



PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT: CHANGING YOUR COMMUNICATION HABITS ONE STEP AT A TIME

We are what we do repeatedly,
Excellence, therefore, is not an act,
It is a habit.
-- Aristotle

The concept of practice applies to any skill that you want to cultivate. If you take up a new musical instrument, you will need to practice a while before you're ready to give your first concert. In Aikido, the martial art I study and teach, we get on the mat many times each week to practice and perfect our technique.

Improving our communication habits also requires practice. The problem with holding difficult conversations is we often find ourselves in performance mode before we have the chance. It is important to learn the skills of effective communication and to take the time to practice them.

There are many excellent books, teachers, and workshops that will teach the skills, then help you to practice and improve. Seek them out. Make a commitment to read one book or attend a workshop every few months.

You can also learn from your successful conversations as well as the ones that don't turn out as expected. By bringing awareness to what you did well and what you might have done differently, you gradually become more proficient. Here are some ways to bring that awareness to bear in the moment, and to continue to practice communicating more clearly and purposefully:

- **Increase Awareness.** Notice whether your communication style is accomplishing your goals. If not, try something different.
- **Acknowledge.** What is your positive hope for the communication? What is theirs? Recognize that you are both doing your best, and give yourself and your partner the benefit of the doubt.
- **Keep it safe.** Maintain a calm, centered attitude, a respectful demeanor, and a positive purpose.
- **Cultivate curiosity.** Develop an open, curious, and interested frame of mind. Regardless of what your conversation partner says, try to see their centered intent and respond appropriately.
- **Practice, Practice, Practice.** Try new techniques and learn from them. If you tend toward a passive and accommodating style, try offering a different opinion on occasion. If the opposite is true and you are on the talkative side, stop yourself and listen more. Ask questions. Try being curious.

A tourist stopped a New Yorker on the street and asked: "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" The New Yorker replied: "Practice!" An old joke, but a good one. The point is that change takes place gradually over time. Try one adjustment today. Review the suggestions above, and pick one. Let me know what happens. Take time to enjoy your newfound power. And most of all – have fun!

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