

Constructive Communication in the Family – The 7 Steps of Equitable Communication

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One of the most important questions we can ask ourselves is surely: "How do we communicate with each other?" How can I say something so that the recipient understands correctly and my message comes across clearly without being hurtful?

On 16 September, UPF Frankfurt held a 3-hour seminar in the Stegstraße center on this topic which attracted about 20-25 participants from the greater Frankfurt area. An interesting mixture of age groups –ranging from teenagers, 'tweens' and 'oldies'- was represented.



Gesine Otto, a social worker who has been a mediator for almost twenty years, conducted this seminar on the invitation of Hilde Piepenburg. The communication was divided into colors of the traffic-light: red, amber and green. Are too many of my words loaded with negative emotions (red area), quickly provoking conflict? Or do I express my concerns and problems without reproach/criticism/analysis (amber area – neutral)? Am I able to express myself positively and constructively (green area)?

The art of equitable communication is especially important in the family. But this also applies in other areas in which people have to express differing points of view (eg in politics). To start with, Gesine Otto gave us more insight into her mediation concept „Fairness in RED-AMBER-GREEN“ for all age groups. This was presented very concretely with the „Fairness Circle in RED-AMBER-GREEN“, consisting of three correspondingly colored cloths set in the middle of our circle of chairs.

Interestingly, the „Golden Rule“, is according to Gesine - depending on formulation - an „AMBER rule“:

„Whatever you don't wish done to you - don't do to another. “

According to Gesine Otto AMBER means for example, to neglect RED (and GREEN).

The „RED rule“= to do something harmful towards another

The „AMBER rule“= to do nothing harmful towards another

The „GREEN rule“= to do something good for another: „do unto others as you would have them do unto you. “



After practical exercises and active participation, we continued directly into the unconscious part of communication; at this point I would have been grateful for a coffee break, which was unfortunately not possible due to time constraints.

It is common knowledge that the iceberg is a symbol for the unconscious. Two examples were given to illustrate this:

Example 1: What makes someone yawn? Boredom? Tiredness? Lack of coffee? Lack of oxygen? Provocation? Hunger? Thirst? Sympathetic yawning (it is „infectious“)?

Example 2: „The Story of the Hammer“ from Paul Watzlawick’s book „Instructions on Un(happiness)“ (1983) as an example of acting on assumptions.

In order to communicate constructively, we have to ‚dive down‘ the ‚iceberg‘ from top to bottom and look for at least three different reasons which are hidden, for a visible action.

As a symbol for constructive communication, Gesine laid a bunch of three colored plastic keys on the green area on the floor inside the circle. They represent our cooperatively prepared „door-opening words“ - in the version suitable for children these are for example „thank you“, „please“, „sorry“.



On the red cloth there was a stuffed cloth pig for „whoop it up!“ for the audience participation exercises.



7 steps of equitable communication with the „iceberg“. - The story: „Hurray, a winner! Drat, a loser!“

The final part of the presentation dealt with feelings. Everyone deals internally with feelings that are unconsciously projected externally. What is it really all about? Do we really listen to what concerns the other, and are we able to recognize his emotional state? Do we put on our green glasses and ask: "How was it for you?", „What could I have done?“.

At the very end, we were given some insights into the essential characteristics of mediation and systematic consensus as a fair method of choice. Mrs. Otto recommended many books, quotes and films, and had laid out a selection in transparent plastic covers; discussion could have continued for hours!

It would be really desirable if UPF Frankfurt could offer such a seminar again. Perhaps in spring next year?

Projects by Gesine Otto (Wien/Mainz) can be found under the link www.kommstruktiv.de and at Xing / LinkedIn