**Communicate: Don't Just Send Messages, by Philip Mulford, J.D.**

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Our current efforts to communicate are too often satisfied by the mere sending of messages. Communication requires more. Communication requires the listener to understand the sender’s message. Unfortunately, as speakers we have been trained to assume our listeners understand our meaning. As listeners, we have been trained to assume we understand. Most miscommunication is the result of speaker and listener assuming each understood the other. Imagine, for example, you have sent an e-mail to a friend inviting him or her for lunch. Before you receive a reply from your friend, you go out to run some errands. While out, you run into that friend while walking down Main Street. Anxious for a reply to your invitation, you say, “Hey, I sent you an e-mail a little while ago. Did you get it?” Your friend, having received the e-mail, perhaps even having responded to it, says, “Yes, I got it. Didn’t you get my reply?” “No,” you say, “I’ve been out running errands and haven’t checked my e-mail.” So you have established that your friend received your e-mail. The next step in our trained communication process is crucial. You say, “So, what do you think? Will that work for you.” Your friend says, “Sure, sounds great. See you then.” And off you go each looking forward to lunch with the other. However, neither one of you confirmed an understanding of the e-mail. You each assumed understanding. This is normal. This is expected. This is our training. Communication often breaks down because we accept this assumption-based process as communication. Communication, however, requires more. You realize this while waiting for your friend at the restaurant later that morning. For any number of reasons, your friend thought you meant tomorrow, not today. Ah well, those things happen. You wait. Then you come up with “reasons” why your friend is running late. Then you may worry - you hope nothing has happened to your friend. Then you begin to take it personally. Finally, you call. “Where are you?,” you ask, somewhat perturbed. “I’m at home. Why?,” your friend responds. “Lunch? Remember? I’ve been sitting here waiting for you since noon.” “Oh my gosh,” your friend exclaims sincerely, “I thought you meant tomorrow. I am so sorry.” We’ve all had these simple misunderstandings in our lives. Generally, we can deal with them pretty well. We can accept and forgive to an extent. It happens to the best of us. But if we recognize it is our desire to effectively communicate with one another, and that an assumption-based process fails to accomplish our goal, then we can choose a different process that will accomplish our goal. To do so, however, we will have to overcome deeply ingrained training – training we will continue to receive our entire lives, from each other, our parents, our friends, the media, and society as a whole - training that says when you speak, send an e-mail, or otherwise send a message, you get to assume the receiver understands and when you listen, you must assume understanding. But, as you realized while waiting for your friend, communication is not accomplished by simply speaking or sending an e-mail and assuming understanding. Nor is it accomplished by receiving an assumption-based response from your friend. Communication requires more. Communication requires sharing information and creating a common, shared understanding of that information. Since we are each unique individuals, it is presumptuous of the speaker and the listener to assume a common, shared understanding. Instead, both speaker and listener must actively ensure that the listener understands the meaning of the speaker’s message. Before going further, let me point out one habit that tends to interfere with our efforts to understand. Ever notice yourself nodding in agreement with someone you are listening to? Ever notice someone interrupting another by saying, “I agree, but…” We all have the habit of evaluating what we hear and deciding whether we agree or disagree. Why? How does this assist our understanding? A common, shared understanding of information does not require listener agreement. In fact, the evaluation process has nothing to do with understanding and it gets in the way. We are unique individuals. It needs to be ok for a speaker to express a view of the world different from the listener’s. The listener first needs to understand what the speaker is saying, not decide whether he or she agrees with what the speaker is saying. Decisions, which will include evaluation, will come later. So in addition to changing from an assumption-based communication process, we must also set aside our habit of evaluating all information we receive on the basis of whether we agree or not. So how can speaker and listener ensure understanding by the listener? One tool is to listen with the idea of needing to repeat the speaker’s information to a third party. How would you listen if your purpose were to pass on the information? One thing you might find yourself doing in that context is asking the speaker for the opportunity to repeat or summarize what you heard to make sure you had it right. What a great way to ensure understanding! If you repeat it back incorrectly, the speaker has the chance to clarify. If you repeat it correctly, the speaker has the chance to confirm. Try it. You’ll be amazed at how helpful this process can be in accomplishing shared understanding. If it makes you feel uncomfortable or self-conscious at first, don’t be surprised. You are going against your years of training that have always required you, as listener, to silently assume understanding. You may find comfort by thinking in terms of getting directions or a recipe from someone over the phone. In those instances, you would not feel uncomfortable asking to repeat the information back to the speaker. In fact, if the speaker were to give any sign of resistance at your request, you’d probably be surprised. If the roles were reversed, as speaker you know you’d welcome the opportunity to make sure the listener had a clear understanding of your information. Notice also, it’s not helpful to evaluate the information in order to understand it – that comes later. (You may later choose to modify the recipe or take a different route, but first you want to understand the speaker’s version.) We can’t read each other’s minds. We can’t even see the world through another’s eyes. But we can try to understand how another sees the world if we change the way we communicate. Although repeating back can be a very helpful tool, it does not transform “message sending” into “communication” by itself. Adopting a perspective that allows each of us to have a different view of the same world simultaneously can be difficult, but engenders understanding. We are each a unique individual. So, therefore, is the person with whom we are attempting to communicate. We can honor our own and each other’s uniqueness, and in doing so treat each other the way we want to be treated, by changing from assumption-based communication to understanding-based communication. In doing so, we will minimize those experiences of miscommunication and discover that communication can be peaceful, loving, and effective – even when we disagree.   
  
  
  
About the author: Philip Mulford is a full-time, professional mediator. Formerly an attorney, Mulford practiced law from 1982 until 1990 when he founded Mulford Mediation. With offices in Fairfax and Warrenton, VA, Mulford Mediation provides mediation services to families and businesses - recently including healthcare professionals, attorneys, realtors, and senior management teams. Mulford successfully resolves over 90% of the hundreds of cases he mediates. He has published articles in various publications including UVALawyer, the Fairfax Bar Association Journal and the Virginia Episcopalian on mediation. Mulford also offers communication consulting to families and businesses and gives continuing legal education seminars to attorneys on mediation. A graduate of Duke University ('79) and the University of Virginia School of Law ('82), Mulford lives with his wife and two sons in Warrenton, VA. Beginning this fall, Mulford will host a weekly radio call-in talk show on Divorce Mediation.