

## RESPECTFUL DIALOGUE

By Suzanne Davies

**Communications Model** (One option for an intervention strategy when doing front-line political work, especially for white activists working to educate/organize other white people)

1. Listen and acknowledge
2. Reflect back
3. Do discovery
4. Educate
5. Make a plan

These steps are not linear and don't necessarily need to happen in this order. Steps 1 & 2 are by far the most important when trying to communicate with someone.

A person speaks with more than just her/his voice. It is therefore important to listen with more than just our ears. A person's tone and body language will communicate a lot of information.

Steps 1 & 2 above are active listening and the most important part of communication. Gil Lopez' work goes into these two steps in much greater detail. Most people really just want to know that they've been heard and can become remarkably receptive to what you would like to communicate back if/when they feel heard. Listening is a skill that takes practice. It can be useful to acknowledge that whatever is being communicated is true for the speaker at that moment. I may not like or agree with what you are saying, but acknowledging that it is true for you right now encourages me to listen to you, rather than immediately reacting to my beliefs about your statement. Reflecting back is important to both let the speaker know they have been heard and also to make sure what you are hearing is what was said. It is easy to sometimes be inaccurate in our perceptions. Some ways to do this are: "If I am hearing you correctly...or What I hear you saying is...or I'm not sure I'm with you, but...or I wonder if you're saying...or Let me see if I am understanding you correctly..."

Step 3 is a way of getting more information by asking questions. Open-ended questions can be especially effective. "What...?" or "How....?" are some examples of open-ended questions that leave the speaker with complete control over the response. Sometimes a statement such as "Please say more.." or "Please describe..." is more effective. It is helpful to avoid asking the question "Why?" when using active listening techniques and also to avoid questions that can be answered with a simple "Yes" or "No."

Step 4 is where we tell the truth with compassion and as Sharon Martinas teaches us, to challenge the behavior while respecting the person. The method with the most integrity (as well as being the most effective) is to speak from our own experience by using "I" statements. For example "I used to think that I wasn't racist either until..." or "I used to think all of the people of a certain group were....until..." It is important to tell your own truth here to the level that you are comfortable with to show another person that where you are today is a result of smaller steps taken, just like the conversation this person is having with you is a step for them. This can be scary work for white activists to acknowledge their racist roots. It can be very important to share how you changed and why. It can also be humbling because it is often easy to see ourselves as very different from the people we are trying to educate. By sharing our own experiences we are giving other white people a chance to identify with us for our integrity and anti-racist principles rather than trying to bond through racism or ignorance. We will certainly not always convince a person of our view, but at the very least we can plant some powerful seeds. This step is not about engaging in a battle of wills with another person or entering into a lengthy debate. It may be as simple as saying "I disagree with you and here's why..." This is also a great opportunity to clear up any misconceptions people might have about the issues at hand, for instance what Affirmative Action does and doesn't do, how and why it gets implemented, and the consequences of losing it.

Step 5 is very important because it allows a person to make a commitment to their next step in the process. The "Million Voices for Justice" petitions are very well worded for this purpose in that they include two ways for people to commit. The first is that they are agreeing to do all that they can (it would be O.K. to offer suggestions) to oppose any legislation or ballot initiative that would outlaw affirmative action, and the second is that they can check the volunteer box. It is

great to encourage people "that don't have time to volunteer" to get ahold of some petitions and get their friends, co-workers, & families to sign them and/or also to commit to having a few conversations about the issues with people they know. In this way they are unwittingly employing the "Each One Teach One" strategy. It is important to make a plan with people who disagree with us as well, if you can. This is the payback for having just listened to them spew their stuff. Not everyone will be willing or able to make a plan, but it doesn't hurt to try. It might be appropriate to encourage someone who is unsure about signing to get more information about it -- especially white women who will be directly affected by the loss of affirmative action. This might mean giving a person a flyer or letting them know about upcoming events or newspaper articles you have read.

Communication and listening are skills that take practice. Some levels of effective listening are:

- Beginning: \* Stop thinking/analyzing/judging and stop talking.  
\* Restate the speaker's words exactly (parroting).
- Intermediate: \* Paraphrase the speaker's statements in your own words.  
\* Reflect in words the speaker's underlying feelings/emotions.
- Advanced: \* Identify and communicate the implications/consequences of the speaker's message.

This material was lifted/synthesized by Suzanne Davies. The above 5-step model is utilized by NHI, a massage school in Emeryville. (6/26/95 Write:Commun.suz)