

# Subjectivity and Communication

In my experience, one of the main ways for communication to get derailed is when people begin arguing about claimed 'facts' 'realities' or 'truths' about a given situation, event, or issue. In such cases, communication is almost sure to break down. The dialogue becomes increasingly polarized and often turns into what seems like a debate or argument about which person is most 'right.'

## Subjective Speaking

It is important to understand that we all have our own filters through which we view and experience the world, and that shape our perception of 'reality.' In this sense, we can even question whether there is such thing as an 'objective' reality, since the kind of reality that matters most to us humans is always interpreted through the lens of some subjective person. Think of this 'personal filter' as a pair of permanently fixed sunglasses that *color* your perception of the world. This personalized view will be shaped by:

- Our past experiences
- Previous relationships
- Our feelings and mood
- Our values and beliefs
- Our life goals and plans
- Our tolerance for uncertainty
- Our ability to empathize
- Our unique personality
- and so on...



When you try to communicate with the other person, it is often helpful to use 'qualifiers' that implicitly reminds the other person that this is *your* perspective. Qualifiers soften the communication to make it clear that you are not looking to impose your view of reality on them. It also implicitly suggests that you would be willing to entertain the other person's view on the matter being discussed. Both work to prevent defensiveness and increase the likelihood of you hearing the other person and feeling like you are being heard in return. Note the use of qualifiers in the underlined words used in the sentences below:

### Poor Communication Without Qualifiers

"You don't care enough to listen."  
"You do nothing but criticize me."  
"You treat me like a child."  
"You just want to be right."  
"You don't care about anyone but yourself."

### Better Communication Using Qualifiers

"It seems to me like you don't enough care to listen."  
"It feels like you do nothing but criticize me."  
"I feel like I am being treated like a child."  
"It seems like you are just in this to win."  
"I feel unimportant to you."

Also notice that the poorly worded statements almost all start with "you" statements, whereas the better methods of communication almost all start with some form of "I" statement. This makes sense if we just reflect on the simple fact that no one likes being told what they think or feel. By using "I" statements, you

again make it very clear that this is your perspective, thought, or feeling. The wonderful side-effect of this is that since it is *your* subjective perception or feeling, it cannot be argued (whereas 'objective facts' can).

### Subjective Listening

It feels good to have someone try to understand our thoughts and feelings. If you take the time to understand the perspective of your partner, they will be less defensive, and may be more likely to entertain your perspective in turn. Remember that they are communicating their thoughts and feelings – you cannot argue them. While you do not have to agree with them, you can validate and empathize with the feelings that your partner expresses. The easiest way to do this is to put your own biases, feelings, reactions, thoughts, to the side for a moment, while you try to embody an attitude of being 'tenaciously curious' about what your partner is thinking and feeling. This is not always easy to do.



Here is an analogy that I sometimes use: imagine that you are sitting on the edge of a dock on a beautiful day. The sun is shining, the breeze is refreshing, and sound of the waves is relaxing. Everything is peaceful and coherent: the world makes sense – this is the equivalent of *your* reality. The reality of your partner will be naturally foreign to you – no matter how hard you try, you will never be able to *fully* understand it, and it will not always make sense to you. In this analogy, your partner's reality is the equivalent to being underneath the water. You can see shades of it from where you sit, but it is masked by the waves and movement on the surface. That 'tenacious curiosity' that I mentioned would be equivalent to taking a deep breath and diving into the ocean – into your partner's world or reality. When you are there, you want to notice the temperature, the movement of the water, be curious about the objects you see there. In short, you want to get a sense of 'what it is like' to *be* in this reality. It feels good to have another person try to understand us – to take the time to appreciate alternative perspectives. It feels even better when others are able to validate our experiences, even though we might not always agree with them. Try to use some of the above approaches to improve on your communication skills to help you listen and to likewise assist you in being heard.