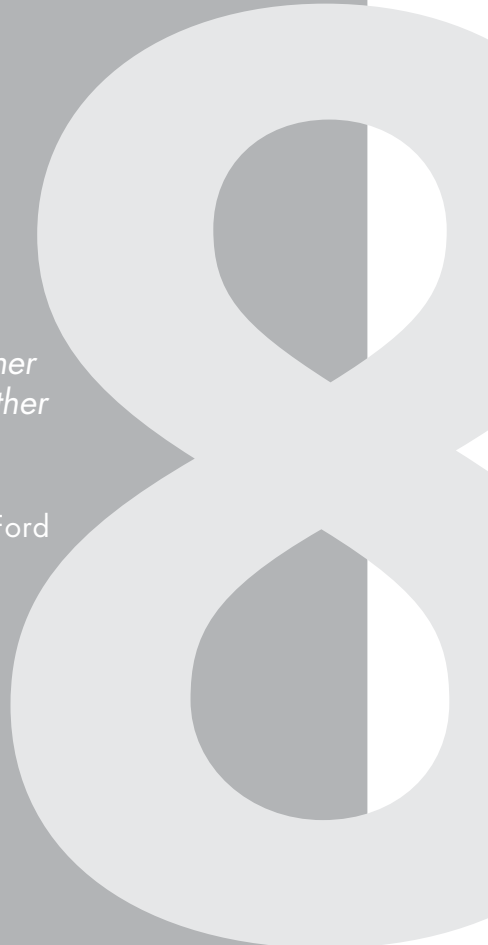# COMMUNICATING IN TEAMS

"Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success."

Henry Ford

8

If you have started using the techniques we have discussed so far, such as listening more actively, developing your consistency and credibility, thinking through your message and expressing it clearly, asserting yourself appropriately and respecting others, it's very likely that you are already feeling the teambuilding effects of better communication. If you can continue to lead by example, the people you work with may be picking up some of your new techniques as well (although don't be surprised if some of them don't even notice!)

Everyone's on the team

In reality, all communication at work is teamwork. Even if you are just bringing someone from another department up to date on your own department's activities, you're acting as a member of the team. A lot has been said and written about the importance of transparency in business so that both investors and clients can trust the organisations with which they are involved. Transparency *within* the organisation is equally important.

'Silo' mentality

Many organisations suffer from what's known as 'silo' behaviour. Each department functions as a singular unit, keeping all their business and information in their own storage silo or tower, protecting their territory, rebuffing outsiders. When the ones seen as 'outsiders' are in fact insiders, the company as a whole — as well as the individuals involved — can only suffer.

This sort of thing regularly happens between sales and accounts departments, accounts and creative departments, front and back offices, and any number of other departments that differ in philosophy and therefore in approach. Managing this problem and improving the situation takes time and effort, and above all takes communication. Everyone involved must be persuaded that supporting each other's efforts is, by its nature, a win-win situation.

Fast Fact

Teams comprise many different personalities. Getting them to work together effectively is not easy, but it is essential to organisational health and prosperity.

The 3 C's of effective teamwork

When lots of people come together, effective *communication* is one thing, but it can so easily go wrong if there is no *co-operation*. Once everyone starts working together towards common goals that are understood and appreciated by all, there can be *collaboration*. Collaboration means a true group effort.

Naturally it's best if such a collaborative approach can be incorporated into the entire organisation's culture, and this requires that people at all levels agree. It doesn't mean, however, that individuals can't make a significant difference by improving their day-to-day communication and leading by example. Absolutely they can!

Danger Zone

Watch out for thinking that your work will be easier if you keep what you're doing to yourself. People will help you if you are willing to help them.

Collaborative teamwork is helped along by a number of things, including:

• **Willingness on the part of each team member.** People who don't want to be involved are obstacles to progress.

• **A working environment that allows the team the freedom to develop ideas and plans without unreasonable limitations.** Teams need time, space and resources.

• **Clear responsibilities for, and expectations of, the team and its members.** Confusion leads to resentment.

Fast Fact

Remember, the 3 C's of effective teamwork are:

Communication

+

Co-operation

=

Collaboration

Communicating from the start

The common denominator for all of these requirements is, of course, communication. It's not enough to sign on and get to work. Each team member must understand the reason the team has been put together and the role they are expected to play in it. This must be communicated to them, and things will progress most smoothly if they each express their understanding of the situation once it has been laid out.

It's not helpful to have meetings where people are wondering what they're doing there in the first place! Start using the technique of paraphrasing, and encourage others to do so, right from the very beginning of the team effort ("So what you're saying I need to do is…", "Do you mean that…", "Let me make sure I understand the process…", etc). This will help avoid misunderstandings and develop a common goal.

The rules of the game

If we asked you to come up with a list of what type of communication you believe works best for teams, you would probably mention characteristics like openness, clarity, and mutual respect, among others. Well, why not have this type of communication be the rule, rather than merely an ideal? Developing guidelines for communication in your team will lead to more effective meetings because people will be encouraged to behave to a common standard, agreed by the group. These guidelines can be as broad or as specific as you see fit, although we believe it really pays to be concrete so that they aren't open to highly different interpretations, which could lead to more confusion rather than less. Let's look at some examples here.

For team meetings you might want to suggest the following:

- Have a clear agenda, communicated to the team before the meeting.

- Be on time.

- Silence mobile phones and only use laptops for meeting purposes, not to work while others are talking.

- Listen actively and respectfully, avoiding interruptions.

- Speak clearly, in a structured manner (unless brainstorming, when stream-of-consciousness can work just fine).

- Appoint someone (different each time) to give a summary of each meeting and its outcome at the end, for a common take-away.

For written communication, guidelines like these can be helpful:

- Structure e-mails for maximum clarity (for very helpful tips on how to do this, see Shirley's book in the Success Skills series, *E-mail Etiquette*).

- Copy all team members on all team-related e-mails. This will keep activities transparent and avoid confusion, and you will not have to repeat yourself.

- Don't always use e-mail. Maintain the flow of communication by speaking face to face as often as possible!

Help yourself by helping others

Beyond developing guidelines for meetings and e-mails, you may also encourage an overall guideline for behaviour, one that is the hallmark of high-performing teams (as opposed to mere work units). This is one that says that in order for the team to succeed, *everyone involved must have the success of everyone else at heart.*

We so often forget that we can help meet our own objectives by helping our teammates meet theirs. People worry that if they help others, they will be overwhelmed by the amount of work this generates, so that even within

small teams you have silos developing. What open, helpful behaviour often generates, however, is an abundance of good feeling within the team, of greater willingness, and a reduction in stress levels. If each team member endeavours to make the rest of the team look good, then the team will absolutely look good. Encourage this attitude in the group. Notice how much happier people are to come to meetings and to participate positively and respectfully. Also notice how the quality not only of the teamwork but also of the output improves.

Positive thinking and productivity

Silo behaviour is protective behaviour, and protective behaviour is by its nature negative. When people are protective, they are assuming that collaborating would be threatening in some way. Information stops flowing. But information is power, and an organisation without a flow of information is a weak one.

Fast Fact

Our brains function more creatively when we are thinking positively. 'No' is the least creative word in any language.

In order for work to flow smoothly, then, people must have a positive view of the benefits of engaging with each other, as well as a positive view of the situations they find themselves in. This doesn't mean that you all have to like each other, and it doesn't mean that you have to pretend that a crisis isn't happening. What it does mean is that you stay positive about your involvement and your ability to make something of it. You can't manage what you don't accept, and rejecting a situation is very uncreative. Morale suffers. Business stagnates.

Try This

This is an improvisation game called 'That's Great'. In it, each group of four people gets one chair, and the person in the chair is the CEO, who decides on the type of company it is. The remaining three players are employees of this company, and have to come up with ideas for the worst things they can imagine could happen to that type of company. So for example if the CEO says they are a noodle company, one of the other players can say, "Boss! Boss! It's terrible! The government has just outlawed anything that's long and thin!"

No matter what the boss feels at this point, he/she must begin by saying "That's great!" and must proceed to explain why this is a wonderful thing for the company. The boss might respond with, "That's great! We know that parents will spend almost any amount on their kids these days. This will push us into noodles shaped like animals and sports cars for the kiddy market. Fantastic!" Then the CEO fields the second problem, and the third, after which one of the other players takes the seat, becomes CEO, decides what type of company they run, and off they go again.

Again, the point of such an exercise is not to tell you to imagine that all apparently bad things are good, but rather to encourage you to consider how problems may be opportunities. Playing this game will show you just how easy it is to react negatively to a situation without really considering it from all sides. As you play it, listen to the voice in your head. Maybe it is telling you, "This is impossible! I can't use this problem!" If this happens, try to override the voice with the enthusiasm of your "That's great!" and you will see how this frees you to be more creative. This in turn will help you have more confidence in your ideas.

Aha! Moment

My brain can grapple with any problem if I can just stop worrying and get out of its way.

The positive role of negative thinking

In most groups there are people who take a negative stance. They can be extremely hard to work with, as it feels like they are highly critical, or that they constantly need to limit the ideas of others. While we encourage everyone to develop their positive thinking in order to use more of their brains and be more solution-oriented, we also want to make sure that negative thinking gets a bit of respect.

It's all about timing. Positive thinking has its place, and is supremely helpful in communication. Negative thinking also has its place, and critics play an important role in any process. The key is to make sure that positive thinking and negative thinking are used at the right time. Groups can avoid the limiting, often upsetting effect of negative thinkers simply by making sure that they understand the appropriate time and place for their comments. Criticism in itself is not bad. It is feedback. It is important. Ideas must be criticised in order to test their strength. However, just as with most other forms of communication, criticism must be voiced at the right time to be useful.

Teams can choose when this time is. By setting guidelines that prohibit interruption when someone is speaking during a meeting, you will avoid a

lot of the negative effects of criticism. We largely interrupt when we don't agree. Think about your meetings. Don't most interruptions begin with the word 'But'? Give people the chance to get to the end of their idea or their message.

Guidelines for responding to ideas can also be encouraged, for example by indicating the value of highlighting what is useful in the idea offered before pointing out its weaknesses.

Myth Buster

We waste time by listening to ideas that have no value.

Value is subjective. Be careful not to judge an idea too soon, because someone else on the team may be able to see the importance of it in a way that isn't immediately obvious to you.

Another very effective technique that teams can use is to delay criticism until as many thoughts have been put out on the table as possible. People are more likely to feel safe and supported when offering their ideas if that is the only type of communication that is allowed. This is particularly true at the brainstorming stage of any team effort. If critics jump in too fast, others will be less willing to offer ideas, and both morale and productivity will suffer.

Try This

During a brainstorming meeting, assign a certain amount of time exclusively for the offering of ideas. Make sure everything gets written down on a flipchart, or on flipchart paper on the table, so that nothing gets lost. Don't allow any criticism of ideas during the brainstorming time, insisting that everyone imagine that there are no limits on what can happen. Forget about budgets or time constraints, since thinking about these will reduce creativity, as well as fun! Allow ideas to flow and to grow.

Once everyone has been able to participate freely, and only then, start taking a critical look at what's on the paper, so that you can choose the strongest and most practical ideas from the collection. But don't throw away the others! They might be useful at another time.

Respecting the power of positive thinking, as well as the importance of more critical thought, will boost morale and help to bind the team together. Agreeing on guidelines that facilitate various ways of thinking, at the right time and place, and sticking to these guidelines, will turn the pain of meetings into pleasure.

Star Tips for improving team communication

1. Strive for an open flow of communication in the organisation. 'Silo' behaviour is very dangerous.

2. Start out the way you want to continue — by making sure the whole team has a very clear understanding of the common goals.

3. Ensure effective guidelines are set down for team behaviour, both spoken and written. This is invaluable in maintaining cohesion.

4. Encourage positive thinking in the team. Many people react negatively to problems. Positive thinking will lead to higher morale and more creative solutions.

5. Remember that critical or negative thinkers have an important role to play in teams. The key is to make sure they play this role at the right time.

6. Encourage freedom to develop ideas by ensuring the environment is conducive to creative thought.

7. Help others and you will be helping yourself. Teamwork is not easy, but it is essential for the success of every organisation.

8. Make sure all team members feel appreciated and that their opinions are valued.

9. Encourage regular team talks to provide feedback and motivation.

10. Deal with conflict between team members immediately and positively. (Chapter 10 will tell you more about coping with conflict.)

Creating Positive Communication with Yourself

> *You will talk and listen to yourself more than anyone else in your lifetime. What will your conversations be like?*
>
> **—Joy Browne**

Carlos looked tired and defeated as he sat in my office. He was currently enrolled in my public speaking class and had come to tell me he was dropping the course.

"We haven't even given our first speech, Carlos," I said.

"I know, but I guess I'm just freaked out about the whole thing."

"Are you concerned about your speech next week?"

"I guess," he said. "I just can't sleep at night since I started the class. I keep worrying about the speech."

"What kinds of things do you worry about?"

"I don't know. I'm just worried."

"No, really, what specifically do you see happening? What things do you hear yourself saying or thinking?"

"I'm thinking I'll make a mistake or forget what I'm supposed to say," Carlos said after a long pause. "They'll think I'm stupid."

WHAT DO YOU SAY TO YOURSELF?

No other individual will communicate with you more than you. What kinds of things do you say to yourself when you are facing a difficult decision, a troubling situation, or even the prospects of giving a speech? How do you talk to yourself?

19

If you are like most people, you give yourself a great deal of negative messages about what you are capable of accomplishing, what the future holds, and who you are. Shad Helmstetter in is book *What to Say When You Talk to Your Self* presents recent research suggesting that "77% of what we think is negative, counterproductive, and works against us." Well, the percentage of your negative thinking might not be that high, but each of us experiences moments of self-criticism, doubt, and worry many times a day.

Like Carlos, you and I are occasionally haunted by visions or voices in the dead of night. We see images that worry or frighten us. We tell ourselves things that erode our confidence, dampen our spirit, and darken our future. Like some form of silent torture, these images and thoughts keep piercing our minds, often making us want to escape, run away, or drop a course.

Yet when these visions or thoughts invade our serenity, most of us do nothing. Oh, we might attempt to wish them away, drink them away, or even drop a class or two. But we rarely confront or address them in any direct and constructive fashion. We toss and turn in the darkness and remain victims to their taunting. However, we can be more creative and dance with our demons in a new way.

CREATING NEW MESSAGES TO YOURSELF

One positive way you can deal with any negative thoughts is to use a technique called "giving equal time to the opposite." Normally when we experience a negative thought or disturbing image, we tend to remain focused on it or ruminate minute after minute.

Turn on your creativity and learn the craft of knowing how to open your heart. There's a light inside you.
—JUDITH JAMISON

Well, if we were to add up the minutes spent with this thought or image, the time would be considerable. To make matters worse, the longer we stay with the negative thought or image, the more anxious, worried, and terrified we become and we have created our own individual pathway to hell. Somehow we need to return home to our center, our quiet, our calmness.

"Giving equal time to the opposite" is an effective technique in bringing us back, not just to where we were before the worrying began, but often to a better place. It provides a more positive and healthy way of regarding ourselves.

The technique is simple. Fold a piece of lined binder paper in half lengthwise. On the top of the left column, mark a minus sign (–), and on the top of the right column, mark a plus sign (+). Whenever you experience a negative thought or image about a specific topic or issue, write down the negative statement or sketch a simple drawing of the negative vision you are experiencing in the left column

and indicate the number of minutes you have spent with it. For instance, Carlos wrote, "I'll forget what I'm supposed to say. = 2 minutes of worry time," and he sketched out a stick figure drawing of himself looking worried.

His task in the "giving equal time to the opposite" technique is to spend an equal amount of time with the direct opposite thought and drawing. So, Carlos wrote, "I will remember my speech = 2 minutes of positive talk time," and sketched a second stick figure drawing of him smiling. For the next two minutes, he repeated the positive sentence "I will remember my speech," over and over, while looking at the drawing of him smiling while delivering his speech.

This technique may seem simplistic and even a little silly, but it forces you to consciously break your negative thought pattern and replace it with its opposite. You create the polar opposite of what you've been experiencing. From hell to paradise. It not only makes you aware of the amount of time you spend with these negative messages, it requires that you give equal time to the opposite, positive messages. This helps you to bring back balance.

My students and clients often experience great success with the "giving equal time to the opposite" technique and usually report three responses. First, they identified the specific thoughts and images that were actually bothering them. Many times, we feel upset, anxious, or worried about something, but we don't label it or give it a picture. Once a negative thought or image is named or identified, we can begin to work with it more constructively.

Second, they report that actually "giving equal time to the opposite" for a few minutes brings negative rumination to a stop, even if it is only for a few minutes. Many students and clients regard this technique as silly and impractical, but even they admit that it is difficult to hold two opposing thoughts or images simultaneously, so the technique provides some relief. Whether or not they realize it, they have created new pathways to solving old problems.

Finally, after minimal practice (usually a few attempts), they report that they can perform the "giving equal time to the opposite" technique without paper and pencil. They can use this new awareness of consciously introducing and holding more positive thoughts and images in their minds whenever those negative demons return. When you first try this technique, it may seem awkward or difficult, but keep at it. It's worth your effort.

By the way, Carlos didn't drop his public speaking course. Although initially skeptical and reluctant to try the "giving equal time to the opposite" technique, he found it helpful, not only in public speaking, but also in his social life and at work. At the end of the course, Carlos visited me again in my office and announced proudly that he had just been offered a promotion at work.

"Well, your hard work really paid off," I congratulated him.

"Hard work, and my pep talks to myself," he added. "Since taking your class, I listen to what I say to myself. If it's negative, I give 'equal time to the opposite'. Even when I don't believe what I'm saying, it makes a difference. At least I'm not

spending the time worrying about so much negative stuff. I'm more positive now."

Creating new messages can help you change your self-concept and your life, just like Carlos did.

YOUR SELF-CONCEPT

Your **self-concept** is the subjective view you hold of yourself as a person. It is the sum total of your perceptions regarding your physical features, cultural background, emotional states, roles, talents, beliefs, values, likes and dislikes, achievements, and failures. The primary determinant of whom you will talk with, what you will say, how you will listen, and how you will interact is your self-concept. There are two primary ways of regarding who you are—public self-concept and private self-concept.

Public Self-Concept

Our **public self-concept** is on display when we are in public or for others to see. Our public self can find its origins in the professional roles we assume. Our professions as an engineer, teacher, doctor, or prison guard can affect how we view ourselves. Often, we internalize our professional roles to the extent that we continue to function in them outside their original context. A marine drill sergeant may treat his children like boot camp recruits. A teacher may lecture her parents as if they were students. A therapist may treat her friends like clients.

Private Self-Concept

Our **private self-concept** is much more personal than our public self-concept. It can be made up of our personal psychological traits, personal beliefs and values, and most frequent emotional states. This is the self-concept that is not known to our casual acquaintances and sometimes even close friends. Many times our private self-concept consists of those aspects or characteristics that we feel distinguish us from others. For instance, ethnicity might be a primary factor in your private self-concept if everyone else at work is of a different race, as would your being quiet and introspective if others around you are loud and boisterous. Both our public and private self-concepts help determine who we think we are and thus how we communicate with others.

HOW SELF-CONCEPT DEVELOPS

We are not born with a self-concept, but the creation and development of who we are begins as soon as we take our first breaths and continues until the moment we die. There are two primary ways that our self-concept develops—reflected appraisal and social comparison.

Reflected Appraisal

Reflected appraisal means that our self-concept matches what others see in us. As early as 1902, psychologist Charles Cooley in his book *Human Nature and the Social Order* suggested that we mirror the beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions that others communicate to us in their behavior. This reflected appraisal begins at birth by the manner in which we are treated as infants. The nonverbal behaviors of our parents, siblings, extended family members, and other caregivers can create strong internal impressions on us. The manner in which we are held, fed, played with, and talked to are a few of the many ways the perceptions of others can be internalized during infancy and last a lifetime.

Before long, the content of verbal messages is added to the thousands of nonverbal messages we receive as significant people in our lives tell us who we are. How we see ourselves as lovable, valuable, and capable to a great extent is determined by the messages from these individuals.

This process of reflected appraisal continues throughout our lives. The perceptions, expectations, and evaluations of our teachers, coaches, family, and friends continue to shape our notion of who we are and what we are capable of accomplishing. **Significant others**, those individuals in our lives to whom we assign great value, such as parents, siblings, romantic partners, and mentors, play an extremely important role in shaping our self-concept.

Social Comparison

Social comparison is how we evaluate ourselves when we compare ourselves with others. We accomplish this in two ways—by superior/inferior and same/different measurements.

By comparing ourselves with others we can often feel **superior or inferior** to others. When an exam is returned in class, we can feel inferior to the other students if we receive a low score and superior if we receive a high score. Perhaps the instructor announced that we received the highest mark on the exam and we were filled with pride. Feelings of superiority or inferiority when we compare ourselves to others in educational accomplishment, economic status, physical development, or spiritual awareness can affect our self-concept.

> *Every artist started out as a beginner. Your skill level right now doesn't matter. You'll learn.*
> —EDGAR WINTER

The second way we use social comparison is by deciding if we are the **same or different** as others. A man who enjoys music and spends his after-work hours practicing violin may view himself as being very different from the other men at work who lift weights at the gym or work on their cars. However, if that same man were employed as a musician with the city's symphony, he would most likely see himself as very similar to his colleagues and not feel out of place.

The reference groups, those people with whom we compare ourselves as superior/inferior and same/different, can have a profound influence on our self-concept. This leads us to the primary reason why "birds of a feather flock together." We have a tendency to associate with those who are equal and similar to us. It may be an unconscious way we keep our psychological equilibrium.

Even though our self-concept begins developing at our earliest interactions with our primary caregivers and continues until the moment of death, we don't always have a conscious knowledge of and familiarity with our perceptions of self. Mostly we have some vague, abstract notion of who we are and confront the components of our self-concept only when faced with a personal crisis or a life transition. It is during those times we are invited to consider and create a much healthier, flexible, and positive self-concept.

LISTENING CREATIVELY TO YOURSELF

We are rarely alone in this culture. When we do spend a moment or two in quiet reflection, we often judge the thoughts and feelings that arise. We don't measure up to the standards established by our parents, the magazine or television advertisements, and the culture in general. It is not surprising then that we often prefer to listen to the sounds of distraction rather than consider carefully and respectfully the contents of our inner life. So we create a flood of external sights and sounds to drown the internal music of our souls.

We need a new way to listen to ourselves that is less critical, less judgmental, and more open to simply observing and maybe even enjoying what we chance upon as we survey our self-perceptions. We need to create an attitude of curiosity, understanding, and, yes, even appreciation for ourselves.

Self-Concept Inventory

To begin the process of creatively listening to yourself, complete the following statements regarding who you think you are. Don't think too much. Don't judge or evaluate. Just jot down your first impression or thought for each item and enjoy the process of seeing who you are.

1. I am _____ .
2. I am _____ .
3. I am _____ .
4. I believe _____ .
5. I think _____ .
6. I am successful at _____ .
7. I enjoy _____ .
8. I like _____ .

  9. My strongest personality trait is _____.
10. People like my _____.
11. My body is _____.
12. Physically I enjoy _____.
13. Mentally I enjoy _____.
14. Spiritually I enjoy _____.
15. Most people think I am _____.
16. My parents think I am _____.
17. My siblings think I am _____.
18. When I'm alone I _____.
19. When I talk to myself I _____.
20. As a friend I _____.
21. As a listener I _____.
22. When I am in conflict with others I _____.
23. My family thinks I am _____.
24. In small groups I _____.
25. If I were asked to lead a group, I _____.
26. If I were asked to give a speech, I _____.
27. People of different cultures are _____.
28. My greatest weakness is _____.
29. I usually leave others feeling _____.
30. I want to be remembered as _____.

Review your responses to the thirty items and reflect on your thoughts and feelings. Did you learn anything new about yourself? Were you surprised by any of your responses? Did they provide insight into your current communication behavior? Which responses were you satisfied with? Which responses were you not satisfied with?

Be gentle on yourself as you consider your responses to these thirty items. There are hundreds of other traits, characteristics, skills, beliefs, and feelings that contribute to your self-concept. As your awareness of them increases, you will also increase the amount of sensitivity, care, and attention you give them. It is not necessary, initially, to judge, improve, or change those you don't like or are uncomfortable with. Instead, just notice them. After you become familiar and comfortable with them, you can create ways to change or replace them with more positive thoughts and images if you desire.

Improvement Inventory

List five communication behaviors, personal habits, personality characteristics, relationships, and anything else you can think of that you feel need

improvement. Solicit input from family and friends, coworkers and neighbors. Just the mere fact you would ask others for feedback will change your relationship with them.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

If you can admit you're not perfect and there are things you can improve, the criticism or threat of criticism from others will have less impact on you. Once you can freely admit to one weakness (or all five!), you may experience a new freedom that allows you to be more open to the communication and feedback of others.

Thanksgiving Inventory

List two things you are thankful for about your physical, psychological, and spiritual self. Choose conditions or attributes you already possess, not those you are striving or hoping to achieve.

1. I'm thankful for my (physical) _____.
2. I'm thankful for my (physical) _____.
3. I'm thankful for my (psychological) _____.
4. I'm thankful for my (psychological) _____.
5. I'm thankful for my (spiritual) _____.
6. I'm thankful for my (spiritual) _____.

Did you find this inventory easy or difficult? If you found it difficult, you may need to become aware of the many wonderful things that are already working in your life. One powerful way to create more contentment in your life is to simply become more aware of the many hundreds of things that you are currently blessed with physically, psychologically, and spiritually.

Six Months to Live Inventory

Write down five things you would like to do or accomplish if you discovered you had only six months to live. Assume you will experience no physical pain until the final day of life.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

    4. _____

    5. _____

Do any of your responses surprise you? How do you feel about your responses? Do your responses involve people, places, or things? Which item would you most want to accomplish before dying? If you were going to die in six months, how would that affect your communication with others?

Hopefully these inventories have encouraged you to reflect a little more on who you are and where you're headed. To create more positive communication with yourself, it's important to get to know yourself and how you'd like to change, improve, and grow.

Four Methods for Listening to Yourself

To get to know yourself more intimately, you may need to spend more time by yourself, free from the distractions and input of your family, friends, magazines, books, newspapers, television, computer, radio, and a myriad of other sources telling you who you should be and what you should do. Try one of the following four methods for listening to yourself.

Giving voice to your thoughts. Whenever you experience a recurring thought, especially negative ones, such as "I can't do this," "I shouldn't do that," "I have to do," "I'm no good," "I'll fail," and so on, you can "give it voice" by repeating the negative thought out loud to yourself, rather than experiencing it silently in your thinking. Don't shout or yell the statement. Anyone in the room might think you have gone off the deep end. Instead, repeat the negative thought softly yet audibly to yourself and label it as negative. For example, "I'm going to fail—I'm giving myself another negative thought," or "I can't complete the assignment—I'm giving myself another negative thought."

By saying the statement out loud and labeling the statement, you are making yourself aware of your negative message. Fritz Perls, the famous Gestalt therapist, believed that "Awareness is the first step to change." Well, this simple method of making your thoughts audible to yourself can be your first step to creating positive changes in your thinking.

Sitting in silence. This involves devoting ten minutes each day to sitting in a quiet place and doing nothing. Just close your eyes and listen to your breath. You are not to read, doodle on paper, meditate on a word or phrase, or even pray. If any thoughts or images come to your mind during the ten minutes, do not attempt to evaluate, change, or get rid of them. Just watch each thought or feeling float past your awareness. Like leaves floating past you on a stream, just observe them. No attachment. No desire. No effort. Just observe and listen to your breath. There is no performing, no attaining, or no striving. Carl Rogers once noted that, "It is only when we accept ourselves the way we are that we are

free to change." You deserve a ten-minute "sitting-in-silence" time each day, just to unplug from the rush and noise of your life and simply be silent, observant, and open.

Keeping a personal journal. At the end of the day, devote just five minutes before going to bed to personal journal writing. In your journal (any notebook will do), write down a sentence or brief paragraph describing your thoughts and feelings about yourself. Note any powerful or significant impressions, observations, or responses to your communication, interactions, or dealings with others or yourself. Do not judge your observations and comments. Just note them in your journal. Try to keep your entries brief and focused. Then, at the end of each week, review your journal entries and see if there are any important points, themes, or issues worth considering or exploring further. You will be surprised how recurring themes emerge or specific behaviors, thoughts, or feelings keep surfacing as you reflect on your journal entries.

Listening to your dreams. Most of us remember our sleeping dreams for a brief moment or two on waking, but the memory of them fades quickly. We usually do not attach too much importance, significance, or meaning to our dreams. But I think they can reveal much about our inner, unconscious self.

> *Man is above all,*
> *he who creates.*
> —ANTOINE DE
> SAINT-EXUPÉRY

By keeping a dream journal by your bedside and noting the content and emotions experienced in your dreams, you can expand and deepen your explorations of who you are. The purpose of recording your dreams is not necessarily to interpret or assign meaning, but rather to explore and expand your self-awareness. Many of your feelings, desires, and longings are censored by your conscious mind and require sleep and the process of dreaming to permit the parade of unconscious thoughts and images to come to the surface of your attention.

SPEAKING CREATIVELY TO YOURSELF

You may have discovered while listening to yourself that many negative, as well as positive, thoughts and ideas were swirling through your mind. The positive thoughts are fine. It's those negative thoughts that can often bring us down, interfere with our communication with others and ourselves, and in general, just make our lives miserable. Psychologist Albert Ellis in his book *New Guide to Rational Living* outlines the ten most troubling thoughts Americans have that make their lives unsatisfactory, frustrating, and depressing. He calls them our ten most irrational ideas. See if any of them are swimming around in that head of yours:

1. The idea that you should be liked/loved by everyone.
2. The idea that you should be competent, adequate, and achieving in all possible respects if you are to consider yourself worthwhile.
3. The idea that happiness is externally caused and people have little or no ability to control their sorrows and disturbances.
4. The idea that your past history is an all-important determinant to your present behavior and that because something once strongly affected your life, it should indefinitely have a similar effect.
5. The idea that there is only one right solution to a problem and it is catastrophic if this perfect solution is not found.
6. The idea that if something is or may be dangerous or fearsome, you should be terribly concerned about it and should keep dwelling on the possibility of its occurring.
7. The idea that certain people are wicked and they should always be severely blamed and punished for their villainy.
8. The idea that it is awful and catastrophic when things are not the way you would like them to be.
9. The idea that it is easier to avoid than to face certain life difficulties and self-responsibilities.
10. The idea that one should become quite upset over other people's problems and disturbances.

Ellis discovered that almost all of the psychological and emotional distress his clients were experiencing was based upon one or more of these ten irrational ideas. In fact, irrational ideas 1 and 2—the idea that one should be liked by everyone and the idea that one should be competent in all possible respects—accounted for almost 70 percent of his clients' presenting problems in therapy.

> *You create yourself by your thoughts.*
> —RAM DASS

To help his clients overcome these beliefs, he developed an approach to clinical psychology called Cognitive Restructuring Therapy. In this approach, irrational beliefs are identified, challenged by the therapist, and replaced with the opposite beliefs. Remember Carlos' "giving equal time to the opposite" as he confronted his public speaking fears? Well, that technique is based upon Cognitive Restructuring Therapy.

Maybe you've told yourself one or two of Ellis's ten irrational ideas. Maybe you believe one of those ideas is true for you. Well, if you do, you may want to reconsider that belief. It is not the purpose of this book to discuss Cognitive Restructuring Therapy in any detail, other than to suggest that you may want to substitute a different belief for the irrational one you are holding. Here are the

ten statements presented in their opposite form. Read the list and see if any of the ideas are helpful in creating new ways of talking to yourself.

1. *You don't have to be approved of by everyone. Not everyone has to like or love you.* It is irrational to strive for universal approval or affection. No one is liked, loved, or approved of by everyone. To strive to be approved of by everyone is not a desirable goal. People who try to win the approval of everyone often sacrifice their own principles, values, and happiness. As a result, they discover only unhappiness in their attempt to win the approval of others.

2. *You do not have to be perfect or competent in everything you do.* It is irrational to desire perfection in anything. No human being is perfect. It's also irrational to desire to be competent in everything you do. There will be some activities you will achieve competency, even mastery, but no human being is competent in everything. In fact, experiencing failure can be one of the best teachers you will ever have. Failure can teach you how to improve, what to change, and when to quit.

3. *Your happiness comes from within you and you can change your feelings by changing your thinking.* Your feelings are determined by your thinking, not by external events. You can change your feelings by changing your thinking. In fact, almost all the negative feelings you will experience can be modified or eliminated by seeing the truth of these ten beliefs.

4. *Your current behavior is not determined by the past.* Human beings can unlearn old behaviors and replace them with new behaviors. Although many habitual ways of behaving and thinking can be deeply rooted and difficult to change, they can be changed with concentrated effort and focused thinking.

5. *There can be many solutions to any given problem.* It's irrational to think there is only one solution to any problem. Most likely, there are a variety of ways to solve any problem. In systems theory, the notion of equifinality states that there exist many ways to solve any problem. When solving problems, don't be limited in your thinking. Use your imagination. Let your creativity soar!

6. *Don't worry.* It's irrational to worry and be overly concerned about every little thing that can go wrong in your life. The vast majority of the things you worry about during your lifetime will never come to pass. Much of your worry is borne from fatigue and loneliness. Get enough sleep, rest, and relaxation. Develop loving relationships. It is amazing how just being rested and enjoying the support and love from family and friends can erase much of what worries you.

7. *Most people are good at heart.* When things go wrong, we often respond by looking for someone to blame and punish. We often desire to vilify and demonize those we hold responsible for our sufferings. But very few people are totally hateful, mean, or evil. The vast majority of people are basically good, hardworking, honest folks. We need to see the good and the beauty in everyone, even those people who mistreat us. In the long run, the price of blaming, hating, or seeking revenge is too high.

8. *It's okay if you don't get your way.* One of the greatest lessons we learn in life is that we don't always get what we want. Thank goodness for that! Can you imagine if you got everything you ever wished for? You would be a gluttonous, wealthy, overindulged mess! We need to get beyond ourselves and begin to be aware of and responsive to the needs of those around us. In this life, we need to move from self to others. Don't get too hung up on what you want or what you desire. Learn to think of others too.

9. *It's better to face your problems and responsibilities than to avoid them.* It is irrational to avoid or deny actual problems or responsibilities facing you. Denial of problems that pose a threat to your safety or welfare is irrational. Physical illness, relationship conflicts, and emotional distress need to be acknowledged and addressed. Anything less will only amplify the problem. The same holds true for your responsibilities. You need to keep your promises, meet your legal obligations, and carry out your duties. To avoid or deny legitimate responsibilities will only cause pain, suffering, and punishment in the long run.

10. *Let others be responsible for themselves.* It is irrational to be overly concerned about the lives of other people. Human beings need to take responsibility for their own lives. We can be responsive to others, but not responsible for them. Each person needs to live his or her own life. With the exception of infants, young children, and the elderly, most people should make their own decisions and take care of themselves. Don't get enmeshed in the lives of other people. You've got enough to take care of with yourself. This doesn't give you license to be uncaring, detached, and self-centered. It means that you let people make their own mistakes, learn from them, and go about their lives independently of your overinvolvement. As an old saying goes, "Every time you help someone, you make them a little weaker, a little more dependent upon you." Let others be responsible for themselves.

These ten beliefs constitute a much more positive and healthy way of viewing yourself and others. You may find many of these beliefs helpful in talking to yourself in a more positive way. If you discover that an irrational belief is running

through your mind and causing you some distress or pain, try "giving equal time to the opposite." One of these rational beliefs may be what you need to create the beginning of a new way of thinking and behaving. Let these beliefs create a different, more positive you.

CREATING POSITIVE COMMUNICATION: THE S.E.L.F. T.A.L.K. TECHNIQUE

In addition to using these ten rational beliefs to create a healthier attitude, you can begin to counterbalance your negative thoughts with the S.E.L.F. T.A.L.K. Technique for creating more positive communication with yourself.

Each of these suggestions can help you create more positive messages to communicate to yourself and others. Your willingness to explore and experiment with even one of these eight suggestions will increase your ability to create messages that will enhance your communication.

See your put-downs

Recall that you cannot change what you cannot recognize. Learn to recognize the negative thoughts, images, and verbal statements you make to and about yourself. Use the four methods of listening creatively to yourself, which include giving voice to your thoughts, sitting in silence, personal journal writing, and listening to your dreams. Awareness is the first step to change.

Eliminate your put-downs

Block your put-downs and negative statements. When you verbally criticize yourself, eliminate or block the statement by placing your hand over your mouth. This may sound extreme, but by using a physical reminder, such as your hand, you improve your efforts at eliminating negative messages to yourself. It's almost as if your body is retraining itself to communicate in a new way. By employing a non-verbal channel of communication, such as your hand, you can actually change your verbal behavior.

List what's good about yourself

In your efforts to create more positive communication with yourself, take stock and reflect on all the good things about you. Get paper and pen and write a list of all the wonderful, positive, and beautiful things about yourself. This may feel awkward at first, but give yourself some time and keep your list going for a couple of days. As things come to you, add them to your list. You will be surprised how quickly your list will grow. Post the list on your bathroom mirror, refrigerator, or car dashboard where you can see it often. You deserve to be reminded

how wonderful you are. Many times, we don't compliment or encourage ourselves because we don't have anything positive to say. Your list can be a powerful reminder. Use it to your advantage.

Find what's good about others

One of the most effective ways to see what's good in yourself is by seeing the best in others. Sounds strange, but often when we look for the best in others and compliment them about specific behaviors, traits, or accomplishments, we begin to appreciate ourselves a little more too. Our perception of the world, including ourselves, shifts from the negative to the positive. You will also discover that as you compliment others, you will receive more compliments too. Compliments beget compliments!

Talk positively to yourself

Your positive self-talk can be expressed in a number of ways. It can be silent. When you want to counter a negative thought or image, such as "I'm so stupid for making a mistake," simply think its positive opposite, "It's okay if I make mistakes," after you've had the thought. Your positive self-talk can be audible by stating the positive message out loud. For instance, you can say to yourself, "I will be relaxed and calm during the interview," as you walk into the personnel office for a job interview. Written positive self-talk is effective because it utilizes visual communication. You can write yourself an encouraging letter, compose a positive statement on an index card, or simply scribble an uplifting word on the back of your hand to remind yourself of a positive trait or attribute.

Ask others for help

An enjoyable way to create more positive communication with yourself is to elicit the help of others. You can invite or ask a good friend or family member to participate in your positive self-communication program. The person can remind you when you say or do things that are self-critical, help you think of positive things to replace your negative thoughts and images, and point out some additional strengths you didn't know about. As artist Donna Sheeves recommends, "Invent your world, surround yourself with people who love you, who encourage you, who believe in you."

Learn to be human

One of the most important things you can keep foremost in your mind as you begin to communicate more positively with yourself is that you are human. You make mistakes. You are not supposed to be perfect. It is often our preoccupation with being perfect, being approved of by everyone, and being competent in everything we attempt that gets us in trouble. We're only human. We cannot be

perfect. Everyone isn't supposed to approve of us or even like us. We cannot possibly be good in everything we try.

Keep a record of your successes

The final suggestion for creating positive communication with yourself is to keep a record of your successes. It is not only important that you create more positive communication with yourself, it's beneficial to track your successes and victories so you can reinforce, remind, and celebrate your creative efforts.

Remember to listen to yourself and to use the S.E.L.F. T.A.L.K. Technique to create more positive communication with yourself. Your willingness and ability to create positive thoughts and images for yourself and others will greatly enhance your communication and relationships with others. Just like Carlos, you can create a positive message for yourself that will improve your life.

EXPLORING CREATIVE TASKS

1. List five things you would like to change or improve about your self-concept. Share your list with a close friend and ask him or her for feedback on your list. With your friend's help, brainstorm at least three different ways you can accomplish or make progress toward each of the five items you listed. What do you think of these suggestions? When would you like to begin?

2. For one day, write down all the negative self-talk messages you give yourself. Notice if there are any patterns or categories in your negative self-talk. What do you think of these messages? How do you feel about them? Which messages would you like to change? What would the new, more positive messages be?

3. Reread the ten irrational beliefs suggested by Albert Ellis. Select one of the irrational beliefs that you would like to change. Substitute the opposite, more positive belief presented in the second list of ten rational beliefs. Write this belief on two separate 3 x 5" cards and tape one to your car dashboard and the other to your bathroom mirror. Read these cards often during the day. After one week, has the statement created anything new in your thinking, feeling, or behaving?

4. For one week, use the S.E.L.F. T.A.L.K. Technique and notice how it changes your thoughts, images, and communication with yourself. Which S.E.L.F. T.A.L.K. suggestions seemed to be the most helpful or beneficial? Why?

EXPANDING YOUR CREATIVE THINKING

1. What would your life be like if you truly believed in all ten of Ellis's rational ideas? How do you think your communication behavior would change?

2. What do you think your self-concept will be like in five years? In ten years? What areas of improvement do you think you will experience? In what areas will you still have difficulty? How can you address those difficult areas?

3. What resources can you think of that could help you improve your self-concept and the ways you communicate with yourself? What experts, books, magazines, movies, or classes could contribute to improving how you see and feel about yourself?

4. What would be the most positive thing that could be said about your life if you were to die today? What would you want the most positive accomplishment of your life to be if you lived to age eighty-five? What specific activities would you have to be engaged in to accomplish this positive goal?