually" (p. 240). Without empathy, little true listening takes place. However, with empathy, deep communication, nourishing humanizing communication is possible.

What must we do to be empathetic? I believe that we begin to be empathetic when we begin with humility. The goal of empathy, what Covey refers to as *empathic listening,* is to silence ourselves and attend to others. We need to teach ourselves to put our personal concerns aside, and to concern ourselves with whomever we are speaking to. This may mean that we learn to duck, metaphorically speaking, when we are criticized or attacked, or that we

put our opinions or agendas aside temporarily to hear others. To really listen to others, we have to learn to keep our personal needs for attention, self-defense, prestige, or power from interfering with our ability to hear what is being said.

An empathic response is also a powerful way to demonstrate respect. William Isaacs (1999) reminds us, "Respect is not a passive act. To respect someone is to look for the spring that feeds the pool of their experience . . . it involves a sense of honoring or deferring to someone. Where once we saw one aspect of a person, we look again and realize how much of them we have missed. This second look can let us take in more fully the fact that before me is a living, breathing being" (p. 111). To respect is to commit fully to the belief that each other person carries within him or her a humanity that must be recognized, validated, and listened to.

Isaacs (1999) suggests that one way we can increase respect is to remind ourselves, "This, too, is in me," when we hear something that provokes in us an un-listening reaction. Isaacs explains that "we may be tempted to say that a given behavior is all 'theirs'—I do not have anything like that in me! Maybe so. But the courage to accept it as not only 'out there,' but also 'in here,' enables us to engage in the world in a very different way" (p. 124). Isaacs goes on to say that we can build respect by demonstrating "the willingness to forgive that which we see in another and come to the point where we can accept it as being in us" (p. 124).

The kind of respect Isaacs describes is central to the partnership approach. We believe that the others with whom we interact are equal to us, that our voice is no more important than theirs, and that they have something to teach us. Even more fundamentally, we believe that it is a moral necessity to see the value in those with whom we interact. We don't tell them what to do or make their decisions; we respect them as fellow human beings traveling a road very similar to our own.

Listening Strategies

Developing inner silence
Listening for what contradicts our assumptions
Clarifying
Communicating our understanding
Practicing every day
Practicing with terrible listeners

Some Listening Strategies

Developing inner silence. We can improve our ability to listen by training ourselves to silence thoughts we have that lead us to judge rather than simply experience the comments of others.

Listening for what contradicts our assumptions. Since we are frequently attracted to messages that reinforce our biases and predispositions, we can improve our listening if we direct our brain to listen for messages that contradict our assumptions.

Clarifying. An obvious but frequently overlooked listening strategy is to check with our colleagues to ensure that we understand what they are saying. Clarifying might take the form of a paraphrase ("let me tell you what I'm hearing you say, and you tell me if I've got it right") or might simply involve asking our colleague to slow the pace of conversation or to repeat an idea that we missed the first time it was spoken.

Communicating our understanding. Being a good listener does not mean that we sit silent and frozen like a rock. Good listeners ask questions, clarify, and communicate that they understand what is being said. We can communicate our understanding verbally or nonverbally. The important thing is that we communicate that we understand, and thus encourage the speaker to keep talking.

Practicing every day. Listening, Stephen Covey (1989) reminds us, "is something you can practice right now" (p. 258). I find it most effective to plan specific times or situations when I will work on my listening skills. Like other healthy habits, we become better listeners the more we practice.

Practicing with terrible listeners. Stone et al. (1999) assert that "the reason why the other person is not listening to you is not because they are stubborn, but because they don't feel heard" (pp. 166–167). To prove their point, the authors suggest a simple test: "Find the most stubborn person you know, the person who never seems to take in anything you say, the person who repeats himself or herself in every conversation you ever have—and listen to them. Especially, listen for feelings, like frustration, or pride or fear, and acknowledge those feelings. See whether that person doesn't become a better listener after all" (p. 167).

UNDERSTANDING OUR AUDIENCE

Becoming an effective listener is a great start for one of the most important communication strategies—learning how to present information so that it can be understood easily by an audience (in this case collaborating teachers). A coach's best intentions, a coach's communication goals, or a coach's obvious intended message doesn't matter a whit if the collaborating teacher doesn't hear it. The message that matters is the one in the teacher's mind, not the one in the coach's mind. For that reason, coaches who are effective communicators structure every message so that it can be accurately perceived by their audience. If coaches start by understanding their audience, they then can frame their message so that it will be heard.

What Questions Can Instructional Coaches Ask to Focus on Their Collaborating Teachers?

What are my collaborating teacher's most pressing concerns?
What does my collaborating teacher know about this topic?
What are my collaborating teacher's learning preferences?
What are my collaborating teacher's values?

ICs communicate better with their teachers if they first ask a few questions. An IC might start working with a teacher by asking these questions in an actual learning conversation, or an IC might consider these questions on her own as she prepares for a future conversation with teachers.

1. *What are my collaborating teacher's most pressing concerns?* The importance of this question might seem obvious, but far too many of us have shown up with ideas to share with a teacher without really ever knowing what is on that teacher's mind. As Lynn Barnes explains, "I have to meet their needs, when they need it." Put another way, ignorance of what is most important to a collaborating teacher can interfere with a coach's ability to have an impact. If a teacher is really concerned about classroom management, and I fail to address that when I meet with her, I may or may not be able to create a sustained relationship focused on professional learning. However, if I can respond to a teacher's pressing concern that he needs to learn classroom management techniques quickly, and as a coach I hear that concern and provide the teacher with tools that help him keep his kids on task and learning, I can make a difference.

2. *What does my collaborating teacher know about this topic?* Chances are, all of us have been in learning situations where teachers misjudged what we knew about a topic before they started teaching us. On the one hand, if an IC assumes I know a lot about a topic and dives in full-throttle without checking to make sure I have sufficient background knowledge, the IC runs the risk of leaving me behind in the dust of her rapid-fire explanations. On the other hand, if an IC tediously explains a topic I already know well, the IC can be even more frustrating because she is wasting my precious time or, more problematic, appears to be patronizing me by teaching me something I know very well.

Effective ICs, then, must do their best to understand as fully as possible how much their audience knows about a topic. Coaches can start by making some assumptions based on their prior knowledge of a given teacher and others who hold similar positions in the school. However, as quickly as

possible, the IC needs to check with the teacher to see if her assumptions are correct, asking a few quick questions to determine how much the teacher knows. Then, throughout future collaborative conversations with teachers, the coach should continually check to make sure that the explanations are sufficiently complete without being overly comprehensive.

Lynn Barnes says that the secret of assessing teachers' prior knowledge is to "ask questions. You find out what they know about this, if they've had training, if they really know it or not . . . you ask questions and you start formulating in your own mind an idea of how much they know."

3. *What are my collaborating teacher's learning preferences?* Asking this easily overlooked question can yield some very useful information. If we can get a better understanding of how our collaborating teachers prefer to learn, that can help us communicate more efficiently. Jane Kise's *Differentiated Coaching: A Framework for Helping Teachers Change* (2006) appears to be the definitive work on learning preferences and coaching. Kise compares several ways of explaining learning types but employs the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator tool (MBTI) to explain why coaches should understand learning types and how they can use that information when coaching teachers.

The MBTI is a self-reporting instrument that people can complete to better understand their learning preferences. The MBTI sorts our learning styles into four pairs of preferences: (a) judging and perceiving, (b) extraversion and introversion, (c) sensing and intuition, and (d) thinking and feeling. Kise's definitions of each preference pair are included in the tables below:

Judging and Perceiving: How We Approach Life	
Judging	"A preference for planning their work and working their plan. They are not more judgmental but rather prefer to come to judgment (closure) on things" (p. 86)
Perceiving	"A preference for staying open to the moment. They are not more perceptive but rather prefer to continue to perceive (gather) more information" (p. 86)

Extraversion and Introversion: How We Get Energy	
Extraversion	"Gaining energy through action and interaction, the outside world" (p. 89)
Introversion	"Gaining energy through reflection and solitude, the inner world" (p. 89)

Sensing and Intuition: How We Gather Information	
Sensing	"*First* paying attention to *what is*, to information you can gather through your five senses—the facts" (p. 93)
Intuition	"*First* paying attention to what *could be*, to hunches, connections or imagination—a sixth sense" (p. 93)

Thinking and Feeling: How We Make Decisions	
Thinking	"Making decisions through objective, logical principles" (p. 96)
Feeling	"Making decisions by considering the impact of each alternative on the people involved" (p. 96)

Since ICs can personalize learning experiences for each collaborating teacher, they seem uniquely capable of responding to teachers' learning preferences. An IC who recognizes that a collaborating teacher has a "judging" learning preference, for example, might take care to spend much more time collaboratively planning with that teacher. Similarly, an IC with an extroversion learning preference should be careful to adapt her communication when working with a teacher who gets energy from solitude. Extroverts who try to energize introverts can sometimes push them away if they do not recognize the introverts' learning style.

ICs can benefit by deepening their understanding of learning preferences by reading works such as Kise's *Differentiated Coaching*. However, even without extensive knowledge of learning types, coaches should be attentive to the unique learning preferences of those with whom they collaborate. IC Lynn Barnes observes that learning styles are important to consider when planning group presentations. "I think it's good to realize that we all have different learning styles, like students. In our trainings we have to incorporate multiple learning styles so that we meet the needs of all those styles in our trainings."

4. *What are my collaborating teacher's values and how do my own values affect my relationship with this teacher? What is most important to this teacher?* An IC who understands a teacher's values, that is, knows what a teacher considers to be important or valuable, has a significant advantage when it comes to communication. For that reason, coaches should do their best to understand each teacher's values so that they can communicate in the most efficient manner.

Consider, for example, the value teachers ascribe to standardized test scores. Some teachers are very concerned about the results their students and

school achieve on standardized test scores, so when working with those teachers, ICs would be prudent to explain how particular interventions might help students do better on standardized tests. Other teachers view standardized tests negatively, believing they promote a narrow understanding of what education is and can be. When working with a teacher who ascribes a negative value to standardized tests, an IC would be prudent to explain how interventions address other aspects of education that the teacher values.

ICs also have to consider other values a teacher holds that might enhance or interfere with communication. Teachers' time, for example, is something that Lynn Barnes is very careful to respect. "Their time is valuable, and when you show them you understand that, that's important to the relationship." At the same time, Lynn also avoids topics that might put her at odds with collaborating teachers. "You know, the older I get, the wiser I get. I try to really be conscious of what I say, really conscious about the way I say it. I'm never flip with people. I could care less about persuading them to vote Democrat in the next election or persuading them to be a Protestant rather than a Catholic. I'm not at the job to talk politics. I'm there because I truly care about helping them in their profession and meeting the needs of those kids."

RECOGNIZING AND OVERCOMING INTERFERENCE

Effective communication, more than anything else, is all about getting the message through various forms of interference. If we are at a Yo La Tengo concert, for example, and the band is playing very loud, we may have to resort to sign language, touch, or notes to get our message through the interference of the music. Similarly, when we work with teachers, we have to employ strategies that help us get through the interference that keeps them from hearing what we have to say.

One common form of interference has been identified by Stone et al. in *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most* (1999). The authors explain that when a conversation has implications for someone's identity, when it becomes what they refer to as an *identity conversation,* a person often finds it difficult to hear the intended message being communicated:

> The identity conversation looks inward: it's all about who we are and how we see ourselves. How does what happened affect my self-esteem, my self-image, my sense of who I am in the world? What impact will it have on my future? What self-doubts do I harbor? In short . . . the identity conversation is about what I am saying to myself *about me.* (p. 14)

Communication is difficult in schools when change leaders are insensitive to the identity implications of what they are proposing. Teachers don't resist new ideas as much as they resist the suggestion that they are not

competent and they need to be helped or improved. When coaches clearly communicate their genuine belief that their collaborating teachers are competent and skilled, that is, when they take the partnership approach, there is a chance that those teachers will hear what their coaches have to say. However, when coaches communicate even ever so slightly that they are in the school to fix the "bad teachers," then teachers hearing that message will resist to protect their identity no matter how great the information is that a coach has to share. Simply put, to make sure people hear you, be careful not to start the conversation by attacking their identity.

A second form of interference exists inside ourselves. Our stories about events can also interfere with our ability to communicate. Over the past few decades, authors such as Michel Polanyi (1983), Thomas Kuhn (1970), and Peter Senge (1990) have shown that our ability to understand the world is limited or incomplete. What all these authors communicate, whether they discuss "the tacit dimension" of perception, or "paradigms," or "mental models," is that what we see, hear, and perceive is dramatically shaped by our prior knowledge (both conscious and unconscious).

An experience I had at a party for my son Geoff's hockey team helped me gain insight into just how incomplete our perceptions can be. Geoff and his young teammates were celebrating the end of a fun season. A kindly grandmother of one of the players had videotaped the final game. After all the food had been eaten, kids and parents herded into the basement recreation room to watch the video of the game. While at first everyone was excited to see the game, within a few minutes, the kids began to get restless. The proud grandmother had filmed every move of her grandson, whether or not he was involved in any action on the ice. During those moments when her grandson was in the midst of the play, everyone in the room was excited to watch. However, during those minutes (and to the children they seemed like very long periods of time) when her grandson was not in the action, the videotape of the boy standing on the blue line, back from the action, was, to say the least, disappointing to all the other players on the team. In short, the boys got to see a tape of the game, but because the tape focused on only one boy, the tape missed most of the game.

Our perceptions of the world are very similar to this grandmother's videotape. We only get a partial view of the action, and our personal interests tend to focus us on some things more than others. Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, and Switzler (2002) illustrate this phenomenon by discussing the impact of stories, stating that stories "are our interpretations of the facts. They help explain what we see and hear. They're theories we use to explain *why, how, and what*" (p. 99).

ICs must be careful not to let their personal stories interfere with their ability to understand what is really happening. On occasion, the stories we tell ourselves about reality shape our perceptions much more than the bare facts right in front of our faces.

When my colleague Mary Brieck came into our research center as our administrative manager a few years ago, every researcher at the Center breathed a sigh of relief. With someone carefully managing our office, we hoped, we would be able to spend more time working on what we felt mattered and less time on bureaucratic minutiae. At first, mind you, I was concerned that Mary was not helping at all. In her first few weeks on the job, Mary instituted several procedures that seemed to be anything but helpful. First, she instituted a policy that compelled all of us to sign out the center's state car if we wished to drive it—up until that point the car had had a nickname that I liked quite a lot, "Jim's car," and I had simply used it whenever I wished. Now I had to sign it out, and sometimes others signed it out ahead of me. Then Mary introduced a policy that she had to approve all grant-related purchases before the orders could be processed. I found myself writing time-consuming e-mails to Mary explaining why I needed a digital camera or why I needed to attend a particular conference. Worse than that, sometimes she wrote back to say I couldn't make the purchase.

As time went on, Mary's impact on my work life grew, and I wasn't happy about it. What was the point of all these new rules, I thought, except for making Mary feel like she was in control? Each week, I found myself increasingly frustrated, going home at night to complain to Jenny about how the new office administrator was a "control freak" who seemed determined to be a thorn in my side.

I got more and more frustrated with her policies and actions. Finally, my feelings and thoughts came to stand in the way of my ability to work with Mary, and I decided to confront her about her behavior. I knew what her problem was, and I was going to fix it, I reasoned. Fortunately, when I sat down and talked with her, I started by asking her to explain why she was doing what she was doing. I quickly discovered that my story was the problem, not Mary's actions. Mary tactfully explained that she was told when she was hired that her chief task was to create systems to organize the way we functioned and to increase our accountability. "My job here, and the way I will be evaluated," Mary said, "is whether or not I can create systems that make sure we don't do anything that will get us in trouble with our funding agencies."

Understanding how Mary perceived her actions made a world of difference to how I perceived what Mary did. Once I knew that she was only interested in ensuring that we were efficient and legal, our relationship changed. I realized that Mary wasn't someone intent on making my life difficult—she was intent on making sure I stayed out of jail. From that day on, when Mary e-mailed me to ask why I needed to make a particular purchase, I no longer saw her as a control freak, but as someone intent upon ensuring that we use our funds correctly and thereby ensuring we continue to get funding for our research. She wasn't against me; she was very clearly pulling for me, working on my side.

If ICs are not careful, they can make the same mistake I made with Mary and allow their personal stories to interfere with an accurate perception of

reality. For example, a coach might come to believe that teachers are stubbornly resisting change when in reality they are simply taking time to balance competing demands on their time. If a coach writes off teachers as being resistant, hostile, or negative, they may dismiss teachers who might actually be open to change. By failing to inspect their own stories, coaches can do teachers and their students a real disservice.

Lynn Barnes told me a story that illustrates how she keeps herself from letting stories interfere with her ability to reach out to teachers. When Lynn first met "Alison" at her school, Alison brushed Lynn off, telling her, "I know all about graphic organizers, so you won't have to deal with me." Although tempted to take Alison at her word, Lynn said, "I continued to do what I do—greeting her in the hall, giving her positive notes, inquiring about her life, finding positive things about her as a person. It ended that she was all for our strategies. She didn't need me right away, but she was able to see the benefits of our strategies in her classroom. We should never dismiss teachers; there is always some way we can help them."

Patterson et al. (2002) identify what they refer to as "vicious stories" we tell ourselves that interfere with our ability to communicate. One such story is the story in which we paint another person as a villain. Thus, an IC might develop a story that an administrator who questions every intervention a coach offers is a bad person who is determined, for selfish or evil reasons, to destroy everything good that the coach is doing.

I spend a great deal of time in schools across the nation, and everywhere I go I hear educational leaders described as if they are villains (even one loving, dedicated coach I know, who seems to have a kind word for everyone, once referred to her administrator as a witch when the administrator failed to support her). The reality is that few people wake up in the morning determined to do evil to adults or children in schools. However, when coaches fall prey to the villain story, it is very difficult for them to reach out to those they consider villains. If I'm sure you're my enemy, I will find it difficult to listen to, empathize with, respect, or connect with you.

A second type of vicious story is the helpless story. Here, we create a story in which we convince ourselves that we are helpless in the face of some challenge. "How can I ever teach these students," a teacher might ask, "when they're not motivated, when their parents don't care, when the class size is far too big?" By telling ourselves that our situation is helpless, we create a situation where the only appropriate reaction seems to be to give up.

It is easy to understand why an IC might give in to helpless stories because at times the challenges of school improvement can seem overwhelming. I have indeed met many coaches who are seduced, momentarily at least, by the story that they cannot make a difference. But a primary message of this book, and a major conclusion to be drawn from our research, is that ICs are not helpless. Indeed, our data show quite clearly that ICs can have a profound impact on the way teachers teach and students learn. In fact, the ICs who are most helpless are those who choose to give in to the vicious story of their own helplessness.

The art of communication involves finding ways to get around interference that stands in the way of the transparent sharing of ideas. In some instances, the interference comes from within ourselves. Our stories about people can stand in the way of us understanding them. Thus, an IC who wants to connect with others needs to be aware of the ways in which his or her own preconceptions might block communication.

Just Talking Together

I had a meeting a while back that I thought was going to be awful. I got an e-mail from the principal, who wrote, "I'm not happy with how things are going. We need to talk." Sometimes it seemed as if the principal just didn't want me to help her with her kids, you know, and at first I didn't like that e-mail a bit. But I knew I couldn't ignore it. As it turned out, the next day was a day when teachers were out of the building, so I suggested we get together.

That night I thought a lot about how to handle the meeting. I decided that my main goal would be to listen. I wanted her to know that I got what she was saying. I wanted to see the world through her eyes and feel her feelings. When I went in she had a lot of criticisms, and I just listened. I didn't agree, but I didn't argue. I just said, "I can see why you feel worried. I can see why you might be concerned." I asked about her work, and the frustrations she was facing. She was overwhelmed and I was amazed that she could handle so many things at once. I told her that, too, and it seemed to help.

Something happened during the conversation. Somehow we shifted from her criticisms to talking about all kinds of things, her son, her new teachers, the new vice principal, our philosophies of life. It became a fun conversation, and I started to like her a lot more. In the midst of the conversation, I explained why I was doing what I was doing. My goal wasn't to trick her. We were just talking, and like never before, she understood me. Everything worked out that day. Sometimes you get lucky.

THE SUBTLE LANGUAGE OF COMMUNICATION: FACIAL EXPRESSIONS AND EMOTIONAL CONNECTIONS

When we think about communication, we might think about things that are fairly easy to see or hear, such as speech, e-mails, memos, letters, or touch. I would contend, however, that most communication is more subtle. When we communicate with others, much of what takes place in the interaction happens beneath the surface. We watch for nonverbal cues, we read body language, we look for eye contact, and we pay attention to how we feel as we talk with others. Furthermore, we often respond positively or negatively to a speaker for reasons that we can't really explain. We like someone, like the way they communicate, like their message. We often find it easier to hear the same message from one person than it is to hear it from another.

Facial Expressions and Nonverbal Communication

Most of us have read about, learned about, or studied nonverbal communication. The basics are well-known. The way we carry ourselves, the way we move and gesture, often communicates louder than words ever could. Nonverbal communication can reveal whether we feel affection for, are interested in, want to control, or trust those with whom we communicate.

Strategies for effective nonverbal communication include such tactics as (a) facing people when you speak with them, (b) making eye contact, (c) avoiding distracting gestures, (d) nodding your head in an encouraging way, (e) finding an appropriate place for communication, (f) paying attention to how close we sit with others, (g) choosing an appropriate tone of voice for the message we want to communicate, and (h) touching or not touching others appropriately depending on the situation. These are important, if well-known, skills every IC should master. In particular, it is important to ensure that what we communicate nonverbally reinforces the messages we intend to communicate verbally.

The most important part of nonverbal communication is facial expression. Paul Ekman and his colleagues have studied people's emotional responses worldwide (in primitive and modern cultures). They conclude that facial expressions represent a universal language that can be interpreted in the same way we interpret other forms of language. Ekman's Facial Action Coding System, developed in 1978, "is now being used by hundreds of scientists around the world to measure facial movements" (2003, p. 14).

Ekman (2003) explains that facial expressions often communicate in "micro expressions," "very fast facial movements lasting less than one-fifth of a second" (p. 15). Ekman suggests that our "micro expressions" can trigger emotions in others, or others' "micro expressions" can trigger emotions in us. Simply put, the communication of emotion happens in a flash, and we must be very conscious to recognize what others' facial expressions communicate to us. As Ekman observed, "As an emotion begins, it takes us over in . . . milliseconds, directing what we do and say and think" (pp. 19–20).

According to Ekman "seven emotions each have a distinct, universal, facial expression: sadness, anger, surprise, fear, disgust, contempt, and happiness" (p. 58). In *Emotions Revealed* (2003), Ekman describes the facial expressions for each of these emotions in detail, including illustrations that, in some cases, are difficult to look at given how evocative they are. ICs would be wise to study Ekman's work to gain a deeper understanding of the subtle way in which facial expressions can communicate messages that support or undercut what is being spoken. By watching facial expressions carefully, ICs can learn a lot about their collaborating teachers and can improve their ability to communicate clearly.

Over the years, Lynn Barnes has learned a lot about reading body language. When she meets with teachers, she says, she "pays attention to the obvious things, eye contact, their body stance, whether they're nodding." Lynn also

looks at her collaborating teachers' nonverbals to determine whether the teacher is ready and willing to learn. "We need to take consideration that maybe they have something else pressing, they might be agitated, they might need to call a parent, and maybe we should meet at another time. A lot goes into it." Lynn goes on to say, "It's just about being aware and acting upon it."

BUILDING AN EMOTIONAL CONNECTION

Facial expressions and nonverbal communication are an important part of another part of the subtle side of communication—emotional connections. To be effective, ICs, we have found, must become masters at building emotional connections with their teachers. When I interviewed teachers who had collaborated with Lynn Barnes, they were quick to heap praises on their IC. Although the teachers said they appreciated the valuable tools and teaching practices Lynn had to share, more frequently they noted that they liked working with Lynn because they flat out liked her as a person. Hannah Waldy, for example, told me, "I think you picked the right person to do this job because she is smart, intelligent, with-it, and also has a very kind heart." Jim Edmiston said, "Lynn's got a very outgoing personality. She's an awesome listener, and I think what helps us most is she has an uncanny knack to sense when something is not going the way we expected and offer some suggestions." Linda Lake told me that Lynn is "such a comfortable person to be around." Others commented on Lynn's warmth, kindness, attentiveness, compassion, sense of humor, and positive nature. Jim Edmiston summed up the opinions of all of the teachers: "You could get somebody else to do that job, but it's the person in that job that makes the difference, and Lynn's that person."

These comments, as complimentary as they are to Lynn, might trouble the rest of us. Does an IC have to be born with a super personality? Can ICs learn to connect with teachers the way Lynn does? Fortunately, research conducted by John Gottman suggests that we do not have to be born perfect to be an IC. Much of what Lynn accomplishes can be learned. Gottman, who has spent his professional life studying people in relationships, describes the specific practices that shape relationships as follows:

> We have discovered the elementary constituents of closeness between people, and we have learned the basic principle that regulates how relationships work and also determines a great deal about how conflict between people can be regulated. That basic idea has to do with the way people, in mundane moments in everyday life, make attempts at emotional communication, and how others around them respond, or fail to respond, to these attempts. (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001, Preface)

Gottman describes "the elementary constituent of closeness between people" as an emotional bid: "A bid can be a question, a gesture, a look, a

touch—any single expression that says, 'I want to feel connected to you.' A response to a bid is just that—a positive or negative answer to somebody's request for emotional connection" (2001, p. 4). People extend bids for emotional connection to others all the time, he contends, and in healthy relationships, both members extend and respond positively to these bids. Emotional bids can be obvious gestures, such as inviting someone out to dinner, or incredibly subtle, such as a second of sustained eye contact. Bids can be verbal or nonverbal, funny or serious, physical or intellectual. Bids for emotional connection can be questions, statements, or comments about thoughts, feelings, observations, opinions, or invitations.

When someone makes an emotional bid, Gottman argues, we can respond in one of three ways: (a) turning toward, (b) turning away from, or (c) turning against.

When we turn toward someone who offers us an emotional bid, we respond positively toward that invitation. If someone shakes our hand, we might pat them on the back. If we are invited out to dinner, we say yes, or acknowledge the thoughtfulness of the invitation. If someone smiles, we smile back.

Though she might not refer to them as emotional bids, Lynn Barnes does many acts that enhance her emotional connection with teachers in her school. "I find out their interests, personal things at home. I try to connect with them on things that are near and dear to their heart." Lynn tries to make a personal connection with each teacher every day. "My daily goal is to try to find something to do to validate each person. Recognition is what babies cry for and grown men die for. We need it for the good things we do."

When we turn away from a bid, we fail to respond to the bid for emotional connection. For example, an overwhelmed administrator might be too preoccupied by the countless work-related demands on her time and turn away by failing to notice or acknowledge a colleague's complimentary comments. Gottman observes that turning away "is rarely malicious or mean-spirited. More often we're simply unaware of or insensitive to others' bids for our attention" (2001, p. 5).

The impact of turning away can be devastating. Gottman reports that "When somebody turns away from a bid, the bidder loses confidence and self-esteem. In our observational studies, we see how people almost seem to 'crumple' when their partners turn away. The bidders don't get puffed up with anger; they don't get indignant; they just seem to fold in on themselves. On video we can see their shoulders sag slightly as if they've been deflated. They feel defeated. They give up" (2001, p. 47). Lynn Barnes is very aware of teachers who turn away from her during the school year. "If I go home and there is a person who has turned away, not wanting to make that emotional connection, I try to figure out a way to do something positive for them. You have to give them personal recognition."

When people turn against bids, they react in argumentatiye or hostile ways. If someone makes a bid by offering to cook dinner, for example, a person turning against might respond by saying, "Are you kidding? I've tasted your cooking." For me, the perfect example of a couple that turns against is George Costanza's parents on *Seinfeld.* Each conversation between George's parents proceeds like a verbal boxing match in which both partners throw disdainful comments at each other. When we watch these conversations on TV, we laugh, but when we experience them in our own lives, they can be far from funny—the results can be profoundly destructive. Lynn Barnes admits that teachers who turn against her can be difficult to handle. "I'm really working hard on not taking things personally," she says, "but it can take its toll. I have to respect their decision. I read a quotation a while back and I thought, I had to memorize it: 'respect those you want to silence.' I'm working on that. You've just got to respect them and go on."

ICs can increase their effectiveness if they are fully aware of how bids for emotional connection function, almost like an invisible undercurrent in any relationship bringing people together or keeping them apart. An IC who carelessly adopts a sarcastic tone may inadvertently turn against his or her colleagues' bids for connection.

ICs also need to train themselves to be very sensitive to the ways in which teachers extend emotional bids for connection, which Gottman refers to as mindfulness. ICs should be attentive to collaborating teachers' thoughts, emotions, and concerns, so they can recognize emotional bids for connection and respond in ways that enrich their emotional connection with others. If they miss their colleagues' emotional bids, they will likely have a more difficult time making a difference in their teaching practices. As Gottman has observed, "If you don't pay attention, you don't connect" (2001, p. 66).

Gottman's research should also be a caution to ICs to be careful not to misinterpret a colleague's behavior. On occasion, a loud, aggressive, or hostile manner can be a teacher's way of reaching out. If an IC is too quick to assume she will never build an emotional connection with a colleague, she runs the risk of writing off someone who might benefit from becoming more connected with the coach. Time and again I have found that my first impressions of people can be disproven if I work to build some kind of respectful common ground with them. Gottman observes:

> If you can see past a person's anger, sadness, or fear to recognize the hidden need, you open up new possibilities for relation. You're able to see your coworker's sullen silence as a bid for inclusion in decisions that affect his job, for example. Or you can recognize that your sister's agitation says she's feeling alienated from the family. You can even see the bid in your three-year-old's temper tantrum: He not only wants the toy you can't buy for him, he wants your comfort in a frustrating situation, as well. (2001, p. 36)

HOW IT ALL FITS TOGETHER, SORT OF

The ideas, strategies, tactics, and concepts discussed in this chapter reinforce and overlap with each other frequently. For example, if we have carefully built an emotional connection with teachers, then we should find it easier to discuss topics that might come close to unearthing an identity conversation with teachers. If we become aware of our own "vicious stories" about others when they start to take root, we may find it much easier to build an emotional connection with people whom we might have otherwise avoided.

If we are aware of our own body language and become more adept at reading others' body language, we can become better listeners. Our listening skills can help us construct our message in a way that our audience can understand, and by listening we can also build connections, get around our own and others' stories, and make connections with others that make a difference. What's more, if we learn to share positive comments with others, we stand the chance of improving the kind of conversations that take place in our schools. We then can start to transform our schools into settings where respectful, supportive interchange takes the place of stories about villainy, helplessness, and victimization.

Underlying all of this is the importance of the partnership orientation. When we authentically see our collaborating teachers as equal partners, when we engage in dialogue and encourage reflection, when we focus on praxis, when we respect teachers' choices, when we listen to and encourage teachers' choices, when we expect to learn from others as much as they can teach us, we remove many of the barriers that interfere with communication. People resist our supportive efforts when they feel they are being tricked, manipulated, or bullied. When we treat others as partners, more often than not, they open themselves up to us as collaborators, as partners, and frequently, as friends.

ICs who adopt a partnership approach and who become fluent in many of the partnership communication skills described here will find themselves in healthier, more rewarding relationships, both inside and outside their schools. This ultimately is the great reward of the partnership approach. If it is true that we live in a time of communication crisis, perhaps ICs have, so to speak, something to say about that. By nourishing meaningful conversations in their day-to-day work, ICs may move all of us closer to a world where more intimacy between people becomes a reality. Coaches can shorten the gap between people one conversation at a time.

GOING DEEPER

John Gottman's *The Relationship Cure* (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001) is an accessible summary of his research suggesting that emotional bids are at the heart of personal relationships. Gottman and Silver's *Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* (1999) relates the insights gained from his research to the specifics of marital relationships. Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink* (2005) offers another perspective on Gottman's work, along with many insights regarding the interrelationship of perception and interpretation.

Stephen Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989) remains the best, most useful handbook on listening, in particular the chapter "Seek First to Understand, Then Be Understood," in which Covey introduces the concept of empathic listening.

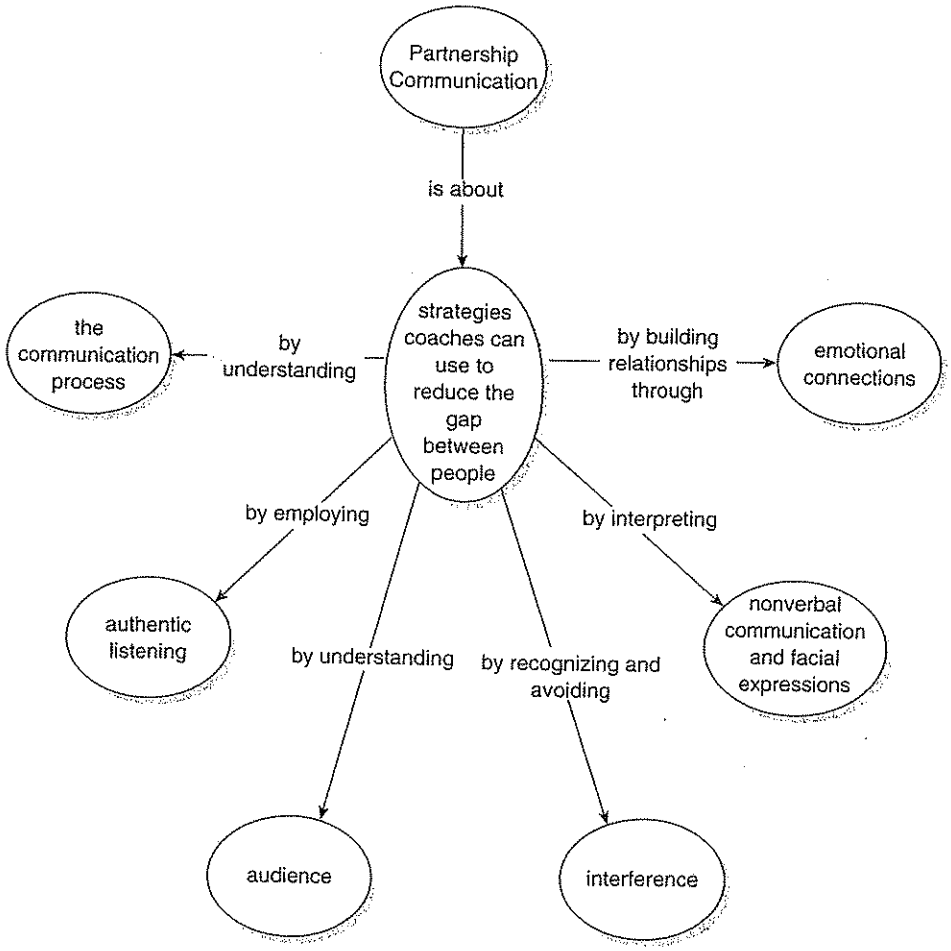
Patterson and colleagues' *Crucial Conversations* (2002), Stone and colleagues' *Difficult Conversations* (1999), and Scott's *Fierce Conversations* (2002) introduce several communication strategies that enhance our ability to get around interference and deal directly with the most important issues. Stone and colleagues provide an especially helpful description of different types of difficult conversations that can very quickly disrupt our efforts at communication.

Paul Ekman's *Emotions Revealed* (2003) offers a thorough, well-researched discussion of facial expressions, what they mean, what they reveal about us, and what they can tell us about those with whom we are communicating.

Tony Jeary, who has written *Life Is a Series of Presentations* (2004), is a kind of modern-day Dale Carnegie, offering many practical tips on how to successfully deliver the many presentations we give each day—whether they are to an audience of thousands or to our 3-year-old son. The original Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936) may seem a little dated, but it remains, in my opinion, a tremendously valuable work for anyone working with people—and that is pretty much anyone.

TO SUM UP

- The communication process involves a speaker, with a message, who tries to penetrate interference to communicate with an audience, who receives a perceived message, and whose reactions to the message function as feedback for the speaker.
- Effective communicators start by trying to understand their audience, and they shape their messages so that it is easier for their audience to perceive them.
- An authentic desire to listen to others may be our most important communication skill.
- How well a person connects or fails to connect emotionally with others profoundly affects the quality of relationships that person experiences. John Gottman refers to the essential constituent of emotional connection as a bid; people turn toward, turn away from, or turn against bids.
- Our personal stories, and the stories held by those with whom we communicate, can block our ability to build emotional connections and to communicate effectively.
- If we take a partnership approach, we frequently find it much easier to communicate transparently with others.
- ICs make the world safer for more meaningful communication, one conversation at a time.



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