

How to Say It to Seniors — *Closing the Communication Gap with Our Elders*
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I. **Holding on and letting go:** *the unappreciated agendas of older adults*

The “secret mission” of older adults involves maintaining control of their lives in the face of almost daily losses, and discovering their legacy, what will live on after them.

Common losses in old age:

1. Loss of physical strength
2. Loss of peer group
3. Loss of consultative authority: older persons have accumulated a lifetime of wisdom, but no one seems to want to hear it. Our society communicates to them that they no longer have a social purpose.
4. Loss of identity, often tied to work roles
5. Loss of physical space as they move into smaller and smaller quarters such as a room in an assisted living or nursing facility.
6. Loss of financial independence

- Like toddlers and adolescents, sometimes the elderly feel a need to say NO! that comes from deep within, just to maintain some control over their lives.
- **The Redemptive power of “Backing Off”:** give them room to resolve their own inner conflicts rather than trying to force them to see or do things your way.

Examples:

A daughter to elderly parent: “Mom, I sense you don’t like the idea of selling the house. I won’t mention it again, but I’d like to hear your ideas about how we will maintain it.”

A sales clerk to a senior customer: “I’m sorry we don’t have that style in stock. Would you like to choose another style or shall I call you when we get more of those in stock?”

- **Listening for Legacy**

Examples:

A son to his father: “Tell me about the winters you experienced growing up in Wisconsin.”

Young CEO to chairman emeritus: “How did you recognize that the company was ready to leap to the next level?”

A Baby Boomer to an elderly aunt: “What made you think about your prom date now?”

II. The Everyday World of Older Adults: *the Myth of Diminished Capacity*

- “A culture obsessed with staying young has missed the most important part of getting old: The brain’s physiology changes in ways that promote the person’s need for reflection, insight and innovation.... What looks like diminished capacity in the majority of the aging population is nothing more than an awareness by that person that he or she is on a different developmental mission.”
- The elderly brain shows some changes in the prefrontal cortex, the area for working memory capacity and the area for processing new information. IQ and the capacity for verbal expression, language and abstract thinking remain intact. Older people are better at mulling over situations, reflecting and drawing upon their life experiences to arrive at decisions.
- **Lack of urgency** is a prerequisite for reflection, but it can drive younger people crazy! Lack of urgency is observed in the communication patterns of seniors, which younger people often identify as avoiding making decisions or taking a long time to think about things.

III. Communication Habits of the Elderly: *What do they look like?*

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| A. Lack of Urgency | D. Attention to Details |
| B. Nonlinear Conversations | E. Uncoupling |
| C. Repetition | |

A. Lack of Urgency (*Why can't they make a decision?*)

Effective Communication Rules for Lack of Urgency

- Accept their pace as the normal end product of enhanced perspective.
- Don't take their “enhanced perspective personally.” It is not conscious resistance to the ideas and suggestions of younger people!
- Be patient!
- Younger people manage their busy lives by being punctual. With the elderly we need to be punctual with no conditions because we cannot speed them up.
- Use punctuality as a means of returning control to the older person. Example: “If you want that errand done by 3 p.m. I will have the car outside by 2:30 p.m.” or “I’ve checked with the doctor’s office and his appointment book is filling up. Do you want me to schedule your check up or shall I let you handle it?”
- Become expert at “spontaneous facilitation,” and “rapid gear changes” as you learn to let the impetus for getting something done come from the elderly person rather than being dictated by your busy schedule.

B. Nonlinear Conversations *(Why can't they stick to the subject?)*

- We are so programmed for efficiency that we don't have patience with nonlinear conversations.
- There is no obvious sequence to the process of searching for the pattern of what's happened in our lives.
- We need to create an environment for nonlinear conversations by signaling that we're willing to listen.
- If we listen for patterns in any nonlinear conversation, we may help someone discover something important relative to their legacy.
- From these nonlinear conversations emerge personal stories that reflect core values and central themes in a long life. Such conversations can lead to great insight.

Effective Communication Rules for Nonlinear Conversations

- View nonlinear conversations as a sorting, discovery and remediation tool. Learn to strike a balance between listening to and facilitating nonlinear conversations. Posing the right questions can make all the difference!
- Create opportunities for spontaneous revelations and insights.
- Listen for patterns and themes and echo back the values your elder expresses in their verbal labyrinth.
- Share a similar story from your own life experience.

C. Repetition *(Why do they always tell the same boring stories?)*

- Repetition is a necessary part of the life review process by which elders begin to piece together their legacy.
- There is something in repeated incidents that recalls a moment of exceptional value in the elder's life.

Effective Communication Rules for Repetition

- Pay attention, when you hear a story being repeated, to what is being emphasized.
- Understand that repetition is a form of emphasis; learn to take mental notes.
- Even if the significance of a repeated story is understood, its role in an individual's legacy may remain a mystery.

D. Attention to Details *(Why do they fret so much about the unimportant stuff?)*

- Instead of rushing the details, ask why they are so intense or so important to the elder.
- Accuracy is not the most important aspect of these stories. Elders are not scripting a documentary, they are using memory as a vehicle with which to intensify a part of their life that means a lot to them. They are reaching for a value or trying to understand a person.
- Listen for what details reveal: what's the message here? What's really being valued?

Effective Communication Rules for Attention to Details

- Appreciate the details and listen to them carefully. Don't prematurely dismiss familiar stories or themes.
- When listening to the details, get inside the scene the older person is describing.
- Be alert to the values that may not be obvious amidst the details.
- Don't assume details contain hidden commands for us.

E. Uncoupling (*Was it something I said?*)

- Seemingly being dismissed or ignored by an elder.
- Uncoupling is a useful marker, a signal that we need to rethink our approach to the other person because they are not ready to hear what we are saying.

Effective Communication Rules for Uncoupling

- Uncoupling is not fatal; it's a signal that we need to find another way to express, or package, what we are trying to say. It's a sign our connection needs fine tuning.
- Rethink the objective: is my goal compatible with my elder's goals of maintaining control and discovering a legacy?
- Uncoupling is not a hang up; it's a disconnect. Ask the same questions in a different way.
- Give elders the chance to exercise the roles that our culture denies them: that of the wise, experienced head of the family with knowledge and wisdom to impart.

A very useful book, worth reading in its entirety!

