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For holiday harmony, first try fine-tuning your listening skills

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P-I REPORTER

Want to be heard?

Try being quiet.

This is some of the advice Susan and Peter Glaser dole out as professors of communication at the University of Oregon, and as consultants who work with companies and organizations to improve communication. Married 35 years, the doctors Glaser are the authors of "Be Quiet, Be Heard: The Paradox of Persuasion" (Communication Solutions Publishing).

We met with the Glasers, who were in town recently to give a leadership seminar at Microsoft, and talked about how to navigate thorny interactions with others during the holidays, when getting together can translate to family stress and spiteful potshots.

Seattle P-I: We hear so much about family strife and miscommunication during the holidays. Is it really out there or is this an urban legend?

Susan Glaser: I have been amazed. We interview people at our workshops all over the country. We said we were thinking of doing a piece on communication breakdowns at holidays and we were just barraged. I mean barraged. People were standing in line to tell us their stories.

Peter Glaser: We'd leave and say we're so lucky because we don't have these problems.

Susan Glaser: One that's really common is how you're going to share the (adult) kids, and whose house you're going to go to and who's going to be invited. Another is that, for grown-up children, the holidays are exhausting because they're constantly going from place to place. And, often, all they want is to stay in their own place.

P-I: You both advocate that people openly invite others to share their criticisms, something few people really want to hear. Why is that important?

S.G.: When you invite criticism, you think it would be overwhelming and incapacitating. But, instead, because of the real message it's sending -- which is I care so deeply about what you think that I'm open to you right now -- it really has a much more bonding and binding effect.

P.G.: It's changing the dance completely. And it's very hard for Uncle Charlie or any other human to keep pounding you when you're actually pulling out the details and finding points of agreement.

P-I: You say one of the big keys to good communication and influencing others is serious listening. Why?

P.G.: There's attraction research -- the study of what causes people to like one another -- and the No. 1 finding is that we like people who listen to us. We seek them out. And we try to avoid people who seem to not care about what we say. ... In 460 B.C. Aristotle said it this way: "The fool persuades me with his reasons; the wise man persuades me with my own." Listening provides you with information that you need to have influence.

S.G.: It is only when people feel heard that they will consider listening to another point of view. That is so different from how people argue with each other -- it's point/counterpoint, point/counterpoint. And the reason people do that is they don't think you get it. So they say it again and again, and then louder. But if you prove to me that you get it, I can stop talking and I can start listening to you, because I feel heard and understood.

P-I: You say that paraphrasing what others just said is important but perilous.

P.G.: Paraphrasing sounds so phony because people do it so poorly. For example, people say, "So, what I hear you saying is ..." And, you just want to bop them on the head -- it's like they're saying to you, "I'm using a technique on you right now." We don't like being techniqued. We resist people who do that. Or, people undershoot the emotional intensity. It's like if someone says, "I can't believe you did that!!!" And you say, "So, you're a little upset." That infuriates people.

P-I: Surely, your set of guidelines doesn't work on everyone.

P.G.: You're never going to win all the people all the time.

S.G.: But you're going to improve your batting average. ... People ask, well, what if someone uses this for all the wrong purposes, which clearly can be done. I mean, there's Martin Luther King Jr. and there's Adolf Hitler, and they both had impact on their universe.

HOLIDAY HARMONY

Some tips on maintaining sanity at family gatherings during the holidays:

- Really listen to people. Try a three-second pause and ponder to really hear what the person is saying. "In that moment, you're thinking, 'How is this person desperately trying to get through to me?' instead of 'How am I going to respond and make myself right and them wrong?'" Susan Glaser said.
 - Paraphrase the other person so she knows you understand her, but avoid the dreaded, "So, you're saying that ..." or "What I'm hearing is ..." And, make sure your response reflects the emotional intensity of the speaker.
 - Avoid communication killers such as "You always ..." or "You never ..." or "Yeah, we've heard that one before."
 - Own your part of the problem, or acknowledge how you contributed to the situation. That helps deflate anger. "If I can take personal accountability for a piece of it, that's huge," Susan Glaser said. Then work together on what to do about it.
 - Embrace criticism and agree with the facts or ask for more information. Tell the person that you understand how he or she came to feel that way. That shows that you value his or her opinion, even if it's harsh or negative. For example, if someone says, "Wow, you've gained weight since last year," or offers a backhanded compliment such as, "The turkey is less dry this year," act as if he meant it in the best way possible, even if he says the same thing year after year. And deliver your response without sarcasm (yes, that can be difficult). You might say you're so glad he noticed that the turkey is better or that you're moved that he cares enough about you to notice your weight fluctuation.
 - Raise delicate issues by having a private conversation that avoids accusatory words. Let the person know what's not working or what sort of change you want. Then develop a solution together that works for both of you. For example, rather than saying: "You never help at our Christmas party," try, "I'm really overwhelmed preparing for this and it would really help if you could lend a hand."
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