**Critical Communication Errors**

As I talk with people each week, I often hear about things people say that really get in the way of effective and respectful communication.  I am not sure that it is often done with intention, or perhaps more often, in haste, out of impatience, or due to conflict.  In any event, these words prevent understanding and often undermine the important relationships we have here at NDSU.  Here are a few things to avoid, and how to respond to them:

*“Why would you do that?”  “Shutting your door to avoid work isn’t going to help you.”*

**\*Making assumptions.** You may have an idea about what’s going on for a person, but you have no way of knowing for sure until you ask.

*“That was simply WRONG.”*  (Criticizing)       *“This is all your fault.”*  (Blaming)        *“You know what your problem is?”*  (Diagnosing)

**Judging** a person and what he or she is doing or saying results in defensiveness, misunderstanding, and even feeling unsafe.

**Offering solutions** by:

Ordering – *“You need to fix that right away.”*

Threatening – *“If you don’t do this, I won’t help you.”*

Moralizing – *“You should apologize to her.”*

Excessive Questioning – *“When did it happen?”  “Are you sorry?”  “What did you say then?”  “Wow, do you regret saying that?”  “What did he do then?”*

Advising – *“Here is what I think you should do…”*

**Surprise**:  Offering solutions in these ways can leave others feeling manipulated, coerced, demeaned, anxious, dependent and resentful.

**Avoiding concerns** by:

Diverting – *“If you think that’s bad, let me tell you what happened to me!”*

Logical Argument – *“If you keep saying that kind of stuff to Susan, you can expect this treatment.”*

Reassuring – *“You have the tools to handle this.  You’ll deal with it and get over it.”  “This too shall pass.”*

**Impact**:  When we avoid others’ concerns, they leave feeling unheard, unimportant, and diminished.

**How can we respond effectively in the face of the examples above?**

Assumptions:  Name it.  In other words, say something like, “I feel as though you are making an assumption about my intentions.  I’d like to tell you why I did [x]…”

Judging:  If you frequently communicate with people stuck in the “blame game”, consider talking privately with them about that style of communication.  Criticizing, blaming, and diagnosing is a destructive communication style that typically avoids problem solving and focuses on finding fault.  Talk with the individual about the value of finding solutions and learning from mistakes, and how judging and blaming leads to a lack of accountability and responsibility that grows out of fear of being blamed and criticized.

Offering Solutions:  If you work with others who constantly have the answer, here are a more civil response:  “I hear your idea and (*not but*) it’s important that we consider all ideas to reach the best decision.”  As a Chair or supervisor, it’s important that you engage your supervisees in the problem-solving process and seek their input, lest they blame you for your ideas when things don’t work.  Of course, you need to respond directly often, but when it involves interpersonal conflict, help them to solve their own issues.  Listening can be the best offense and defense.

Avoiding Concerns:  If you feel that your underlying concerns are being dismissed or ignored, be more pointed and direct in your language:  “I understand it’s a difficult issue, but I really need help in getting to the underlying cause and I believe it is…”.  Often people avoid concerns because it makes them uncomfortable, and so finding respectful ways to discuss sensitive issues can help with resolution.

**Here are some resources to help along these lines:**  Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, Switzler (2011).  Crucial Conversations:  Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*.* McGraw-Hill; 2 edition.  Stone, D., Patton, B., & Heen, S. (1999).Difficult conversations: How to discuss what matters most. New York: Penguin Books.