

# EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Message sending: It's not just something you do when you have a dose of ink, a piece of parchment, and a silver piece to pay some flighty boy named Toner in a lob-sided piper hat. You are sending messages, that is to say, communicating, in everything that you say or do with relation to others. Even when you are not saying anything at all, you are communicating. When two or more people don't communicate effectively, something bad happens; it could be as minute as not seeing a particular movie on the night that you had wanted to, or it could be a major war that costs millions of lives. We've each seen virtually all the possibilities within our brief lifetimes, yet we still haven't learned to do it differently.

Effective communication is about getting more of what you want; it is about giving others more of what they want; it is about making the most out of our time on this crazy little spaceship we've all been quarantined on. Many tools have been known to improve the effectiveness of our communication, and we are going to focus on four of them: Assertive Communication, taking Accountability for behaviors, giving and receiving Feedback, and communicating emotions with the "I Feel..." Statement.

If you are among the vast majority who could use improvement in your communication style, you're probably wondering why in Starthmorta's name the staff of Magestry (a "game that I play to have fun and not to be told that my communication skills suck, so back off, man!") insists on cramming this down your breastplate. Well, in respect for the subject matter, we will be *assertive* with you and answer that we are interested in both maximizing our own fun at the game and retaining as many of our players as possible. Live-Action Role-Playing, or any Role-Playing game for that matter, is, by its nature, a competitive thing. Players are frequently pitting themselves against the challenges they are faced with and even against the skill advancement of their peers. This makes our virtual world a tight little pressure cooker, and effective communication is the only way to release enough steam so that it doesn't blow up and deal massive splash damage. And no one has boiling water immunity. Think about it...

## ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION

Assertive communication is the most effective way to communicate with people to achieve your desired message without backing them into emotional corners. Actually, the other three communication tools we will cover are assertive tools, but they are useful for specific instances while assertive communication is always useful.

Too often in our dialect, speakers are passive or aggressive.

**Passive communication** consists of holding back true emotions and wants, lying, avoidance, or blaming others indirectly (assuming the role of the victim).

**Aggressive communication** consists of sarcasm, name-calling, threats, and blaming directly ("it's your fault").

**Assertive communication** lies comfortably between passive and aggressive communication. It consists of actively listening, decision-making, cooperation, and openness.

As an example: If you are going out to a night at the movies with your friends and you have been waiting to see *The Sassy Little Princess Pony*, rather than saying, "I don't care what we see, you guys pick." Or sarcastically spouting, "Oh, yeeeah, I'd love to see *Murder by Spinach Casserole*, you dorks." Try simply being assertive: "Though *Murder by Spinach Casserole* sounds to me to be a trip to vomit-ville and I would rather see *The Sassy Little Princess Pony*, I am willing to see whichever happens to be the consensus of the group. Let's take a vote." Boom. Done. You might not get to see the film that you wanted to, but at least you didn't waste the night being indecisive *and* your choice became a consideration, making it more apt to be the decision on the next movie night.

Below is a table to help you quickly identify what kind of communication is being used:

Non-Verbal	Verbal			Non-Verbal
<b>Withdrawn</b>	<b>Passive</b>	<b>Assertive</b>	<b>Aggressive</b>	<b>Assaultive</b>
Stares	Whining	Active Listening	Blaming	Violence
Gestures	Blaming	Making Choices	Name-Calling	Rage
Isolation	Indirectness	Giving Choices	Sarcasm	Stealing
Avoidance	Dishonesty	Honesty	Profanity	Vandalism
	Avoidance	Directness	Threats	
	"Whatever"	Accountability	Loud Volume	

Passive relationships never reach full potential and aggressive relationships eventually self-destruct. Know it.

## ACCOUNTABILITY

This one is simple and obvious. Be responsible and take accountability for your actions and mistakes; it will gain you the respect of your peers, leaders, and followers and make them more apt to give you what you want (emotionally, that is). Apologizing helps, too. We all know at least one person who can never take accountability for his or her mistakes, and we know what we feel and think about that person. Enough said.

## FEEDBACK

Feedback is verbal or written information given to a friend or colleague for the purpose of modifying his or her behavior. There are two types of feedback: affirmative and constructive.

**Affirmative Feedback** is used to inform the receiver that something he or she has done was effective, helpful, correct, and appreciated. Its purpose is to reinforce behavior so that the person continues it in the future.

**Constructive Feedback** is used to inform the receiver that something he or she has done was destructive or problematic. Its purpose is to correct the behavior so that the person will know better and do better the next time.

Feedback should never be used for attacking, and recipients should try to always be open to it and not take offense. Justifying feedback you are given is ineffective (“I did it because...” or “I did no such thing!”). Remember, you are being given feedback because the person giving it to you truly believes it is necessary. It’s not easy for them to give, so why bother if they don’t think it will help? Perhaps the feedback is only one person’s perspective, but it is worth listening to and respecting it for the observation that it is. Also, remember that the person you are giving feedback to may be completely aware of his or her behavior and does not intend to modify it. Simply because you are giving feedback does not mean the behavior will change.

Avoid using words like “should” or “need to” in your feedback to others; they will not be as open to it if you try to tell them that the way you think they should act is the only way. You will find the subject of your feedback even more resistant if you categorize him or her. “You are a bad role-player and you need to improve or go home,” is not nearly as effective as, “I noticed that you were talking about playing video games, and I think that Magestry would be more enjoyable if you tried your damndest to stay in-game.” If you reference a very definite occurrence that you observed and then state how you believe the behavior could be improved, you will be more successful. Remember that feedback is criticizing a particular behavior only and not making a judgment about the person.

Seek out feedback, ask for it, and then use it.

## THE “I FEEL...” STATEMENT

We each perceive the world in a unique way, and our perceptions are formulated solely by our beliefs and emotions. Though we are often quite aware of our beliefs, how often do we question why we believe these things? If you believe that women are worse drivers than men, is it because you were recently side-swiped by a female motorist and still feel angry that your new car was banged? Or, is it because you’ve heard the claim multiple times from different sources and assume it to be simply a universal truth? Whatever the situation and whatever your belief, your thoughts about it were probably sculpted by your emotions. The “I Feel...” Statement was designed to help us become more aware of our emotions and beliefs and direct us toward behaviors that help us achieve what we want in the future, both by helping us formulate a plan of action for our own behavior and telling others how we hope they will behave. It helps us become aware of what is within our control and what is not. If you are familiar with that branch of kinda-sorta-science called psychology, you are probably familiar with this tool and everything else we’ve discussed thus far. Know that the purpose of these tools is merely to improve your relationships through effective communication and not to clinically treat emotional problems.

There are five parts to the “I Feel” Statement: the emotion, the *specific* event (the “when”), the belief, the future hope that is within your control (“hope for myself”), and the future hope that is out of your control (“hope for others”). The structure looks something like this:

I feel/felt \_\_\_\_\_ when \_\_\_\_\_.  
I feel/felt this way because I think/believe \_\_\_\_\_  
In the future, I hope for myself \_\_\_\_\_.  
In the future, I hope for others \_\_\_\_\_.

As an example:

“I felt embarrassed when my pants fell down, revealing my Captain Planet boxer shorts, and some people laughed.

I felt this way because I think Captain Planet is a sissy and his presence on my under-shorts suggests that they are polluted.

In the future, I hope for myself that I don’t forget my belt at ballet class.

In the future, I hope for others that they will not laugh if my pants fall down again.

To practice both this format and your listening skills, try reflecting your friend’s “I Feel” Statement by reciting it back to him, allowing him to correct you when you make a mistake. Actually, reflecting feedback you receive is also very helpful.

Be careful not to let the “I Feel...” Statement be used for manipulation of the emotions of others (“I feel angry when you are a stupid-head!”). Take accountability for your own actions and emotions and simply make others aware of the way you are feeling and allow them to both have their own emotions about the situation and make a decision about how they want to modify (or repeat) their behavior in the future. Once you become proficient in the format of the “I Feel...” Statement, you are free to modify it so that it better resembles actual speech and not some fruity-sounding clinical incantation.