



Judy Ringer

Being Heard: Mental and Verbal Strategies for Getting Your Point Across

We all want to be heard. It's gratifying, empowering, and makes us feel valued. And in a difference of opinion, we want our side to be represented. We want others to get who we are and to hear our valid arguments, even if they don't agree with us—though, of course, we'd like that to happen as well.

What we may not realize is that the best way to get our point across is often counter-intuitive. To be successful we have to try less and listen more.

Understanding as a Goal

Have you ever been in a restaurant that has a swinging door in and out of the kitchen? Ever pushed (or watched someone push) on that door when another body is trying to get through from the other direction? What happens? You push, they push, and nobody gets through, right?

The same push-pushback phenomenon occurs when two people want to get their differing viewpoints across at the same time. It usually sounds something like: "Yes, but you're wrong because ..." or "No, you weren't listening. What I'm trying to say is ..." and so on. If you want to get through to the other side and they're not creating an opening, you either let them talk first or push hard enough to get them to hear you. If we extend the metaphor, they're probably not listening. The more you force, the more they resist.

When you push for your way, you virtually guarantee failure, because the harder you try to persuade, the harder the opposition will do the same. He wants to be heard, too—just like you.

If you want to get your point across, don't make *getting your point across* the goal. Make *understanding* the goal. When you try to understand your conflict partner's view, you create an opening for him to do the same. The door swings toward you as you receive his energy, beliefs, and vision, and benefit from a peek at an alternate reality. You're able to see both views simultaneously while you reflect on how differently this person perceives the world from his side of the door.

Giving Way to Get Your Way

Don't give in; give way. There's a difference. Giving someone the freedom to deliver his message is a gift and a model. You're not saying you agree with the message; you're saying you're willing to entertain an alternative view to facilitate solving the problem.

Sensing a receptive audience, the speaker relaxes. His energy and ideas have an outlet. He worries less whether you agree with him, simply because you're willing to let him talk. His need for you to understand him is less critical than your willingness to try.

Psychologists have found that we are each more interested in knowing that the other person is trying to empathize with us ... than we are in believing that they have actually accomplished that goal. Good listening ... is profoundly communicative. And struggling to understand communicates the most positive message of all.

--Difficult Conversations, Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen

Eventually he has nothing left to say, and now he is opening the door for you. In fact, he's eager to hear your reflections. He's thinking, "Wow, I just made some great points. I can't wait to hear what she has to say about them!"

Offer Information That May Be of Value

So don't start with, "You are really out of line, you don't know what you're talking about," or "your reasoning is full of holes!"

If you want to get your point across, start by *acknowledging his argument* and appreciating his position. Specifically:

- Summarize his thoughts for him.
- Compliment his reasoning.
- Speak first to his positive intentions.
- Look for one thing you can agree with.

For example: "John, you've obviously put a lot of thought into this and care a great deal about the outcome. I liked what you said about ... " You must be sincere. We're not talking about manipulation, but rather a willingness to step into another human being's shoes.

By listening and acknowledging, you've let your partner come through the door, and it's starting to swing in the other direction. Here's the place where you might get your point across. But one more admonition: change your thinking from *getting your point across* to *offering information that might be of value to him*. He may take advantage and he may not. He's more likely to receive your offer favorably if it helps him achieve his goals, look good, or save face.

For example, "John, from what you're saying, you believe you're doing a good job and living up to the requirements of the job description. I have a slightly different take on it. Would you like to hear it? As I see it, you put a lot of thought into preparing our meetings and organizing staff, and I think you want to do a good job. I have some ideas about how you can go further in your career, if you chose to, by making a few simple changes." The door is swinging back. It's your turn to walk purposefully through it.

Do You Want to Win or Solve the Problem?

In the end, you may find that "getting your point across" is language that presumes a contest of wills and that there are more efficient ways to achieve your objective. You are less likely to create defensiveness in the listener when you disclose your thinking, acknowledge his, maintain respect and safety, and establish consequences.

Keep in mind there's a problem on the table to be solved. He's offered his view. And now you will present yours. As you do this, keep the door open. The following steps will help you:

Six Steps for Creating A Willing Listener:

1. **Understand *Your Story* and *Their Story*.** *Rashomon* is a 1950 Japanese movie involving four people, each of whom tells a story about how a specific event unfolded. Each story is a little movie that looks completely different from the others. *Rashomon* reminds me that my story may vary widely from my partner's, even when we're looking at the same facts. It helps me exercise caution about how much I think I know about someone else's motives. I try not to presume. How could I? It's not my movie. My goal is to see *his* movie through his lens.
2. **Educate, don't sell, blame, or accuse.** When it's time to tell *my story*, I have to teach the listener what things look like from my perspective. I don't assume he can see my movie either; in fact, I know he can't. When an employee, student, or loved one acts contrary to expectations, I respectfully describe the feelings that ensued or the resulting impact on the environment or on our relationship. I assume the person has positive intent, and I try to help him to live up to that assumption.

For example, "I think you were trying to help the customer as best you could, given the complexity of the request. However, from my experience, when I put the customer on hold for more than a minute, he usually becomes frustrated and hangs up. Let's talk about how to get answers without putting the customer on hold."

3. **Communicate your hopes and goals.** If I'm disappointed, it helps to let others in on my hopes (for the relationship, the workplace, or the task at hand). For example, "When you said you would have the spreadsheet ready Tuesday, I took you at your word. My hope is that we all recognize the importance of deadlines on a project that's as time sensitive as this one. Can you tell me what happened and what we can do to remedy the situation?"
4. **Stay interested.** Remain curious and childlike. Look at each situation with new eyes. Don't forget that everything you experience is filtered through your perception, your lens. As Stephen Covey says, "Seek first to understand."
5. **Center yourself and extend positive energy.** I practice and teach the martial art aikido, often translated from the Japanese as "the way of blending with energy." In aikido, as the attack comes we center ourselves and extend our life energy (*ki*) to meet the attacker, align with him, and redirect his energy. We lead without force. In life and business, you do the same thing when your language and manner are poised and focused, when you exercise both power and compassion, and when you make your adversary a partner by honoring his energy and positive intent.
6. **There are no guarantees.** What if you've tried to find a creative solution through joint problem solving and the situation doesn't improve? For example, after several conversations and promises to improve, a direct report continues to be disrespectful. Or after your numerous requests to be prompt, an important member of the team continues to show up late or not at all.

Did I forget to mention there are no guarantees? You may not get your point across, ever. You can, however, remain respectful, interested, and purposeful. In the final analysis, this is where your power lies. You can also employ your company's performance management system as early in the process as possible and hold your staff accountable to its guidelines. At this stage, the point you want to get across changes. You are no longer asking for behavior change. Instead you're making sure the employee understands the consequences of the road he is traveling.

At home, if *getting your point across* with your teenager means *gaining agreement*, you will almost never succeed. However, you can set limits and expectations. For example, "I hear you when you say that your friends can stay out until midnight. Nevertheless, you have to be home by 11:00." ...

"But, Mom! ..."

"I realize this seems hard to you. But I expect you to be home by 11:00."

Establishing limits and consequences is usually a more practical and effective way to be heard than attempting to gain agreement.

In any case, remember that winning a contest and solving a problem are usually two different things. When you find yourself pushing through that metaphorical door, stop and ask yourself whether it's the winning or the solving you're most interested in.

Good luck with all of your communication. Let me know if this article has been useful by contacting me at judy@judyringer.com

Resources

Unlikely Teachers: Finding the Hidden Gifts in Daily Conflict, by Judy Ringer

How To Get Your Point Across in 30 Seconds or Less, by Milo O. Frank

The Magic of Conflict, by Thomas F. Crum (www.aikiworks.com)

Difficult Conversations, by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen (www.triadcgi.com)

Crucial Conversations, by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, Al Switzler (www.crucialconversations.com)

FAQs about Conflict, by Judy Ringer <http://www.JudyRinger.com>

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About the Author: Judy Ringer is the author of *Unlikely Teachers: Finding the Hidden Gifts in Daily Conflict*, containing stories and practices on the connection between aikido and conflict. As the founder of Power & Presence Training, Judy specializes in unique workshops on conflict, communication, and creating a more positive work environment. She is a black belt in aikido and chief instructor of Portsmouth Aikido, Portsmouth, NH, USA. Subscribe to Judy's free award-winning e-newsletter, *Ki Moments*, at <http://www.JudyRinger.com>

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