

# EXCISING OUR COMMUNICATION DEMONS

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*We pass the word around; we ponder how the case is put by different people, we read the poetry; we meditate over the literature; we play the music; we change our minds; we reach an understanding. Society evolves this way, not by shouting each other down, but by the unique capacity of individual human beings to comprehend each other.*

— *Lewis Thomas (1913-1993)*  
*Author and physician*

Communication is something that most of us take for granted. It seems like we've always known how to talk and we've always known how to listen. We can't remember a time when we were not able to do either. It's seems so simple. That's why we take it for granted.

But it's not as simple as it may appear. Communication is actually an incredibly complicated process that includes a *sender*, a *receiver*, and a *communication environment*.

Here's where it gets complicated. Both the *sender* (the person sending out the communication) and the *receiver* (the person listening to the communication) has his or her own personal physical and psychological history. In addition, the *communication environment*, the setting in which the communication is taking place, includes a variety of distorting, limiting, and distracting influences.

A sender transmits a message to a receiver in a particular environment. That message gets influenced by a host of factors from the time it starts out from the sender's brain to the time it is processed in the receiver's brain. At every point along the way, the message picks up a variety of *charges* (positive or negative meanings) that affect the way the message is received and interpreted by the receiver.

Let's see how this all works.

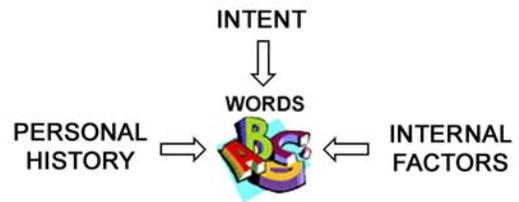
## The Sender



Suppose you and I are having a conversation. I have something I want you to hear. I start with an image or an idea in my mind. My first challenge is converting that image or idea into a verbal message so I can send it to you. I do this by “encoding” it into some symbols called “words,” which I have learned over the course of my life.

Here is where the “charges” enter the process. Each word I choose picks up a charge from three places: my *personal history*, the *intent* I have in communicating my idea, and *internal factors*.

As I am exposed to and use words throughout my *personal history*, my words pick up various shades of meaning, according to what is happening when I use them. Some have become charged with negative meaning, others have become charged with positive meaning, and still others have remained neutral. It’s easy to see that my message to you is being influenced even before it begins!



My selection of words is further influenced by my *intent*. Why did I decide to say something to you? No matter how quickly I choose words for sending an image or an idea, most of those words are carefully selected according to my reason—my motivation—for saying them to you. Maybe I am trying to force you to do something, so I choose threatening phrases. Or maybe I am trying to please you, so I choose sentences that are designed to make you feel good. Maybe I simply want to convey information to you, so I choose words that I believe will most objectively do that. My *intent* is a subtle but powerful influence on my communication.

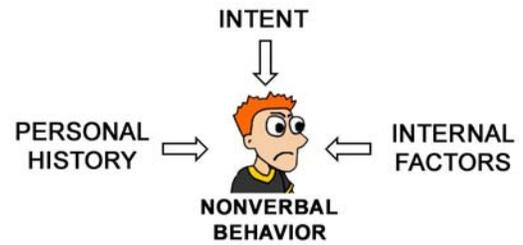
To make it even more complicated, I may not even be fully aware of the *why* behind what I am saying. For example, I could be feeling defensive and not even realize that I am “stacking the deck” with negative charges.

Finally, *internal factors* influence the charges of the words I use. I may be overtired or hungry. I may be worried and tense. Maybe I just had an angry conversation with someone else and I’m still fuming. Perhaps I am angry with you or angry with myself. Or maybe I feel dumb compared to you.

Now that I’ve selected my words, I am ready to communicate them to you. But selecting words is not the only way I communicate. My whole body gets into the act. The “charges” accompanying my message stimulate *nonverbal* behaviors—body behaviors that accompany the words I use.

Here again, my *personal history*, my *intent*, and *internal factors* enter the picture, influencing my *nonverbal* behaviors.

Over the years of my *personal history*, I've developed my own communication habits in a variety of situations. I may speak loudly or softly. I may have or not have eye contact with you. I may frown or grimace. I may speak hesitatingly. I may mumble. And so on.



My *intent* in communicating a message to you also influences my nonverbal behaviors. Without even being aware of it, I may frown, I may smile, or I may scowl at you. I may hold my body in a tight stance. I may speak to you in a whining or sarcastic tone of voice.

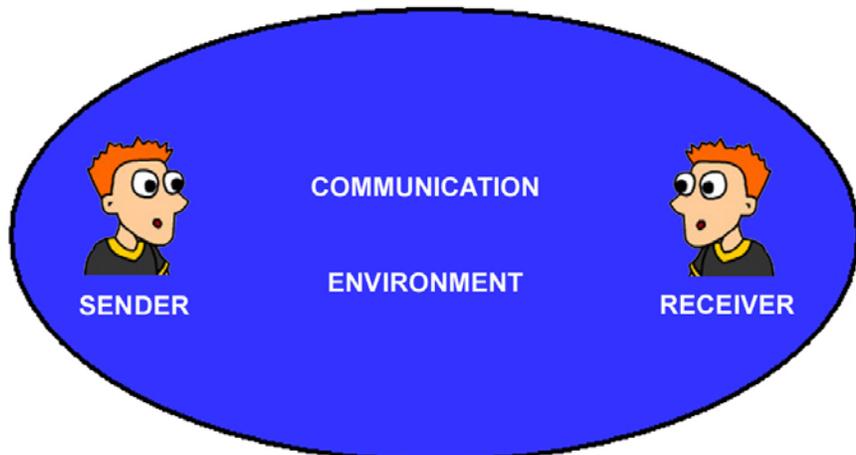
*Internal factors* further influence how I send my message to you. I will probably have less patience when I am tired or stressed. An intent to defend myself against you will affect my tone of voice, my body posture, and the gestures I use.

These nonverbal transmissions are automatic. They are reflexes that we learn—maybe even before we learn to speak. Most of the time, we do not even know we are exhibiting them.

## The Communication Environment

As I send you a message, still another source of influence shapes my communication—our *communication environment*

It may be too hot in the room. Maybe other people around us are making a lot of disturbing noise. Perhaps you are wearing what I perceive to be an ugly shirt which distracts me. Maybe you are looking around at other people as we talk. You may simply look at your watch. Or you could have a frown on your face, or a scowl, or a smile. And so on. All of these things will affect my communication behaviors.



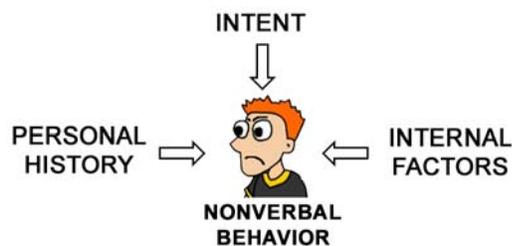
## The Receiver

My communication is now coming your way. The way *you* perceive our communication environment further alters my message. While noises may disturb me, they may not influence you at all because you were raised with five brothers and three sisters. As a native of New Mexico, a hot day might not bother me at all, but as a recent emigrant from Minnesota, that same hot day may put you in a very negative mood.



Now we get even more complicated. Just as my message picked up numerous charges as I formed and delivered it to you, *you* add charges as you receive and interpret it. You receive my words and nonverbal actions with all of their accumulated charges. You then magnify, minimize, or even change those charges, depending on what's going on inside of you and what you see going on around you.

The same sources that influenced how I sent my message to you influence the way you receive my message—*your* personal history, *your* perception of my intent, and *your* internal factors.



Your *personal history* receiving messages will influence how you hear what I am communicating. For example, I may speak with a sarcastic tone of

voice and you may be comfortable with sarcasm because it was the most popular style of humor in your household as you were growing up. My sarcasm therefore does not bother you. On the other hand, if an angry parent used sarcasm frequently during your childhood, my use of it may threaten you.

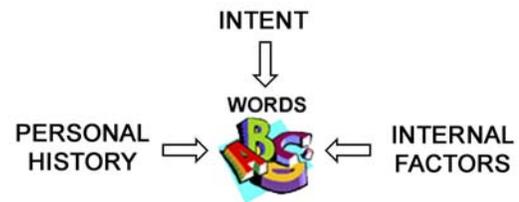
Your perception of my *intent* in communicating with you adds more charges to the mixture. Are you listening to me cautiously because you think I am not trustworthy? Do you think I am trying to take advantage of you? Are you becoming defensive because you believe I have set out to attack you?

As you receive my message, *internal factors* will influence you. What you are currently thinking and feeling or how you perceive what is happening around us will affect the way you “filter” what I say. These may alter the charges on my message. Maybe you would like to be somewhere else and you feel impatient. Anything I have to say picks up a negative charge. Maybe you are hungry, you have a hard time paying attention to me and you actually miss a charge I deliberately aimed at you!

As you receive my message, your brain begins the work of interpreting what I am communicating.

That interpretation is again influenced by the same three sources—your *personal history*, your *intent*, and *internal factors*.

You have your own *personal history* with the words you hear me saying. As you've used those words over the years, they have picked up various shades of meaning, according to what is happening when you used them. Like me, some are now charged with negative meaning, others with positive meaning, and still others are neutral. Those charges may be the same as they are for me, or—and this is where it gets to be a problem—*different* from me. So the meaning I am trying to convey to you by my selecting particular words may end up meaning something entirely different to you!



I might say “That was a silly thing to do”, and the word “silly” might mean “funny” to me but not to you. You might think I was accusing you of being foolish or stupid because somewhere along the way you learned to attach such a meaning to it.

Thus, we may know the same words—we may have the same words in our vocabulary. But, because of our individual personal histories, they may differ in the shades of meaning they have for each of us.

Your motivational state now enters the picture—your *intent*. Why are you receiving my message? Are you listening to me because you want something from me? Are you listening to me in order to compete with me? Are you out to show me that you are better than me? And so on.

In addition, your *internal factors* come into play. You may be very tired and just not thinking as clearly as usual. You may be very worried and preoccupied, which has the effect of narrowing your perceptions and thus your interpretations of what I am communicating. You may be very angry with me and actually looking for ways you can attach negative charges to my message!

## **Our Communication Demons**

By the time you have decoded my message, not only has it suffered from all of the charges it accrued while I was sending it to you, it also has been changed and burdened by the charges you added while you were receiving it. I call these charges our *communication demons*.

I start with an idea or image. I choose words (often without even realizing why I am choosing them) to communicate my idea or image to you. My choices, the words themselves, and the way I deliver them are charged by three factors—my personal history, by

my intentions in sending a message, and by a host of other physical and psychological factors internal to me.

When I finally send the message to you, in addition to however it is affected by our environment, you “decode” my message, influenced by the same set of three factors.

It is clear that even the simplest act of communicating to another person is actually very complex!

With so many elements in such a complex process—for even a *single* exchange between us—it is amazing that we are ever able to communicate anything clearly to each other!

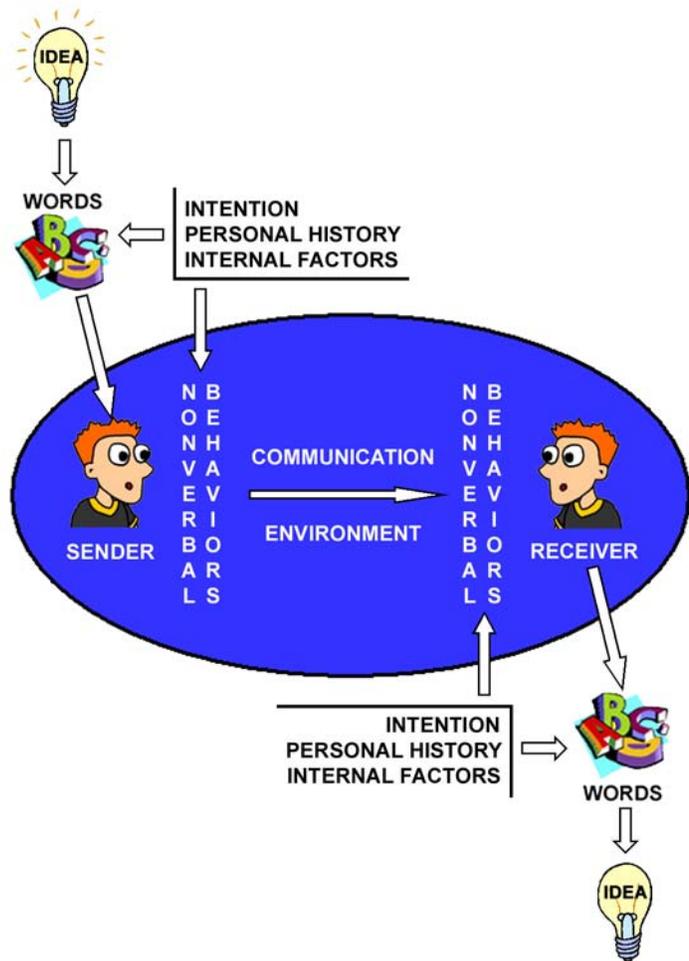
It is also no wonder that we often experience such feelings as confusion, tension, misunderstanding, discomfort, and conflict when we communicate with others.

It is apparent in looking at the diagram to the right that the various negative charges involved in a transaction are the real demons behind the communication problems we have with each other.

For example, when I send you a message loaded with negative charges, or you perceive my message to be loaded with negative charges, I am, in effect, launching a missile at you. Your natural impulse will be to defend against it.

Some people defend by withdrawing within themselves, becoming quiet, even sullen. Others defend by attacking, by becoming belligerent, even hostile. Still others “leave the picture” by simply not listening or even actively ignoring someone talking.

No matter which behavior is chosen by the receiver, that behavior then influences the sender’s *next* message.



## Overcoming Our Communication Demons

So how can we cope with our communication demons? How can we improve the way we communicate with one another?

There are three basic steps:

◆ **The first step is reading our own minds.**

For us to effectively communicate, we must rid ourselves of—or at the very least be aware of and control—our own communication demons. We can only do that by learning where they come from. This means getting to know ourselves better, learning to understand and read our own minds. It means opening ourselves up to active self-observation and introspection. Knowing ourselves better will help us become more aware of the charges that we add to our messages. The more we are aware of those charges, the more power we will have to control them.

◆ **The second step is reading the minds of others.**

This doesn't mean that we look inside their brains and see exactly what they are thinking and feeling. What this does mean is that we—based on the knowledge we acquire reading our own minds—learn how to detect the charges that affect the way others receive the communications we send to them. We do this by listening more actively, more perceptively, and more empathetically. We observe nonverbal behaviors. We stay alert for the other person's communication demons.

◆ **The third step is adjusting our own communication styles.**

Given what we know about our own communication demons and what we perceive to be the communication demons of the people with whom we are communicating, we adjust the way we communicate. We more carefully select the words we use. We pay closer attention to how we deliver them. We consciously control our nonverbal behaviors. We make choices that will minimize the effects of our communication environment.

This all doesn't happen overnight. It takes time and concerted effort. It takes practice, practice, and more practice.