

CHAPTER 5

How We Communicate

Human relationships can be divided into two fundamental types: vertical and horizontal. Within this division there are many more subdivisions. We enter mutual relations with others in different dimensions and directions.

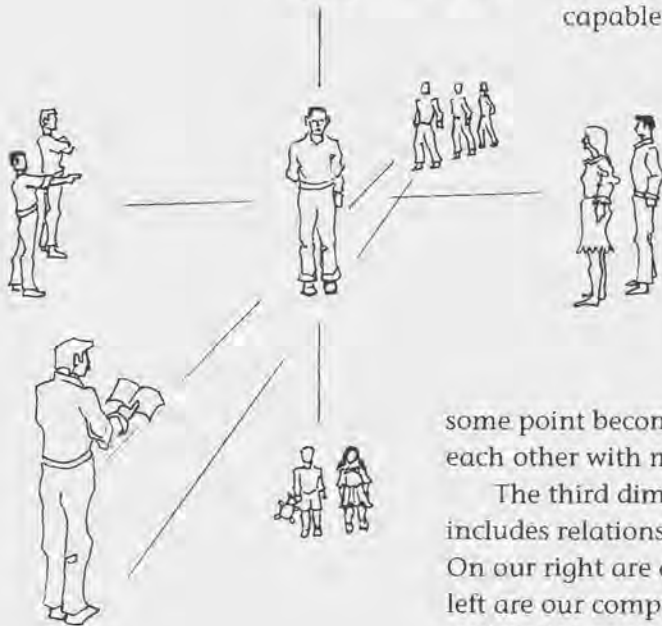
The first dimension is purely vertical and reflects the interrelations of generations. We can say that our seniors (parents, teachers, other adults) are “higher” and possess some kind of authority, whereas children and younger people are “lower”. This does not mean that the people in the “upper” position are more valuable than those in the “lower” one. It simply signifies that the nature of the relationship is vertical – from up to down, older to younger – and that there is a certain “one-way” nature in the relationship. For example, a child cannot say to his parents, “Hurry up! Sit down at the table and eat properly”, but his parents do have this authority. In many cultures, the language itself reflects this principle and relational truth. Language often differentiates words and expressions depending on the relative position of the people involved.



The second dimension assumes a combination of the vertical and horizontal factors and reflect relative competence. Leaders of some groups are our peers who happen to be more capable and experienced than us, while in other groups there may be adults that guide us, such as our teachers. These relationships have a clear order but, unlike those of an absolute vertical order, they can and do change with time. Thus, over time a student may come to surpass her teacher in knowledge of the subject matter. Moreover, students often have the opportunity to take a subjective role in their class when they present material, report about projects and give various types of presentations.

Any person who is now a subordinate may at some point become a superior. Recognizing this helps both sides to treat each other with mutual respect.

The third dimension presents the purely horizontal factor and includes relationships which can be characterized as “right” and “left”. On our right are our brothers and sisters, colleagues and friends. On our left are our competitors, opponents and those we treat with indifference or detachment. These kinds of relationships are usually “two-way” because they imply that both parties are on the same level and that they relate to each other in the same way. But in life we often observe a breach of such reciprocity. For example, between husband and wife





there may be a longing for intimacy and trust on one side that is not reciprocated by the other.

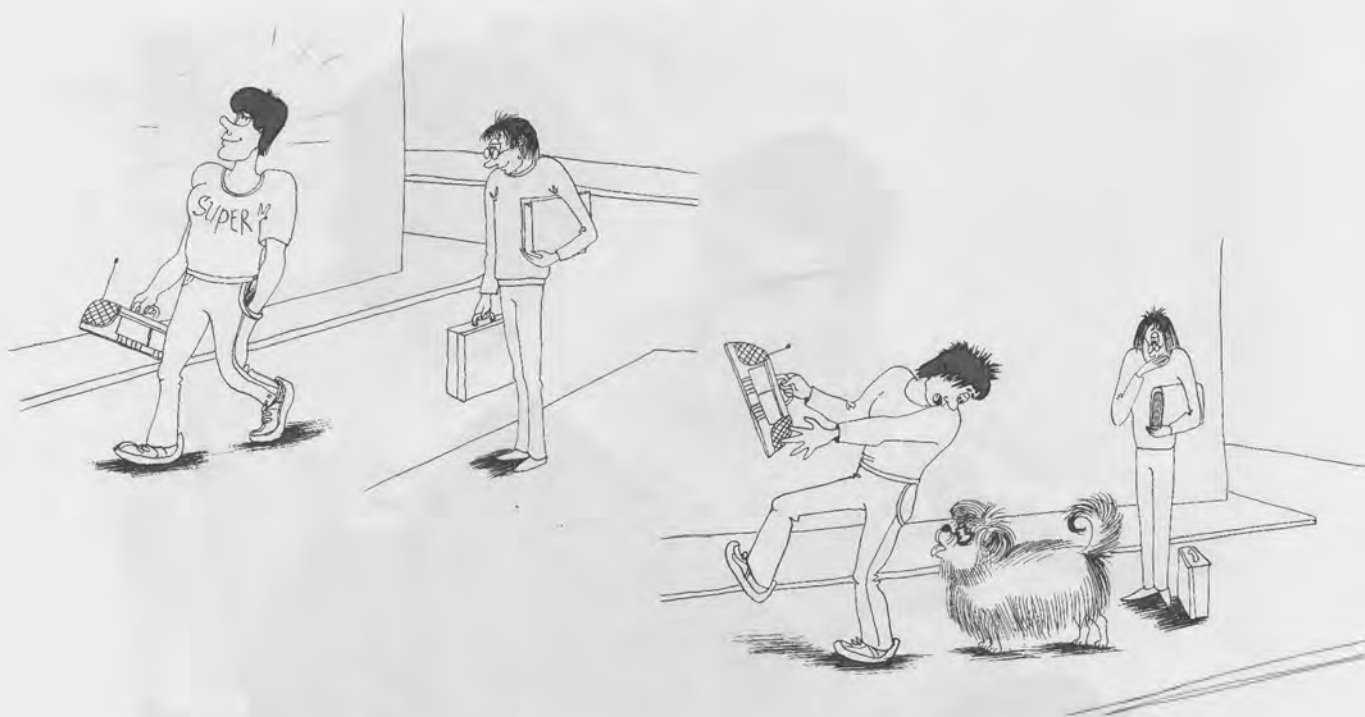
We easily communicate with our friends and with those with whom we feel sympathetic, but are often unwilling to relate with our rivals, opponents or those who wish us ill. Many of us would be glad to avoid such relationships altogether, but this is a mistake, because eventually such relationships may turn out to be fruitful.

Abraham Lincoln, one of America's greatest presidents, was one man who did not shy away from such people. In 1864, as he campaigned for re-election, he was faced by a determined and malicious opponent, Charles Seward, from within his own party. Seward used every opportunity to degrade Lincoln's character. In the end Lincoln won the nomination of his party and the election. After it was over, he astonished his aides by asking Seward to take a senior post within his administration. How could he work with such an enemy? Lincoln was sure that he could make a friend out of his enemy. Moved by the new president's big-heartedness, Seward became an important member of the government and a friend. When Lincoln was shot a few months later, it was in Seward's arms that he died.

The truth is that there is no one who is incompatible with us. True, some people are more difficult to relate to, perhaps very difficult. However, such people challenge us to make more effort to love them. If we can do that, then we will have the added bonus of being able to love all such people of similar character.

In order to establish any relationship, it is necessary to meet the person, get acquainted and feel some friendly attraction. The exception is in the family where all members know each other naturally. But the majority of relationships, especially horizontal ones, develop on the basis of mutual purpose or personal attraction. There are perils with this way, because one's first impression may be not the most accurate. Studies have discovered the following most frequent mistakes:

- ✗ **Inequality.** We tend to overestimate people who surpass us in a feature significant for us. For instance, if I am physically weak, I overestimate a physically strong person, automatically attaching to him other noble qualities.



- ✘ **Preconception.** We have a higher opinion of those who like us and a lower opinion of those who dislike us. For instance, lovers usually do not see any drawbacks in each other at first.
- ✘ **External impression.** We often judge a person by their outward appearance. For instance, we tend to attribute kindness and intelligence to a good looking person. It was Gogol who wrote: “Beauty works genuine miracles. All the spiritual drawbacks of a beautiful woman, instead of causing disgust, become somehow extremely attractive”.



Kindle at every meeting, whenever you can, a candle of love. Bring joy and inspiration to every heart. Take care of every person as your own family member. Give to strangers the same love and kindness that you give to your close friends.

— Abdul-Baha (Baha'i faith)

These mistakes happen because we already have an idea of the kind of person with whom we want to communicate and befriend. As soon as we meet a possible future partner, we just take this ready notion and label the person with it. Each of us has “reserves” of such desired images, which emerge when we encounter others.

In such ways we form our friendships. But there is always the danger that something will destroy a good relationship and friends may become enemies. There may be arguments or misunderstandings, resulting in mutual avoidance and even hostility. However, there are tried and tested ways to preserve a friendship.

The most important thing is mutual understanding. Members of a group must “speak the same language”. In their conversation they use words and expressions in the same manner. Personal relationships are deepened by doing activities together, such as playing games and doing other things of interest. Relationships have a great opportunity to deepen especially when they involve activities that benefit other people.

Very significant is what psychologists call empathy—feeling, suffering and rejoicing together. Empathy engenders trust, tolerance and openness. It helps us to be sensitive to each other and it can prevent people from hurting each other. When one communicates with a close friend, every word, every expression, every gesture carries meaning. Finally, it is vital to remember: every person is different, so we should approach others sensitively. Communication in this way is positive and will improve any relationship.

Individual Exercise



You overhear the following conversations in the hallway at school. Which one sounds strange to you? Why?

Dialogue A

Misha (ninth grade student): Hey, Alexei, what's up? I thought that biology test on Friday was way too hard. How did you do?

Alexei (ninth grade student): Misha, I thought that the test was very fair and if you had studied for once you would have thought so, too!

Misha: Gee, Alexei, I think you're crazy. That test was too hard. I don't have all day to study, you know.

Alexei: Maybe the next test will be easier for you, Misha.

Misha: Yeah, maybe. Hey, where are you going now? Do you have a coin for a phone call?



Dialogue B

Misha (a ninth grade student): Hey, Sergei, what's up? I thought that biology test on Friday was way too hard. What are you trying to do by giving your students an exam like that?

Sergei Bovis (biology teacher): Misha, I thought that the test was very fair and if you had studied thoroughly for it you would have thought so, too.

Misha: Gee, Sergei, I think you're crazy. That test was too hard. I don't have all day to study, you know.

Sergei: Maybe the next test will be easier for you, Misha.

Misha: Yeah, maybe. Hey, where are you going now? Do you have a coin for a phone call?

See the Appendix for the psychological test pertaining to this lesson.

