

Communications Workshop

Based on Sathya Sai Baba's Teachings

This article is a summary of a communications workshop, given as a slide presentation by Dr Joe Phaneuf in May 2013 at the USA Sai Organization Region 8 (Pacific South) Conference in Norwalk, Southern California.



THE GOAL OF THIS WORKSHOP is to improve our communication with family, friends, colleagues, co-workers, and everyone else we interact with throughout the day.

Speak to Swami Himself

The simplest and most powerful technique to do this . . . is to **remember we are speaking to Swami himself**. This simple remembrance will change everything! We love our dearest Swami so much that when we are speaking to him, we will automatically speak to everyone with love, respect, and humility.

Why are communication skills important? We each have a unique role to play in this life. The way we communicate with others determines how successful we are in this role and is also a good way to measure our spiritual progress or spiritual growth.

A man or woman of good character has unity and purity of thought, word, and deed. Only God, and each one of us, knows if we have unity of thought, word, and deed, and whether or not all our thoughts, words, and deeds are based on the foundation of love.

Actions: Our Most Powerful Communications

The most powerful way we communicate who we are and what we stand for is through our actions. Actions speak louder than words!

Our dearest Swami is the best role model in this regard: he inspired and is inspiring people all over the world to serve those in need, by his loving example of the way he led his life. His message that everyone has a birthright to receive high quality medical care, values-based education, and pure drinking water was communicated in the most powerful and beautiful way by:

- a) the hospitals he built, which provide the highest quality, free medical care with love and compassion;
- b) his educational institutions, which provide the highest quality free education, based on the five human values (truth, right action, love, peace, and nonviolence) and the two pillars of knowledge and compassion;
- c) his water projects, which have provided free and pure drinking water to more than 12 million people in India who had suffered for many years due to lack of pure drinking water.

If we want our children, SSE students, or colleagues to behave in a certain way, **we need to lead by our example**, because what we do is much more important than what we say.

The Power of Our Words

Here are some words of wisdom that show how powerful and long-lasting our communications can be:

I've learned that people will forget what you said. People will forget what you did. But people will never forget how you made them feel. —Dr. Maya Angelou

Swami has said the same in different ways. We have to be especially careful about what we say, since unkind words cause a wound that can fester in the heart of another person for years:

Practice moderation in speech – it will help you in many ways. When the foot slips, the wound heals after a few months; when the tongue slips, the wound it causes in the heart of another will fester for life. (SSS 1:10, July 22, 1958)

Smile!

Smiling is a simple and powerful way to communicate with others and should be a cornerstone of our communication skills.

At the 3rd World Youth Conference in July 2007, Swami said, “**When we smile, love bubbles up in us.**”

He has reminded doctors that they should greet each patient with a smile and give them the “**capsule of love**,” because this will speed their progress and help their healing.

This same greeting would apply to all of us, regardless of our profession. Smiling is also the best way to make a heart-to-heart connection and is a universal language whereby we can communicate with others, regardless of background or country of origin.

Silence / Moderation of Speech

Silence or moderation of speech is also important. Swami has said that before we speak, we should consider several things, which we can remember as “**T.H.I.N.K.**”:

T – Is it true?

H – Will it hurt anyone?

I – Will it improve on the silence?

N – Is it necessary?

K – Is it kind?

(See, e.g.,: radiosai.org, *Sai Inspires*, 12 June 2013)

Various scriptures have also taught:

- Speak the truth.
- Speak the truth in a pleasing way.
- Avoid speaking a truth that is hurtful. (SSS 18:26, Dec 5, 1985)
- And, in order to avoid speaking a truth that is hurtful, sometimes . . .
- Silence is golden.

Regarding moderation in speech, Swami has said:

The bond of love and brotherliness will be stronger if people would speak less and speak sweetly. Silence (mounam) has been

prescribed as a spiritual practice for this same reason. You are all aspirants at various stages of the road, so this discipline is valuable for you also. Practice moderation in speech; it will help you in many ways. When the foot slips, the wound heals after a few months; when the tongue slips, the wound it causes in the heart of another will fester for life. (SSS 1:10, July 22, 1958)

Swami also shares about the tongue:

The tongue is liable to commit four errors:

- (1) *uttering falsehood,*
- (2) *finding fault with others,*
- (3) *excessive articulation, and*
- (4) *indulging in scandals.*

These have to be strictly avoided if there is to be peace for the individual and society. (SSS 1:10, July 22, 1958)

About Finding Faults – Look Inside!

Regarding finding faults with others, Swami has given a number of guidelines:

- (a) There is a very good chance we have this same fault in us.
- (b) We should see good in others and look for faults in ourselves.
- (c) We should be lenient when judging others and harsh when judging our own actions.
- (d) Focusing on the faults of others can contaminate our minds, and faults of others can even enter our mind.

If we do not have the role of a supervisor, where our job responsibility is to evaluate a

person's actions, both good and not good, then why are we judging others' actions?

The following is a beautiful quote from Swami that we should reflect on whenever we start seeing faults in others:

“The others are part of yourself. You need not worry about them. Worry about yourself; that is enough. When you become all right, they too will be all right, for you will no longer be aware of them as separate from you. Criticizing others, finding fault with them, etc. – all this comes out of egoism. Search for your own faults instead. The faults you see in others are but reflections of your own personality traits.

Pay no heed to little worries; attach your mind to the Lord. Then, you will be led on to the company of good people and your talents will be transmuted. Consider everyone as children of the Lord, as your own brothers and sisters; develop the quality of love, and seek always the welfare of humanity. Be like the bee, drinking the nectar of every flower, not like the mosquito, drinking blood and distributing disease in return. If you continue to love, you will be loved in return. (SSS 1:11, July 25, 1958)

“First Understanding, Then Adjustment”

Swami teaches us: *“First understanding, then adjustment.”*

(See, e.g., SSS 26:26, July 21, 1993; SSS 28:34, Nov 21, 1995; Sharon Sandweiss, Nov 19, 2009, http://www.sssbpt.org/pages/Prasanthi_Nilayam/sharonsandweisspeech.html)

Swami has said that most of the time, we do just the opposite! Before we listen to another person properly, to understand how they feel or what they want, we may cut them off and start giving them advice, before we have properly understood them.

I show a cartoon to depict something many of us do – a situation that occurs at meetings at the office, or even at Sai Centers in our study circles.

In each instance, someone is talking – and they think others are actually listening

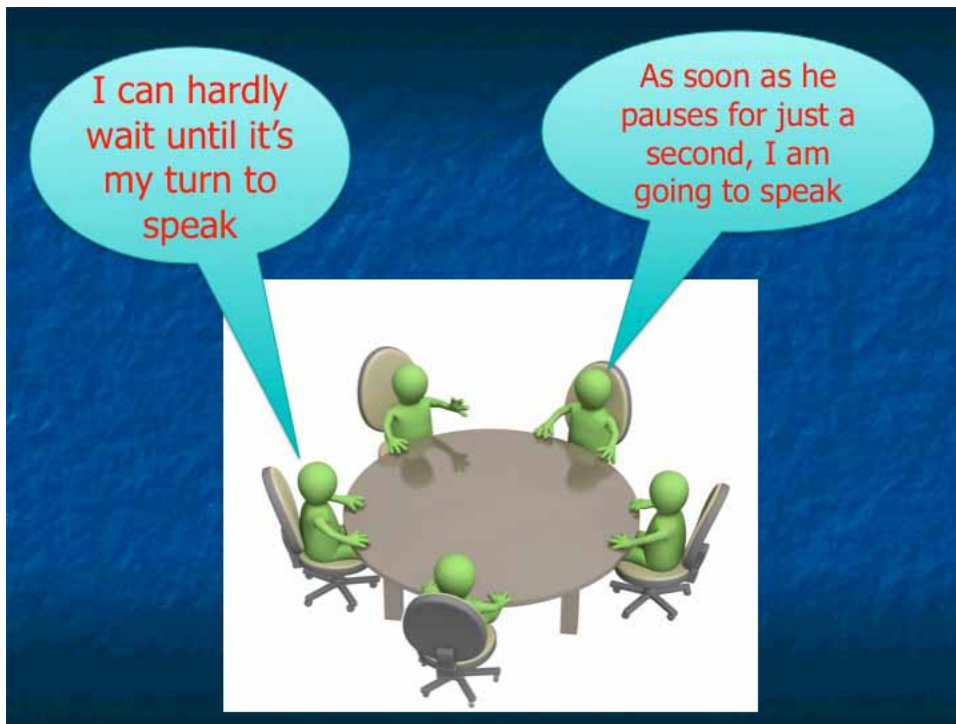
to them! Often times, people who appear to be listening are not really paying attention to what the speaker is saying and instead are thinking about what they are going to say next and are just waiting for their chance to speak.

For Understanding, Build Listening Skills

The first mistake we make is that we don't listen properly and cut off the other person before they are finished saying what they want to say. When we do this, we are not practicing the first part of "*first understanding, then adjustment.*"

Then we go right to the adjustment part and think this means giving the other person advice. Often times the other person does not want or need advice; they just want to have someone listen to them. So, just expressing





empathy or giving the other person the capsule of love by listening to them is all we need to do. If we are not sure if they want advice, we can find out by asking them, "Would you like advice on that, or can I help in some way?"

One of the ways we can listen attentively is to put ourselves in the other person's shoes and listen the way we would like someone to listen to us. Or we can imagine that the person we are speaking to is someone we have tremendous respect for, such as our dear grandmother. For those who are devotees of Swami (or any other guru), we can remind ourselves that we are listening and speaking

to our dearest Swami, who resides in the heart of each and every person.

When we remember that God resides in the person we are speaking to, we will automatically listen with patience, humility, respect, and reverence.

Summarize to Improve Understanding

Repeat back One good method to make sure we have really understood the person we are listening to is to summarize or repeat back what the person has just said. This is something we should do when we want to be sure we have really understood the person we are speaking with.

Avoid making assumptions It is best not to make too many assumptions about what the other person is thinking or what the other person wants, because when we make an assumption about what another person wants, often times we are wrong.

It is important to summarize what we think the other person is saying or what the other person wants. Why? Because nothing is so simple that it cannot be misunderstood!

Inquire further After we have listened carefully to the other person, it is time for our response (the “*then adjustment*” part). Before going to the adjustment phase, we should remember that we might need to ask further questions or summarize what the speaker has said, to make sure we understood them.

Express empathy Often times **people just want to be heard**, and when we express empathy – “That sounds very difficult,” “I am sorry to hear that,” and so on – this alone may be all we need to do, which is giving them the capsule of love.

Have advice? Wait to be asked If they ask for advice, we can give advice, and we should remember to keep it short and simple. If we are not sure if they want advice, we can ask, “Would you like to hear what others have found helpful in this situation?” or, “I am sorry to hear that; can I help in some way?”

Praise publicly, critique privately If we are a supervisor or it is our role to give people feedback, we should always keep in mind the rule of thumb to praise and acknowledge in public, and give feedback for improvement in private. Also, we need to have built a relationship with another person before they

will be open to criticism or suggestions for improvement in areas they need to improve.

Build a “Positive Account” in Relationships

There is a concept known as “building a positive bank account” in the area of relationships. The rule of thumb is that we need to make three to five deposits (compliments or acknowledgments) before we can make a withdrawal (give someone a suggestion for improvement).

We should keep this in mind when giving criticism to family, friends, and co-workers. This method is certainly a good incentive to look for the good in others and build a nice relationship with them by praising their good work and acknowledging their good actions, whenever we get a chance to do so.

Give feedback when it is your duty (as a supervisor at work or other position where it is one’s duty to perform job evaluations) and remember the importance of developing a relationship beforehand, where you have a positive balance in your relationship account (many more praises and acknowledgments than criticisms).

Lead with positives When giving feedback, one may start by pointing out a person’s positive points and then transition into areas where the person needs to improve.

Avoid “BUT...” Another tip to remember is not to negate a compliment or positive point by saying BUT. If you tell a person something positive and then say “BUT,” this may indicate to him or her that you didn’t really mean the initial compliment.

Use “AND . . .” Here is an example of how to give positive comments along with suggestions for improvement: *“John, what I notice about you when you are at your best is _____, AND . . . what I notice about you when you are not at your best is _____.”*

Accepting Criticism

How about when people criticize us or point out areas where we need to improve? Swami has told us that we should **listen carefully** when people are criticizing us and **be open** to this criticism – because they may be right! If they are correct, then we should be grateful to the person who is pointing out our faults, and we should do our best to correct them.

If, on the other hand, when we honestly evaluate and reflect on the criticism and realize that it is not true, then we should just take it as a test from God.

“Test Is Taste for God”

Swami gives a couple of examples. We have to pass a test before graduating from one grade to the next at school. Similarly, in the school of life, God gives us tests, which we need to pass before we can graduate to the next grade. (See, for example, SSS 3:7, March 1963) Criticism about us, if it is not true, is one of these tests.

Another example Swami gives is that when we hammer a nail into the wall, before we hang a picture or other item, we shake the nail and make sure it is firm in the wall before placing the picture. (SSS 6:23, Sept 8, 1966)

Similarly, when people criticize us (and the criticism not true), God is testing the firmness of our faith, patience, fortitude, and love for others. So, the next time we are criticized unjustly, just remember:

- (a) This is a test to graduate to the next class.
- (b) God is testing the strength of the nail in wall. God likes to test us. As Swami says, *“Test is taste of God!”* (SSS 31:45, Dec 25, 1988. See also, SSS 2:32, Mar 6, 1962; SSS 18:15-1, July 7, 1985; SSS 19:11, June 3, 1986; SSS 30:21, Sept 14, 1997)

Helping When Possible; Saying “No,” Nicely

Swami also has said, *“You cannot always oblige, but you can always speak obligingly.”* (SSS 31:19, April 26, 1998)

Many of our mothers have taught us the same: *“There is always a nice way to say no.”*

When a person asks us for specific help, and we can do so, we should jump at the chance, for God may not give us this chance again.

We cannot always, however, do what a person asks us to do. In this situation, it is good to find out what they are trying to accomplish. We may be able to help in some way, even if it is not the exact way they had in mind.

When we have to say no, one nice way of doing so is: *“I really wish I could do _____. Now, what I can do is _____”* – or something like that. This keeps your statements positive, rather than saying, *“I can’t do that.”*

Some people say the idea that *“you cannot always oblige but you can always speak obligingly”* does not work in many business

situations or in the “real world,” but nothing could be further from the truth.

Showing Respect

Speaking obligingly does not mean that you will be labeled as a “yes person,” or that people will walk all over you, or that you cannot hold your ground and be firm on an issue. Speaking obligingly is just a way to show respect for another person’s viewpoint. It does not mean that you have to agree with what the other person is saying.

Swami has likewise said that if we want people to respect us, we first have to show others respect. (Summer Showers 1974-2:28, pp 181-182) This also is true for family interactions. Speaking obligingly is one of many ways we can show respect when we are communicating with others.

Remember: “Yes, AND . . .”

We touched on this somewhat before, when talking about ways to give criticism, but again, another powerful way to show respect at work, home, and in all situations is to avoid using “Yes, BUT . . .” when responding to another person who is stating their point of view, and, instead, use the positive connector, “Yes, AND . . .”

This helps to show respect for the other people’s views, and if our view is different, “Yes, AND . . .” will help the others to keep an open mind and hear our viewpoint, since we have just respected their opinion.

An example would be after hearing someone state a viewpoint on some matter, and we see things slightly or dramatically

different, we could say, “Yes, that’s a good point – and for this situation, my approach would be . . .,” and then give our viewpoint.

To recap:

“Yes, BUT . . .”

- a) may indicate disrespect;
- b) is judgmental;
- c) is exclusive;
- d) discourages brainstorming or having others express their ideas.

“Yes, AND . . .”

- a) shows respect;
- b) is nonjudgmental;
- c) is inclusive;
- d) encourages others to express their opinion and helps brainstorming sessions bring out group wisdom.

Handling Conflict

Just listen When listening to someone who is angry or upset, sometimes just listening is all that is needed. We don’t have to give advice or solve everyone’s problem. Most people just want to be listened to when they are upset.

Handling our “hot buttons” What should we do when someone pushes our “hot button”?

- a) **Get curious instead of furious** (“First understanding, then adjustment.”)
- b) **Demonstrate empathy** (“Give the other person the capsule of love.”)

When We Cannot Oblige

How do we handle conflict when the person with whom we are speaking wants

something we cannot give, or asks for something we believe is not good for the situation? This is a chance to practice all the above strategies:

- a) **Listen attentively and patiently.** (“*First, understanding.*”)
- b) **Give the “capsule of love.”** Demonstrate empathy every chance we get: “I am sorry to hear that.” “That sounds like a very difficult problem.” Give the other person the “*capsule of love.*”
- c) **Summarize or repeat back** what you have heard the other person say. This helps most people to calm down, because they know you have actually listened to them carefully, and it also checks for understanding. If you did not understand their request, they can help clarify it for you.
- d) **Validate their opinion.** This is very important. This does not mean we must agree with the other person or that we will do what they are asking for. It does **show respect** for their opinion and thinking. For example, “Mr. Smith, from what you have told me, I can see why you think that XYZ is the best course of action.”

“Yes, AND . . .” Now, be careful. Here is the bridge, where you will give your opinion, which is different. We don’t want to negate everything we have done so far by using a negative connector such as “Yes, but . . .”

When we do so, it takes something away from all the positive connection we have built up in steps (a)–(d). So, **be careful, and use a pregnant pause, or just use a positive connector, such as “Yes, AND . . .”:**

“Mr. Smith, from what you have told me, I can see why you think that XYZ is the best course of action.” (This shows we respect the person’s opinion.) “AND, from my experience with this situation, I have found that ABC is the best course of action, and here are the reasons: _____ . . .”

This helps others keep an open mind to our viewpoint, when it is different from their viewpoint.

The Art of Apologizing

How to make an apology: keep it short and simple . . . and don’t make excuses!

How to make an apology when you are really in “hot water”:

- a) I am sorry.
- b) My mistake.
- c) Please forgive me!

E-mail Communications

E-mail is a good way to share ideas. E-mail is *not* a good way to resolve differences. In fact, most of the time when we try to resolve differences via e-mail, things get worse.

When we disagree about something via e-mail, we should show restraint and not

respond immediately. We should collect our thoughts and not send an e-mail that may hurt another person's feelings and make things worse.

Instead, we should speak to the other party, in person if possible, or, if this is not possible, discuss the issue on the phone. Speaking with the person face to face is best, and next best is on the phone. Doing this will give us a better chance to understand the other person's viewpoint and then work through our differences.

Avoid negative comments Never say anything negative about a person in an e-mail. In the first place, if we want to point out someone's shortcomings, it is best to speak with the other person directly rather than criticize them behind their back in an e-mail.

Also, whatever negative thing we may say about another person, may end up circulating around the world via e-mail to many people. Also it has happened many times that the person you are criticizing may be accidentally copied on an e-mail and receive your behind-the-back criticism. Talk about doing something embarrassing!

Use subject lines The subject line should clearly explain the content of the e-mail and should make the other person want to open up and read the e-mail. And don't forget to put something in the subject line – often times people forget to do this.

Having a well-thought-out subject line is very important for another reason. Down the road, you or others may want to come back to this email. If the subject line describes

the content well, it will be easier to find, when you or others do a search to find the important information in this email.

Keep e-mails short and to the point Listing a few bullet points will make it easier for others to read. Thoughtful and well-written e-mails take some time to compose. This time is well worth it, so that others don't waste their time reading a diffuse and confusing e-mail.

Mark Twain once wrote a long confusing letter to a friend. At the end of the letter he wrote, "I apologize for the long letter; if I'd had more time, it would have been shorter and to the point!"

An e-mail should also have all the needed info for others. If you are sharing info about an event, it is best to list the name of the event, date, location, time, and all other necessary info, including links to register or get directions.

Include all the info Please don't say something like, "For directions or registering, kindly refer to the previous e-mail from a week ago."

We should make it easy for the person reading our e-mail to get all the information they need, nicely summarized in our most recent e-mail to them. I must say, our U.S. Sai organization regional presidents are very good at doing this!

CCs Who should we send the e-mail to? Everyone who needs to know – and no one else. Saying something negative about another person is bad enough and should be avoided; even worse is sending this type of e-mail to many people who should not have been copied on the e-mail.

Fwds When forwarding e-mails, again, send to everyone who should know – and no one else. Also, explaining the reason for forwarding the e-mail in the subject line is needed.

Keep the subject line current A group of people may start discussing ABC in a chain of e-mails, and a few days later the topic has changed to XYZ.

Many times, the subject line stays the same, and this is confusing to those who receive it. When the topic or content of an e-mail changes, the subject line should also change to reflect what is being discussed currently.

Additional E-mail Etiquette

Here are a few miscellaneous points to bear in mind when e-mailing:

- **Don't share official Sai organization e-mail lists** Some people will be tempted to use them for commercial purposes or other ways that are not proper. We may do this inadvertently if we don't pay attention to the next bullet point.
- **Use BCCs** Blind copy long lists of e-mail addresses, to prevent sharing of many people's e-mail addresses without their permission (but, be transparent about who is receiving the e-mail). This keeps e-mail addresses private, which helps prevent many problems down the road, such as someone hacking into a person's address book and then sending out spam, a virus, or worse.

- **No negative BCCs** Do not send an e-mail to a colleague saying something negative, or pointing out a mistake the person has just made, and then blind copy the person's boss or as many other people you can think of, to make sure they all know (behind-the-back style) about the mistake your colleague just made.
- **Be Careful with "Reply All" . . .** Be careful about hitting "Reply All" or sending to an entire e-mail list. In most cases, this is to be avoided, because you may be sending spam inadvertently to your co-workers or those in the Sathya Sai Organization. On the other hand, when communicating with others on a committee or other small groups, hitting "Reply All" is appropriate when people are sharing ideas.

Enjoy God's Darshan All Day Long

Remember, communication is key to all areas of our life, including our spiritual growth. When we communicate well, everyone benefits.

The best way – to listen and then communicate with patience, respect, humility, and love – is to remember Who we are speaking to! We each have the opportunity to speak with, interact with, and have God's *darshan* (see God) all day long – if only we remember!

—Dr Joe Phaneuf
California

