


6-2018

A COMMUNICATION GUIDE FOR EX-OFFENDERS

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A COMMUNICATION GUIDE FOR EX-OFFENDERS

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
Communication Studies

by
Richard Anthony Contreras

June 2018

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ABSTRACT

Incarceration rates and the release rate of ex-offenders into the community are both increasing. Studies have shown, on a consistent basis, that, while incarcerated, ex-offenders experience lower literacy levels than the general population, suffer emotional and mental distress from a harsh prison life, and suffer from the negative effects of public perception. Ex-offender anger abounds. These factors interfere with an inmate's ability to communicate effectively. Notwithstanding, upon release from custody, how do we help such ex-offenders communicate? Many handbooks exist to help former inmates. However, the vast majority only offer assistance with locating government social services agencies, obtaining documents, and helping with jobs. A few offer help with finding mentors. However virtually none assist with communication techniques. Utilizing clear and simple language, *A Communication Guide for Ex-Offenders* fills this gap. The guide consists of three sections: the first defines basic concepts of communication, including contextual and cultural aspects. Additionally, it contains information on how ex-offenders can communicate more effectively despite suffering from various mental and emotional issues. Finally, a theoretical application focuses on the importance of disclosing information and making a favorable impression. At the end of each section, there is a review of concepts. This manual will also contain two new features in the application of communication studies and the ex-offender population: A communication 'Bill of Rights' for ex-offenders and a pledge on ex-offender responsibilities

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To those who have helped me on this journey:

Professor C. Mo. Bahk: Dr. Bahk, as my committee Chair, your guidance was invaluable. Thank you for your leadership which made this project possible. It was an honor to work with you Sir.

Professor Fred Jandt: Your immense experience in our field is legendary. Thank you Dr. Jandt for your wisdom. I enjoyed learning from you.

Professor Liliana Conlisk-Gallegos: ‘Dra. Liliana’, ¿Qué más le puedo decir? Su ejemplo nos guía a nosotros—especialmente a los estudiantes latinos y latinas. Sabemos que como usted lo hizo, ¡Sí se puede! Sinceramente, le digo <<gracias>> por sus consejos y por motivarme cuando yo lo necesitaba.

The CSUSB Community: To my fellow grad students and Communication Department Professors—thank you! To my university fam at the *Osher Adult Re-Entry Center*, a special shout out for your support; the coffee and camaraderie guided me to the finish line.

Friends and family: I appreciate those whom have supported me on this project. Thank you A.V. for your friendship.

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to the memory of my paternal grandmother **Apolonia Hernandez Contreras (1906-1993)** who was a strong, beautiful woman. For every man standing, there is a good woman who has been there for you.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Across the nation, many states are pushing for more serious incarceration penalties for serious, violent offenders. State legislatures and voters attempt to enact passage of laws that aim to reduce punishment for lesser crimes such as drug offenses, while increasing prison time for felony acts of murder and rape. This was the goal of Proposition 48 approved by California voters in November 2014. The approval of California Assembly Bill 109—the so-called “prison realignment” measure spurred the drastic reduction of the prison population and created community parole and probation programs to oversee the ex-offenders’ reintroduction into society (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation Fact Sheet, 2013, p. 1).

As a result of measures like these across the country the ex-offender population is ballooning. As of December 2015 (the latest figures available), the number of parolees in the United States stood at 870,526—which amounted to 350 parolees per 100,000 U.S. residents (Evans, 2018). All states had less than 45,000 parolees with the exception of three states. Pennsylvania (112,351), Texas (111,892), and California (86,053) contained 35% of the total U.S. parolee population (Evans, 2018).

The influx of felons on the streets creates many burdens—both real and imagined—in society. There are the infrastructural concerns: who will help care

for those probationers and parolees needing assistance? Who will shoulder the burden on community-service agencies and the healthcare system as both entities struggle to provide for the needs of such members as they reintegrate into society? Then there is the perception that the sudden release of offenders into the community will create fear, incite panic, endanger children, or increase crime rates. Even the newly-created agencies of community probation are overwhelmed. The average California state parole agent supervises a caseload that highly surpasses recommended numbers (St. John & Esquivel, 2014).

Certain ex-offenders in the community are able to adjust after release. They are able to obtain employment, attend school, find a place to live, and have an array of family and friendships that support them in their endeavors to be productive in society. However, what about those former inmates who are unable to make the transition sufficiently? They violate their terms and conditions of parole, repeatedly create malfeasance, or commit totally new crimes altogether. This results in a “revolving door” of inmates coming and going into and out of correctional facilities—even if they have a family or social support system, gainful employment or other favorable living conditions.

Purpose Statement

Part of the problem that ex-offenders face in the community as they attempt to adjust during their post-incarceration is the ability to communicate effectively to make their concerns known and get help. It is entirely possible that many ex-offenders fail to communicate clearly out of reasons of fear, distrust,

intimidation, frustration, or other existing health problems. Such ex-offenders' inabilities to communicate effectively could be a reason that hinders them from making crucial adjustments as productive members of society.

This project creates a guide that helps ex-offenders communicate more effectively. The importance of this is magnified due to issues that may prevent an ex-offender's adjustment to society: the lower literacy rates the ex-offender population has; the emotional, mental difficulties and anger that contribute to the ex-felons' difficulty of communication; and the negative perceptions of offenders by the public at-large that exacerbate the communication process. Therefore, the attached guide offers skills to help inmates improve their communication ability within the community after release from incarceration.

Defining the Need

To locate what handbooks for ex-offenders existed online, I utilized the Google search engine and typed in the following terms and phrases: 'handbooks for ex-offenders', 'manuals for ex-offenders', 'guides for ex-offenders', 'communication and ex-offenders', 'communication strategies for ex-offenders', and 'communication skills for released offenders'. An online search reveals that many handbooks for ex-offenders exist. Such handbooks are published by the U.S. government, state correctional agencies, and not-for-profit entities like churches and social services agencies. The majority of these handbooks direct former inmates to government resources such as obtaining state identification

cards, birth certificates and information on how to navigate Social Security programs; most, however, focus on obtaining jobs (Employment, 2011).

A few handbooks assist ex-offenders in finding mentors (Fletcher, 2007). One of the most comprehensive handbooks I located, *Reentry Begins with You*, contained chapters such as 'Health and Life Skills' and 'Friend/Family Relationships'; yet it offered scant information on communication skills (Reentry, 2014). I also found some blogs and books about the challenges of reentry and survival tips (Staff, 2016; Shrum, 2012). However, virtually none of these handbooks and other resources help ex-offenders with actual, real-life communication skills. Therefore, the guide fills in this gap.

Contents of Guide

This project *A Communication Guide for Ex-Offenders* consists of three parts and is written in clear, easy-to-understand language. The first section explains concepts and terms of basic communication. In this section, I define what a message is, who is involved and explain this utilizing a communication model diagram. I discuss the importance of context and culture. Additionally, and as it relates to specific situations an ex-offender might experience, I explain the communication concepts of space, touch, and time.

In the second section the guide delves into some of the feelings ex-offenders struggle with: inadequate intelligence, anger, depression. Since such feelings are often roadblocks to the absence or effective communication, I utilize conversation scenarios to improve communication-defeating feelings.

Finally, the third section introduces the theoretical aspects of communication privacy management and impression management. I present detailed instruction on how ex-offenders may decide to share information, with whom they might share, and ways they can communicate a positive impression in their daily lives. The conclusion of each section reviews a helpful listing of communication tactics. Included in the front and back covers of the guide is, what I believe to be a first in the study of applied communication and ex-offenders, a 'Bill of Communication Rights' and a 'Pledge of Communication Responsibilities' for ex-offenders.

Personal Interest

The focus on this topic is an intensely personal one. Years ago, I was incarcerated. I know what it is like to spend time behind the rattling bars of the jail doors that slam in your face. I know what it is like to deal with custody officials who know you as 'just a number.' The sights, sounds, and smells of being locked up in a cold, impersonal facility was a demeaning and degrading experience. Moreover, I witnessed the various mental and emotional breakdowns fellow inmates experienced.

After release, I knew my life outside would be different. It is oftentimes difficult for the ex-inmate to talk about that harsh experience of having been locked up. Sometimes I wondered who I could trust with my story. I have experienced the trepidation of sharing my experience. Since my release, I have learned to effectively communicate despite the challenges. I have wanted to help

others with similar struggles. The desire to write a handbook was borne out of these thoughts and experiences.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study and project. I conducted a literature review that focused on aspects of prison life. I researched limited literacy, emotional and mental stressors, stigmatization, and anger. I grounded my project findings on the theoretical applications of communication privacy management and impression management. Additionally, I relied substantially on auto ethnography to relate my experiences to the readers of my guidebook. I did not interview ex-offenders or any other people, therefore, I did not utilize Institution Review Board requirements.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication difficulties among the prison population are more predominant than that of people in general. Ex-offenders possess inadequate social skills; such social skills are “missing tools” instrumental in developing effective means of communication (Emmers-Sommer, et al. 2004).

Forrester-Jones (2006) found that imprisonment stifles communication among inmates in various ways: the physical environment is restrictive; authorities within the prison only allow ‘essential’ contact with visitors and medical officials; and that the penal system itself is designed to deny opportunities for prisoners to communicate. Among the beliefs within prison walls that officials have is that “face-to-face verbal communication and the development of relationships were generally not believed to be beneficial to those imprisoned there” (p. 223).

When these prisoners hit the streets, a harsh reality awaits them. Researchers have surveyed newly-released offenders and have found that ex-offenders struggle with many internal and external challenges. Western, Braga, Davis, and Sirois (2015) observed that factors such as unstable family ties, addiction, limited housing and unemployment led to feelings of anxiety, isolation. In turn, such feelings lead to socialization and communication problems (Western et al., 2015).

A majority of the research I present pertains with the ex-offender experience *during* confinement and custody. The negative feelings and emotions they present with upon release are based largely on the circumstances they encountered within the walls of a jail or prison. For the purpose of this project, I will look at factors that lead to negative feelings: lower literacy levels, emotional and mental distress, public perception and stigmatization, anger, as well as cultural considerations.

Lower Literacy Levels

Studies have consistently found low literacy levels in the general prison population and high level of functional illiteracy in specialized populations (Bryan, Freer, & Furlong, 2007; Miller, 2005; Bates, Davis, Gum, & Long, 1992). Further findings indicate that some groups of prisoners cannot function at simple tasks such as reading directions, or comprehension of a simple word problem. Kerka (1995) explains that:

Some 1,100 inmates from federal and state prisons in order to depict the state of the prison population and compare it to the general population. Of the 5 levels measured, 7 in 10 inmates performed on the lowest 2 levels, on the average substantially lower than the general population. Only 51% of prisoners completed high school compared to 76% of the general population. (p. 2)

Bates et al. (1992) tested two groups of inmates and found that the prisoners, on average, were only able to read at the fourth-to-sixth-grade level.

Fifty-one percent of survey participants reported that they repeated one or more grades, while nearly three-fourths (72%) said that they dropped out of high school (Bates, et al., 1992). Aborn, van den Toorn, Hockin, Jordon, Nayvelt, and Finkelstein (1999) connected the crippling effects many inmates with low literacy levels experience:

In California, half of all prisoners read at a level below the sixth grade. The 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey found that two-thirds of adult prisoners were unable to write a letter explaining a billing error or extract information from the average sports page story. These prisoners have grown up without an education and quite often, without much of an upbringing. With so few skills, they are without many prospects for future employment. In addition, as noted above, many of the prisoners enter with drug abuse problems. Compounding these pre-prison social problems is prison life itself which can be a devastating experience. Prisoners are separated from friends, family and community and life is extremely regimented with physical and mental activities restricted. When prisoners are freed, they return to society in much the same state that they began their sentences. ('The Current State' section)

The inability of inmates to comprehend instructions could interfere with functioning inside of a prison—let alone preparing them for future adjustment outside prison walls. In studying the communication abilities of young offenders, researchers were left to ponder: "How effectively do these young people with lower than average levels of language ability communicate, and does this level of

language ability affect their ability to benefit from [further] interventions?” (Bryan, et al. 2007, p. 515). In fact, some inmates have refused to participate in a research study inside prison out of the fear and embarrassment of not being able to read in front of others (Bates et al., 1992).

Emotional and Mental Distress

According to the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR), the sheer number of mentally-ill prisoners in California alone has skyrocketed in recent years. “In 1998, people with severe mental illness accounted for 11% of [the] state prison population. In 2003, it was 16%. In 2006, it was estimated to be 20%” (as cited in Spearlt, 2009, p. 280). As a result, much of prison services made available to inmates is done in the way of psychological counseling and psychiatric treatment.

Nevertheless, and by virtue of being incarcerated, many convicts suffer in a naturally harsh environment. Such an environment can be factored into prisoners’ feelings of depression and other incapacities. Often, people who are lonely and suffer from self-esteem issues are at a higher risk of committing violent acts and suicide (Segrin & Flora, 2001). Depression, fear, and anger can be barriers to effective communication among convicts (Hartnett, 1998; Vernon, 2010).

According to Guoa (2012):

New inmates tend to experience lower self-esteem, more anxiety and depression, and are more likely to suffer from a mental disorder; some of

them might end up committing self-mutilation, suicide, or violent behaviors toward fellow inmates and prison officials. Therefore, it is necessary that these inmates be considered for counseling not only for improvement of their mental health, but also for the maintenance of order and security in the prison. (p. 342)

There are accounts of slashing, cutting, hanging, and overdosing on medications as inmates attempt suicide. Ortega (2012) reported of three recent instances in an Arizona prison:

Otto Munster hanged himself with his shoelaces while in solitary confinement. Tony Lester slashed his throat, arms and groin with a razor blade he wasn't supposed to have because he was categorized as mentally ill. He bled to death. Rosario Rodriguez-Bojorquez killed himself while in solitary after being denied a request to be moved to protect him from other inmates. (para. 2)

Indeed, on the other side of prison walls, many adjustments—and often the inability to communicate—must be made by those incarcerated as they struggle to adapt. Valentine (1998) sets the stark scene for inmates in a Phoenix, Arizona women's prison:

Like this woman, the others detained behind these walls miss being 'in the real world' where they are able to control such everyday actions as opening the fridge for a snack or the bathroom cabinet for an aspirin. In addition to the loss of such freedoms, they have lost intelligent play, curiosity, unfettered affection (especially for other women), choice of

friends, and free expression. They especially miss being able to communicate without constant surveillance. (p. 38)

Married inmates also experience bouts of loneliness. Segrin and Flora (2001) found that while the “marriages of prison inmates... did not appear to be particularly distressed... the longer inmates are so isolated, the more they experience loneliness, and in general, married inmates were more lonely [sic] than their counterparts outside” (p. 170).

Another study, aimed at looking into speech anxiety of female prisoners was “conducted in the tense and stressful environment of a state prison [with] a group known for their communication difficulties” (Nickell, Witherspoon, & Long, 1989, p. 1351). Herman and Wasserman (2001) concluded that, “The process of reintegration for returning offenders who have few prospects and multiple handicaps—often made worse by long separations from families and communities—is inevitably difficult and hazardous” (p. 428).

Public Perception and Stigmatization

A look at news coverage reveals that crime is on the rise. Even those charged with a crime know how the negative perceptions might damage their chances in a favorable court outcome. In a paper on the investigation of so-called ‘white-collar’ crimes, one author noted: “Interviews with 14 offenders revealed that they perceived the reaction of the judiciary and media as negative” (Dhami, 2007, p. 57). One of the interviewees stated: “The local press were [sic] negative. The case was badly reported, sensational and biased against me, despite the

fact that the reporters weren't in the court to collect information for most of the hearing” (Dhami, 2007, p. 57).

Once inside prison walls, certain groups of offenders whose crimes were sexually-related are placed at the lowest levels of the prison inmate hierarchy. Such felons are viewed “as the lowest of the low in prison terms” (Asser, 2002, p. 11), and those that are released into the community face a harsh reality awaiting them due to negative public perception:

Due to the nature of sex crimes and their impact, no other criminal population generates as much public trepidation as sex offenders. The extensive media coverage of sex crimes is highly influential in public perception and legislative response. The media's interest regarding sex offenders may instill fears about public safety and the potential for victimization. (Bishop, 2010, p. 33)

According to Levenson and Hem (2007), those on probation or parole for a sex-related offense face many post-incarceration obstacles. The authors found that:

Residency restrictions seem to have unintended consequences that many now believe may make communities less safe rather than more safe [sic], because a poor residential situation makes an offender more likely to reoffend. These restrictions make it more difficult to find housing for released defendants/offenders, resulting in increased risk factors for recidivism, such as homelessness, transience, and instability. (as cited in Bishop, 2010, p. 34)

The year 2017 saw the advent of the ‘#MeToo’ movement. The social media campaign saw hundreds of thousands of women the world over march, protest, and demonstrate—in word and action—over an influx of celebrities accused over rape, molestation, and harassment with allegations (Gilbert, 2017). It is not hard to see how the movement could not increase negative perception for ex-offenders in the eyes of the public.

Additionally, ex-offenders face seemingly insurmountable obstacles to employment. Nearly 70 percent of potential employers conduct background checks prior to employment (Ali, Lyons, & Ryan, 2017). Those with a criminal history “tend to be stigmatized as dangerous, dishonest, and disreputable or lacking integrity” (as cited in Ali, Lyons, & Ryan, 2017, p. 1272). It is fathomable that such stigmatization compounds an anger many ex-offenders already feel.

Anger

Among ex-offenders, the feeling of anger is a palatable emotion. Individuals released from jail or prison are angry over perceived treatment while under confinement (Irwin, 2005). Some believe they were given an unfair sentence. Many are mad at themselves. Indeed, others feel ire and resentment over not being given a fair chance to make their way as productive members of society (Irwin, 2005). Criminologist Stanton Samenow (2004) noted why anger is so prominent with the ex-offender: “The criminal’s anger stems from the fear of not being in total control and the fear that things will not go his way. Only if his

thinking changes will he become more realistic in his expectations and thus be less angry” (p. 110).

In a longitudinal study Beijersbergen, Dirkzwager, Eichelsheim, Van der Laan, and Nieuwbeerta (2014) found that prisoners develop anger when they perceive that jailers do not treat in a just manner. The researchers tested 806 prisoners at two intervals (3 weeks, and at 3 months) and found marked differences when measuring the prisoners’ anger and misconduct. Using the grounds of procedural justice theory, they observed that over time, prisoners would use their anger over perceived unjust treatment as a means to violate prison norms and engage in misconduct. The researchers found that the results were one-directional, that the perception of the level of positive staff treatment predicted the amount of prisoner misconduct (Beijersbergen et al., 2014).

One prisoner commented on how restrictive administrative prison rules augmented many inmates’ ire: “I don’t know what it would take to get us to stand up to them. They took away our family visits. They took away our weights. They made us shave our beards and cut our hair. Next, they’ll tell us to bend over so they can fuck us in the ass” (Irwin, 2005, p. 161).

As the foregoing points discuss, factors and circumstances that lead to self-esteem and anger issues may inhibit communication. Differences in cultural upbringing can also inhibit communication.

Cultural Considerations

Here in the United States, we communicate differently than other parts of the world. In countries such as the United States there is a focus on individualistic qualities. In many parts of Asia, the focus is more on the group, or family relationship. Here, in the U.S. communication styles center on the individual, what communication researchers refer to as low-context (Kim, Pan, & Park, 1998). In a low-context culture, words are more implicit in their meaning. Communication styles are more direct. To be understood, speakers must communicate exactly what they mean (Kim, Pan, & Park, 1998).

The exact opposite to this is high-context culture. In these cultures, words are often left open to interpretation. The family and group setting take higher priority than an individual's concerns; socialization is more frequent. Communication styles are indirect (Kim, Pan, & Park, 1998). Often, one must guess at the real meaning behind what is being said. Literally, a 'yes' can mean a 'no', and vice-versa. People in some Asian cultures will avoid direct eye contact since they do not prefer confrontation; direct eye contact, to those of high-context cultures is seen as threatening behavior. In the U.S., however, this can be interpreted as a sign of guilt, disrespect, or cynicism (Kim, Pan, & Park, 1998).

For the ex-offender this can be problematic. For example, how do Asian offenders communicate with U.S. parole agents? Will the American offender unintentionally more likely to disrespect a law enforcement officer who comes from a high-context background? Often, in ex-offender-law enforcement relationships, a slight difference in communication style can possibly lead to

conflict, confrontation, and avail itself to consequences. Therefore, it is important to look at how cultural considerations can become a roadblock to effective communication.

What factors into an ex-offender's mind as he or she decides what information to reveal to others? To what extent should an ex-offender protect their information. Disclosure can be a tricky proposition. Additionally, how does an ex-offender make a favorable impression on others despite possessing an unsavory past? The theoretical foundations of communication privacy management theory and impression management theory help to shed light on this.

CHAPTER THREE

THEORETICAL APPROACH

In a prison setting, inmates, at first, are wary of meeting others. Fear and insecurity abounds. It takes some time for inmates to get to know each other, and even at the first instance of contact with another prisoner, little information is revealed. Self-disclosure is not easy. To know too much might involve harm; if other prisoners learn of rapists in their vicinity, for example, injury to the rapist-prisoner could be imminent. (Cotton & Groth, 1982). Inmates reveal even less of themselves to staff members. Trust issues dictate that the inmates only reveal the necessary identifying information (prison number, birth date, etc.) requested by jail officials (Cotton & Groth, 1982). When inmates (and later, as ex-offenders) decide to disclose information, how much of it do they decide to share, when do they share it and with whom?

Earlier theoretical ideas of self-disclosure stem from what was originally referred to as *social penetration*; how we exchange ideas interpersonally in our relationships can be encapsulated within a given framework (Altman & Taylor, 1973). In the process of maturing relationships, people, at first, will often speak in generalities; later, they may be comfortable in disclosing more and more intimate details about their person. Factors such as people's personal characteristics, exchange of outcomes—things people might agree or disagree with, and social environment, will influence what is said, when it is said, and help to determine if a relationship continues or terminates (Altman & Taylor, 1973).

Social penetration compared humans' personalities to the layers of an onion: The more we 'peel back', the closer we get to reveal the core of our inner selves. Since we have many layers of personality, we can decide to share what we want about ourselves, with whom we want, where we want, and when we want. This theory was first proposed as a 'minimax principle of human behavior' by philosopher John Stuart Mill in the 1800s. The tenets of the principle dictate that we tend to seek the benefits and minimize the potential costs (Griffin, 2012).

Communication Privacy Management Theory

In the years since the postulation of social penetration, researchers discovered that in real-life situations, what people decide to disclose was not based only on the cost/benefit dichotomy; there were other factors to consider (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2017). In 2004 communication scholar Sandra Petronio addressed these additional constructs with the ascension of the communication privacy management theory [CPM]. In her view disclosure is more complex. She contends that individuals are "constantly managing boundaries between public and private—between those feelings and thoughts they are willing to share with others and those they are not (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2017, p. 225).

Boundaries can be "permeable" or "impermeable". "Certain information can be revealed"; "other times it may never be shared" (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2017, p. 225). The permeability of the boundary can vary and can lead to a change of a person's autonomy or vulnerability level depending how much

information is disclosed (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2017). There are three main elements of CPM: *privacy ownership*, *privacy control*, and *privacy turbulence* (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2017). According to Petronio, in privacy ownership, the individual owns his or her own information. When someone else shares this information, he or she now takes on co-ownership of the shared information and also has a set of negotiated responsibilities, for example with whom, when, or where the information may be shared (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2017).

Privacy control takes into account how others may be affected when private information is shared. Littlejohn, Foss, and Oetzel (2017) give the example of a woman who finds out she is pregnant. She must figure out how and when she might disclose this news. Will she share it with her partner? Will she share it immediately with others as well, or wait until her pregnancy is noticeable? If and when she shares the pregnancy with her partner, the partner would now have a responsibility as co-owner of the information. The woman may have negotiated a 'pact of secrecy' wherein the partner must not reveal this private information for a certain period of time (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2017).

The boundary of when, how and when to share information depends on risk-benefit ratio. The person must decide if the benefits of doling out information to others outweighs the risks. Cultural differences, gender, situational considerations, and personal expectations also play a role in weighing the permeability of a boundary (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2017). For the pregnant woman, how she discloses can be based on a prior experience within the family as a reference point, for instance (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2017). Certain

catalyst rules also come into play during the privacy control process. *Core criteria rules* are those that are “persistent, routine, and dependable” (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2017, p. 226).

In the context of an offender in prison, his family may not discuss these circumstances with anyone outside the immediate family—and, this could last for years, if he is incarcerated for a long period of time. This is an example of a core criteria rule. However, when circumstances change years later, catalyst rules could come into play. As the inmate nears release, family members may have to move a disclosure boundary, now discussing with an outside family member where the ex-offender may live. While not discussing particular information about the ex-offender, a specific conversation about housing would now become a catalyst rule. Deciding boundary permeability can be tricky. Family members have to coordinate with one another how to manage shared information. Everyone’s story has to be straight. A brother must adhere with the negotiated rules of exactly what information can be shared with an uncle (outside the immediate circle) so as to not violate other immediate family members’ privacy ownership (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2017).

The third and final core element of the CPM is privacy turbulence. When rules of negotiation and privacy ownership are violated this can create conflict. Rules may be intentionally violated or disclosure may be unintentional—such as when a boundary is ambiguous (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2017). In the case of the pregnant woman, her partner may share the news with his mother out of excitement—swearing her to secrecy—in the belief that she, being his mother,

should know so as to guide him on how to deal with the situation. This is an example of an ambiguous boundary. If his pregnant partner finds out, there could be consequences such as hurt feelings and resentment.

Consequences could be more serious. If a man tells his brother he may have committed a crime and is sworn to keep it secret, this could cause multiple sanctions: the brother who now has the disclosed information may violate the boundary by notifying the police. His brother could be arrested, accelerating legal consequences. At minimum, although one brother may be relieved that he 'did the right thing', there could now be a violation of trust between the brothers resulting in a frayed relationship within the family. When privacy turbulence is created, the way negotiation of private information is shared now changes. Boundaries become less permeable and the rules of privacy ownership tighten (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2017).

When an ex-inmate decides to share information, he needs to make a favorable impression. Impression management theory explains how this can be achieved.

Impression Management Theory

Impression management theory (IM) dictates that people attempt to influence how people see them through the presented image. The resulting image, and perception gained by the viewer, seeks to take advantage of the presenter's goals (Ali, Lyons, & Ryan, 2017). This image is important when looking at an ex-offender's history and the relationship to job seeking. Since

much information is already public record, what is crucial is not whether the ex-offender decides to share his or her history, but *how* the information is shared (Ali, Lyons, & Ryan, 2017). Applying IM and other concepts, Ali, Lyons, and Ryan (2017) looked how ex-offenders used apology, justification, and excuse when discussing their previous criminal history during job interviews. The authors found that when such job seekers were apologetic this created an image of accepting responsibility (Ali, Lyons, & Ryan, 2017). On the other hand, justification and excuse presented negative images; and thus, reinforced stereotypes of the ex-offender as deceitful (Ali, Lyons, & Ryan, 2017). The importance of communication plays in the importance of justification and excuse messages sent during the interview are noted by a hiring manager Ali, Lyons, and Ryan (2017) interviewed:

I'm watching body language. I'm watching tone. I'm watching expressions when I ask for an explanation. For instance, I had a guy that was convicted of domestic violence. I asked him to explain, you know, what happened here? And this one didn't go too well because during his explanation, he felt like he did nothing wrong. (Ali, Lyons, and Ryan, 2017, p. 1271)

However, employers who are willing to listen to an inmate can also distinguish when an ex-offender is genuinely accepting responsibility and communicating it:

I have had an applicant convicted of assault and say, 'hey, you know I messed up, I really regret that I've done this and look what it's done to me in life, now here I am having to sit here and explain this time after time,

hoping that somebody will give me a shot.' At that point I can see, it's really the true them hopefully, and I'm always more than willing to help those individuals out. (Ali, Lyons, & Ryan, 2017, p. 1271)

Contextual Application

To date, no application has been found with the study of CPM with relationship to prisoners, ex-offenders, or otherwise in a criminal justice setting. Literature has focused on applications such as friendships (Kennedy-Lightsey, 2012); the workplace (Smith, 2017); health and disease (Ngwenya, 2016); social media (Frampton & Child, 2013); child-parent relationships (Hammonds, Braithwaite, & Soliz, 2010); a classroom setting (Schrodt, 2013); and sexual orientation (McKenna-Buchanan, 2015).

Oftentimes, information regarding to crime and the factual details included in the discussion are sensitive in nature. Compounded with low literacy, fear, mental instability, and anger, the decision of how to disclose can be problematic. Of particular interest to the ex-offender will be the 'how-to' aspect when dealing with law enforcement officials, parole agents, probation officers, employers, and family members. I will utilize scenarios that give real-life and applicable examples based on CPM, IM and other verbal and non-verbal factors of communication that may help them disclose information appropriately.

CHAPTER FOUR

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTION

Limitations

This project gives communication direction from the view of the ex-offender. It only deals with the communication defeating feelings of inadequate intelligence, depression, and anger. This is a limited scope as certainly there are other negative feelings to consider. Moreover, the communication instruction is given without regard for the gender of the ex-offender. Additionally, although some cultural aspects are considered, this guide only superficially, discusses communication from a cultural standpoint; the instruction is based from the author's low-context culture and obviously does not take into account various questions or concerns a high-context reader may have. Finally, this guide is limiting in the sense that it does not look at the other side of the ex-offender communication conundrum: that of the law enforcement, parole, or probation officer. Ex-offenders, in their early stages of release, come into contact with such officials on a weekly basis; and therefore, only one of the two-sided views of communication is considered. This is important due to the social negative bias that exists against ex-offenders.

Future Direction

It would be interesting for future research to look at aspects of gender, culture, and the law-enforcement perspective when helping ex-offenders

communicate. Researchers can expand on communication privacy management and how it relates to ex-offender communication. As far as has been looked at, this is the first time CPM has been studied with respect to ex-offenders. New laws such as 'Ban the Box' are only now being enacted and it remains to be seen how ex-offender disclosure will be fully impacted. Further research can look at these dynamics from both a qualitative and quantitative perspective.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Conclusion

Legislation has led to the increasing number of offenders released into society. Although some ex-offenders are successful in their re-entry, many are not. Help is available to these former criminals in the form of job assistance and other social agencies that provide counseling and other practical services. However, research has demonstrated the need to help ex-offenders with communication. Often, feelings of intellectual inadequacy, depression, and anger are roadblocks for effective communication for the ex-offender. Many of these feelings are the product of the often, harsh prison and jail environments from which these ex-offenders come. Additionally, societal stigmatization contributes to communication-defeating feelings these former inmates experience. Application of communication theories of disclosure and impression management can assist ex-offenders with their communication skills. While some research has been done with the ex-offender population in applied impression management theory, the same cannot be said for communication privacy management. Through a basic instruction of communication definition, conversation scenarios, and practical advice, the attached project guide will be a promising start in that direction

APPENDIX A
A COMMUNICATION GUIDE FOR EX-OFFENDERS

A Communication Guide for Ex-offenders

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By Richard Anthony Contreras

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Ex-offender's Communication 'Bill of Rights'

As an ex-offender you reserve the right to:

1. Be treated with respect.
2. Be spoken to in a dignified manner.
3. Be listened to.
4. Be unjudged.
5. Be given a fair chance to explain your circumstances.
6. Be treated fairly, according to all local laws and regulations.
7. Be able to withhold private information that may harm you.
8. Be given a chance to trust.
9. Be looked at as an individual.
10. Be treated according to your own merit.
11. Be treated as a person, and without respect to sexual identity.
12. Be treated with sensitivity to one's own cultural differences.

About this Guide

The ex-offender population across the nation is ballooning. As of December 2015 (the latest figures available), the number of parolees in the United States stood at 870,526—which amounted to 350 parolees per 100,000 U.S. residents.¹ The influx of felons in the community creates a need for common-sense solutions. There are the infrastructural concerns: who will help care for those probationers and parolees needing assistance? Who will shoulder the burden on community-service agencies and the healthcare system as both entities struggle to provide for the needs of such members as they reintegrate into society? Then there is the perception that increasing the release of offenders into the community will create fear, incite panic, endanger children, or increase crime rates.

Some ex-offenders in the community can adjust after release. They obtain employment, attend school, find a place to live, and have an array of family and friendships that support them in their endeavors to be productive in society. Others, however, struggle with a lack of communication skills.



¹ Evans, K. (2018). *Crime, Prisons, and Jails*. New York: Gale Cengage Learning.

The focus on this topic is an intensely personal one. When I was younger, I was incarcerated. I know what it is like to spend time behind the rattling bars of the jail doors that slam in your face. I know what it is like to deal with custody officials who know you as ‘just a number.’ The sights, sounds, and smells of being locked up in a cold, impersonal facility was a demeaning and degrading experience. Moreover, I witnessed the various mental and emotional breakdowns fellow inmates experienced.

But after release, I knew my life outside would be different. It is oftentimes difficult for the ex-inmate to talk about that harsh experience of having been locked up. Sometimes I wondered who I could trust with my story. I have experienced the fear, the worry, and the trepidation of sharing my experience. How will my story be taken? Will I be judged? In the many years since my release, I have learned to effectively communicate despite the challenges. I have wanted to help others with a similar experience. The desire to write a handbook was borne out of these thoughts and experiences. It is my hope that this guide will help you or someone you know who was formerly incarcerated.



This guide aims to help ex-offenders communicate more effectively. It will consist of three parts. The first section will explain concepts and terms

of basic communication, types of communication, context, and cultural factors, and how these factors influence the communication message. In the second section, I will delve into some of the feelings ex-offenders struggle with: intellectual inadequacy, depression, and anger. Additionally, I shall present scenarios that can help improve communication.

In the final section, readers will see detailed information that address effective communication, disclosure and making a favorable impression. At the end of each section, I will review the key points of instruction. Also included is a 'Bill of Rights' and 'Pledge of Responsibilities' section in the beginning and end of the guide, which I hope will set the right tone in the ex-offender's communication guidance. It is my sincere hope that the contents of this guide shall help ex-offenders improve their communication skills!

Section 1

WHAT IS COMMUNICATION?

If I asked you what communication is, you would probably say it's about speaking; it is about the words we use when we talk to others. And you would be partly right. But communication is so much more than that! Researchers have concluded that verbal communication (what is uttered from the mouth as language) only accounts for some 7% of all communication! That means that about 93 percent--the majority of communication--is **nonverbal**: composed of signs, symbols, tone of voice, and body language.²

You have probably heard about communicating with your significant other or how to better your communication at work, for instance. Communication can be done by just one person or by more than one person. How you stand in front of a room is communication. Two people carrying

² Heathfield, S. (2017). Tips for understanding nonverbal communication. *Balance Careers*. Retrieved from www.thebalancecareers.com

out a conversation is communication. What we may see as a large group on the movie theatre screen involves communication.

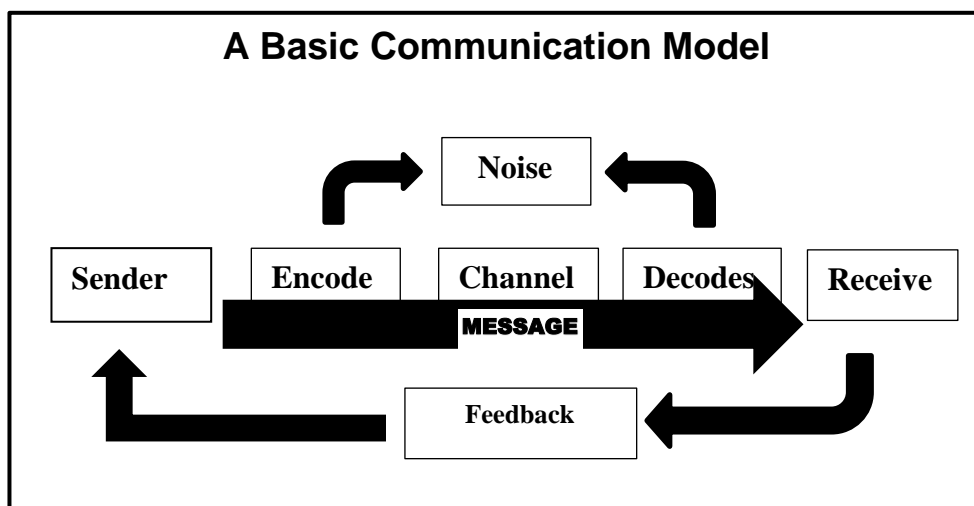


Fig. 1

A basic model of communication³ [fig. 1] involves a **sender** and a **receiver** of a message. The message can be a word, a picture, a symbol, such as use of a body part, or the resulting meaning from any use of verbal or nonverbal means. The sender **encodes** the message. Encoding formulates a thought or idea in a way that will make the message understood. The message is sent using a **channel**. Channels can be personal (in person, speaking) or impersonal (through media: T.V., radio, computer). The person receiving the

³ Adapted from wilkenfieldconsulting.com

message must now **decode** it. Decoding is the interpretation of the message. In the process of encoding and decoding, **noise** is present. Noise can be anything that may interfere with the message such as lack of understanding between the sender and receiver or what preconceived notions the sender and receiver have about each other. Finally, there is **feedback**. Feedback allows the sender to know if the message was received. The process seems easy enough, but what happens when someone doesn't get the message?

What's the code?

Have you ever said: "You don't understand;" "You know what I mean;" or "Don't you get it?" Or how about someone saying to you: "I don't get what you're trying to say;" "I can never seem to understand you;" or "Oh, *that's* what you meant!" Oftentimes, we know exactly what we *mean* to say, we just don't communicate it effectively. The problem in part involves improper coding and a failure to decode. Let's illustrate this.

Here is an example of a conversation between a parolee, and probation officer:

Parolee: I did what you asked me to do.

Officer: Good. Now I need to ask you another question. Let me see the paper.

Parolee: Uh, what paper?

Officer: The one that's signed showing you attended class.

Parolee: I don't have it. I thought I just had to attend class.

Officer: Nope. You know what that means: I must violate your parole!

Was the conversation a good example of communication? No. The parolee did not encode his message. What does 'I did what you asked me to do?' mean anyway? Just as problematic was the officer replying 'Good' to what he *assumed* was his assignment to the parolee. Why is this a big deal? Often, we encode and decode messages based on our assumptions! Then, when you add noise to the mix, little wonder there is a failure to communicate! (More on this later.) This is where we cross our wires up when communicating. The sender may mean one thing; and the receiver might be thinking about something else entirely!

Now let's look at how a previous failure to communicate effectively may have led to this misunderstanding between the parolee and officer:

Officer: Don't forget you have your class coming up.

Parolee: Yeah. I know.

Officer: And don't forget your paper.

Parolee: O.K.

What is the problem here? Both the officer and parolee again failed to encode and decode the messages. The officer could have encoded better by being specific. What paper could the officer be referring to? Again, he

most likely assumed the parolee knew what the paper meant. But the parolee failed to decode the message as well. By properly decoding, the parolee could have asked exactly what the officer meant by 'paper'.

Now, let's look at both conversations where better encoding and decoding leads to much clearer communication:

Parolee: I went to class and have the paper. [hands officer the paper]

Officer: Good. How is the class going?

Parolee: It's going great.

Officer: Excellent. Keep up the good work!

The parolee properly coded his message. In going to class, he automatically tells the officer he has the proof of attendance. The resulting communication leads to a pleasant conversation minus the unnecessary consequences. The clarity of the communication was made possible from the earlier conversation they had. Notice:

Officer: Don't forget your class coming up.

Parolee: Yes. I will be there.

Officer: Please do not forget to bring me the signed paper by the instructor; it gives me the proof you were there.

Parolee: You got it. I will have it!

Officer: You understand clearly, correct?

Parolee: Yes. I will bring you back the signed paper.

Obviously, there is much more specific detail to this conversation. Both the parolee and officer coded properly. Surely, you see why coding and encoding are so vital. Proper coding and decoding creates clear communication. The sender not only knows what he wants to say, but he makes sure he communicates this! The receiver, by properly decoding the message, gives confirmation that the message was received; a clear understanding is achieved.

Recall, that during the process of coding and encoding, noise can interfere with the message we are trying to send, and our understanding of the message being sent. As mentioned at the outset, noise can be things such as preconceived notions, feelings (usually negative), misconceptions, and perceptions. Noise can also be using words that the receiver is unable to understand or literal noise from our surrounding environment that makes it difficult to hear.

More than talk: Other types of communication

Remember those days when you were in the chow line? You grabbed your tray of mystery meat and sat down to grub. Do you remember how long you had to eat? 10 minutes? Even less time? You had to hurriedly slough down your food before the dining officer told you to get up and dump your tray. This is an example of how chronemics is used in communication. And

what was communicated by way of **chronemics** (communication by time)

here is 'You don't own this dining hall, we do; now hurry up and eat!'

I'll never forget when I got to the reception yard to start my prison sentence. After we got off the bus, we were told to line up in groups of three. We stood with about a foot of room from the row of men in front of us and behind us. The corrections officer shouted to move closer. All of us scooted up another few inches or so. It still wasn't good enough. After a few rounds of this we ended up very uncomfortably close to each other--so close that the tip of my nose contacted the guy's neck in front of me! Did you feel uncomfortable reading that? If you did you're not alone. we all have our personal space where we feel comfortable, usually the few feet of space that surrounds us. The only people we let in that space are people we trust or for purposes of personal greeting or intimacy. Little wonder that, with **proxemics** (communication by space or distance), the prison officers communicated power with this spacing technique. We may have not liked it, but it was the prison giving us a harsh welcome: 'Look where you are now. You have no power. Enjoy your stay'.

Years ago, in a Psychology class the professor asked us if we could only have one sense (sight, touch, hearing, taste, or smell) which one would we want. Most of us automatically chose sight. I wouldn't want to be blind! Would you? None of us picked the best answer. He replied that he would want touch. He reasoned that, without touch, none of the other senses were

possible. He said if the neurons and nerves could not form connections and communicate signals, everything else was off the table.

Can you recall how it felt when you hugged a family member or friend you had not seen in a while? I'll never forget the day I got out of prison and saw my brothers who had picked me up. Do you know how well it felt to hug them? How about when you see your significant other and hold hands or kiss? In lots of ways communication by touch, or **haptics**, is such a vital form of communication, even in a basic, biological sense!

In considering the factors of time, distance, and touch, how would you answer the following questions?

1. Do you find yourself often running late? What could this communicate to others? What could you do to improve this?
2. Who do you let into your personal space? (the 1-2 feet of space surrounding you). If a person tried to invade this space, what would you do? Could you politely accept or deny them permission? How would you do this?
3. A person you do not know accidentally bumps into you and grabs ahold of your arm. It makes you uncomfortable. What would you say to them?

Other forms of nonverbal communication include gestures, facial expressions, postures, and body language. For the purposes of this guide,

however, I will largely focus on language and the words we use when communicating.

Context

Let's imagine you overheard two people talking and their conversation went something like this:

John: Are you ready?

Paul: Yup. Got the tools all set up.

John: We've been planning this a long time. Might be the most difficult thing we have ever done.

Paul: I hope the family is proud of our effort.

John: Well, all we can do now is our best. We've prepared hard for this.

Paul: Yeah. I hope it all goes to plan; we will finish knowing we gave it our all.

Any thoughts as to what is going on here? Take a guess. The two are getting ready to rob a bank, you say? No. They are working on rebuilding an engine? Wrong again! Okay, here's a hint: the two are in a well-lighted, and sanitized room. They are doctors. A long, 10-hour surgery is about to take place where they are performing a rare, triple-organ transplant. The reason you couldn't guess is that **context** was missing. Even if you had seen the operating room, but couldn't hear the conversation, you might have made a better guess as to what they were about ready to do.

As is often the case, we misunderstand the meaning of words and phrases when we just see text written. Have you ever received a text message, only to get upset because someone seemingly made a cruel or insensitive

remark? The reason we often miss the intended meanings is that we are unable to code and decode messages without things like facial expression and tone of language. **Vocalics** concerns how we use our voice. For instance, what kind of tone are we using to speak? Is it high? Low? Are we speaking fast or slow? Are only certain words or phrases emphasized? **Kinesics** is the use of gestures and facial expressions to supplement the words we use in communication. Consider the importance of tone and facial expression of the following lines of the same text. What do they mean?

- a. I told you so. (smiling)
- b. I TOLD you so.
- c. I told YOU so!
- d. I told you so. (said slowly and in a monotone)

The parts of the sentences in bold were said with emphasis. In phrase A, the interpretation could be one of surprise, even congratulatory. The person might have been happy for an accomplishment. In phrase B, the emphasis is placed on the sender's action. Phrase C can be interpreted as a threat, with emphasis is placed on the receiver of the message. Finally, in phrase D, not only is there sadness, but a confirmation that something negative has taken place; the monotone lacks feeling. The same sentence with added context, gives rise to four completely different meanings. In this case, where the phrase was said (location, setting) was not as important, but as we saw earlier in the operating room, it can be. What does this mean for you?

When you receive a text and are quick to be upset, stop and think about the context. Without tone, place, and facial expressions, they're just words. Therefore, special attention needs to be considered when sending and receiving texts, emails, or chats. Stop and consider: Why did the person say what they said? Maybe it was said with a smile? (Yes, emojis have made texting easier, but emojis do not replace human face-to-face communication). Perhaps you could give the sender of the message the benefit of a doubt. You could also follow up with a question and ask the sender to clarify. It sounds easy, but this is one of the causes of many a misunderstanding in today's form of communication.

When you are face to face with someone, pay attention to the words you are emphasizing. Remember the person will decode your message based on this. And as we saw earlier, you might send a message of happiness that could be construed as threatening!

Cultural Aspects

Here in the United States, we communicate differently than in some parts of the world. In countries such as Sweden, Norway, The Netherlands, Germany, England, and the United States there is a focus on individualistic qualities. In many parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, the focus is more on the group, or family relationship. Here, in the U.S. communication styles focus on the individual, what communication researchers refer to as **low-context**. 'I statements' are an example of this. Instead of zeroing in on what

a person does, one is encouraged to state how the person's action made them feel. For example:

'What you said was awful'. **vs.** 'I feel sad that you said that.'

'You always do that!' **vs.** 'I feel angry when you do that.'

In a low-context culture, words are more implicit in their meaning. Communication styles are more direct. To be understood, a speaker must communicate exactly what he means. This goes back to what I discussed earlier in the coding of messages. If you fail to code your message, here, in the U.S., that is highly likely to be problematic.

The exact opposite to this is **high-context**. In cultures that use this form of communication, words are left open to interpretation. The family and group setting take higher priority than an individual's concerns. More effort to decode messages will occur. Communication styles are indirect. Often, one must guess at the real meaning behind what is being said. Literally, a 'yes' can mean a 'no', and vice-versa. This can be frustrating if you do not know about the cultural factors that influence communication. For example, some cultures that utilize high-context will avoid direct eye contact. In the U.S., this can be interpreted as a sign of guilt, disrespect, or cynicism. How many times have you ever heard of the command: 'Look at me when I am talking to you!' Again, this is a statement that will be made from someone whose cultural influences favor individualistic communication.

Think of the following scenarios and see if you can figure out why there might be a communication problem:

1. A student of Japanese culture is being reprimanded by a teacher in the U.S.
2. A U.S. judge repeatedly asking a defendant who is Native American to speak truthfully. The defendant's family members are present in the courtroom.
3. You are from a culture where family is extremely important. Your parole officer doesn't care about your family concerns.
4. You don't like it when someone speaks softly and fails to make eye contact while they talk to you.
5. Your boyfriend says being with his friends on weekends is a must in your relationship. However, you want exclusive time with him because you believe this is more important.

Can you think of what communication problems could arise out of such situations? Some could be a minor inconvenience. Yet, if a law enforcement official doesn't understand certain cultural factors, for instance, this could lead to misunderstandings, arrest, or worse. It happens more often than one might think.

Communicating better!

In review, here are some tips on what to say, or how to better code, decode, and other aspects of communication:

Encoding messages:

- Speak clearly. Use specific words.
- Repeat your message and ask for verification of understanding.
- Apologize if your message was not understood.
- Don't get mad. Just repeat the message.

Decoding messages:

- Ask to repeat if you don't understand.
- Use patience when trying to decode messages.

Time:

- To many, 'time is money'.
- Be on time.
- Make a schedule.
- Don't overbook yourself.
- Give yourself extra time to be on time.
- Arrive early.
- Pay attention to what they are saying. Use eye contact and head nods.
- Ask questions to show you are engaged in the conversation.

- Turn off your phone. Limit distractions.

Space:

- When in public settings that require privacy, give people their space.
- If you don't know someone, keep distance at arm's length.
- Ask for permission, if necessary, to be in a person's intimate space.
- When in a line of people, give yourself at least an arm's length in space.
- Don't crowd people, if possible.

Touch:

- If you are not related to, or not partnered with a person, don't touch.
- Some people who normally don't mind a touch, may not always appreciate a touch.
- If you like to touch, there are situations where it is not encouraged, even frowned upon, like schools.
- Be considerate of cultural factors. Some Asian cultures do not like any touching on the head, ever.
- If you don't like when someone touches you, say it firmly and respectfully.

Context:

- Don't rely on just the words themselves.

- Use added tone to ascertain what is being emphasized.
- Facial expression often adds meaning to what is being said.
- Don't be quick to take offense.
- Consider why it was said.
- Consider why it was said.
- Follow up to clarify meaning.

Culture:

- Just because it is OK in your culture, doesn't necessarily hold true in theirs.
- If you are unsure, ask.
- 'Please' and 'Thank you' (And a smile) are almost universally understood.
- Just because someone is a fellow American, doesn't mean you should have the same cultural expectations of them.
- A person's 'sub' or 'native' culture may be most important to them.
- Don't take indirect eye contact as being necessarily negative.
- Some hand gestures you use may be offensive to others or have entirely different cultural meanings.
- Some people talk more. Others less. Do not mistake this for being uninterested.

- Cultural factors dictate that you may have to speak to a male or eldest male of the family for permission.

YOUR NOTES:

Section 2

YOUR FEELINGS AND COMMUNICATION

As an ex-offender, you have seen a lot coming from the world of jail and prison. Those places are filled with violence. Built with cement and steel, and void of any decorative effects, the starkness often leads to feelings of depression. While there, many inmates struggle with anger and loneliness in the desperation to survive the daily grind. I remember what it was like when I spent those days in a 6'x9' cell staring at four white walls and a tiny window that let a sliver of sunlight in. It wasn't a happy place to be, that's for sure.

Oftentimes, feelings such as these get in the way of communication. Usually we know what we want to say, but struggle to get the words out. Depression and anger make the communication process even more difficult. Have you ever felt unworthy of seeking help to a problem? Have you ever felt so angry, you just wanted to slam your fists on the table to make your point? At one time or another, we've all been there. The process of incarceration, along with feelings of guilt or shame about our circumstances lead to the old 'Fuck it' syndrome. Instead of saying those words we need to say, it's easier to grab a beer or drug of choice. It feels good to be alone in silence and our own thoughts. Ever been there? There are countless feelings we could look at in terms of blocking communication. Let's look at a few:

intellectual inadequacy, depression, and anger and see how you could communicate better despite having them.

‘I just feel stupid’

In the United States, a common social construct is that you must go to school to be smart. We equate college degrees with intelligence. Did you know that some of the most famous creators and inventors in many fields never had a formal education? Whether you have heard of people like Elon Musk, Lady Gaga, or Bill Gates, they have one thing in common: they have made tons of money over their careers despite never having finished college!⁴

It is true that ex-offenders, on average, have about a 5th-grade reading level.⁵ Whether you have finished school or not, it may make you concerned about being ‘stupid’ or questioning your intelligence. But the fact that you can be successful without necessarily obtaining a college degree says what? What if you never finished high school? Does that mean you are stupid? Of course not! But what you mean to say is that you are **ignorant**. Ignorance is simply not knowing. It is not an inherently bad thing, it just means you don’t know! For instance, if I asked you to build me a house and

⁴ The College Dropouts Hall of Fame: Successful people who were college dropouts, April 23, 2018, www.collegedropoutshalloffame.com

⁵ Bates, P., Davis, T., Gum, C., & Long, S. (1992). Assessment of literacy levels of adult prisoners. *Journal of Correctional Education*, 43(4), 172-175.

you had no knowledge of carpentry and could not build the house, it would simply be because you did not know how to build a house. But if you touch a hot stove and expect not to get some sort of pain or injury--and do it anyway, well that's another thing entirely! That is stupidity in terms of not using your common sense. See the difference?

In the context of this guide, I am referring to learning how to communicate better by teaching you how to use words to your advantage. In this sense, any ideas you might have of being 'stupid' can be unblocked so that you can become a better communicator.

A sample conversation:

Jane: What does the word 'metaphor' mean?

Sara: Hey, didn't you go to school?

Jane: I did but I must have missed when it was defined.

Sara: You are just so dumb.

Jane: I am not as dumb. But you are insensitive.

Sara: Ok. Sorry, my bad.

Jane: You have the definition?

Sara: Coming right up.

Jane didn't get upset. She went to the root of Sara's statement. Jane flipped the negative remark and pointed to the real issue. Jane defended herself simply and honestly, then turned the conversation to the original purpose. Sara apologized and complied to Jane's request. Since you know 'stupid' really means ignorance, you might have to teach someone this since *they* are ignorant!

Depression

I'll never forget the summer of 2004. I spent most of that month in solitary confinement because I refused to work in my prison detail where I had been assigned. I was earning what amounted to 20 cents an hour and 15 of those cents were being paid out to restitution. By now I had been in prison for 4 years and the grind wore me down. I figured, why bother working for a measly 5 cents per hour? The isolation cell was about 6 feet by 9 feet in dimension. Yes, it's really like the movies: a metal bunk, a steel toilet and sink, and in this case, nothing else. No books or any of the other privileges afforded to general population inmates. There was a tiny sliver of sunlight that would come in through the miniscule window at the top of one of the bare, white walls. Most of the time I slept. I was prescribed a few pills to cope with the anxiety I was experiencing. I later realized I was in the throes of a deep depression. The surroundings of that stark, tiny cell only compounded my depressed state. I was barely eating, and I refused to shower. I simply was tired of caring.

We all get down from time to time. It's human nature. But an actual medical diagnosis of depression, which I have, is different.⁶ This type of depression is one of those things, at least in my experience, that subtly sneaks upon you. My life is good, but even now, from time to time, before I realize

⁶ www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/depression

it, I am suddenly feeling sad and hopeless. Often when these feelings creep up, I catch myself thinking, ‘Gee I was laughing and smiling only a few hours ago. What happened?’ I still take medication which takes the edge off, but a more intense depression, I think, is a lifelong struggle; once you have it you can never really get rid of it. Whether you have the occasional feelings of being down, or have been diagnosed as clinically depressed, these feelings can inhibit effective communication. Notice:

A sample conversation:

Father: Hey son, you don’t look too good. What’s wrong?

Son: Oh nothing. I am fine.

Father: No, you are not.

Son: [sighing] I feel down.

Father: Want to tell me about it?

Son: I just feel like no one cares about me.

Father: I know sometimes it may seem that way. I care about you. I love you.

Son: Thanks dad. I appreciate that.

Feelings of sadness and depression are real. The hardest part is to talk about it. The best thing to do is find someone you trust and who will be nonjudgmental. Do not lie about how you feel. Tell them how and what you are feeling. In my experience, most often I have found is that we want acknowledgement and validation in what we are feeling. There is no right or wrong in that; we just want someone to hear us out. When things need to be taken to the next level, there are trained professionals who can prescribe exercises or medication to help with other issues that lead to depression. It

is OK to seek help. You will find that talking to someone is one of the best things you ever did. There is no shame in talking about it!

Anger

Probably one characteristic we ex-offenders can relate to are feelings of anger. Having been incarcerated means experiencing losses besides freedom. Jails are by their very nature, oppressive places. Movement is restricted. There is little privacy. One is often stripped of dignity. Guards bark out orders as fellow inmates compete for individualized space to read, exercise, or converse. If you don't figure out how to adjust, you are left frustrated. This situation is ripe for anger to brew. Little wonder why there are a lot of fights in the prison environment.

If we feel we are rightly there due to our own fault, often we are left with a self-imposed anger for putting ourselves there. If we are innocent, we are angry because of how the 'system' treated us. Often, no matter the case, one is presumed guilty after arrest. Guards and jail officials don't care about your situation. Once you find yourself between those jail walls, the prevailing attitude is 'you put yourself here, you must be deserving of it'.

So, when an ex offender is released, the feelings of anger don't just go away. Now, you find yourself outside in a world that is not much

friendlier. How can you cope when it seems the quickest way to solve a situation is to get mad about it?

A sample conversation:

George: What happened to the money?

Marie: I spent it on food.

George: All of it?

Marie: Well, yes. \$40 dollars doesn't buy much.

George: You always just spend money.

Marie: What is that supposed to mean?

George: Never mind.

Marie: No. You started this.

Sound familiar? George and Mary have been married for 5 years and this relationship, like many, sees arguments over money. What was the first problem here? George made a generalized assumption about Marie. When we use absolutes—words like ‘never, always, best, worst’—we are being unfair and inflammatory in our speech. These are words that often cause problems. When you think about it, no one *always* does ‘x’, or a person is never the *worst* at something. It is mostly our imagination that leads us to qualify such statements about people. Psychologists call this ‘all or nothing’ thinking; and it is a common thinking error.⁷ The second mistake George made was to not want to finish the conversation. It is easy to start a

⁷ Star, K. (1017). How to overcome all or nothing thinking. *Very Well Mind*. Retrieved from www.verywellmind.com

conversation; but wanting to take the easy way out is cheap and a power grab. It is also unfair. When we use the phrase *never mind*, it is usually because we know we are wrong. Often it is easy to pick on people because of anger. What's the best way to avoid that? Don't speak while you are angry. When you are angry, you are not thinking rationally. It is best to take a break and speak when you are more level headed. Let us redo the conversation with this in mind:

George: What happened to the money?

Marie: I spent it on food.

George: Oh ok. I need to use the bathroom quick.

[returns after taking some deep breaths and splashing his face with cold water]

Marie: Hey, you OK?

George: Better now. It's been a long day.

Marie: I know sometimes things are frustrating.

George: There was \$40 in the account, right?

Marie: Yup and it doesn't buy much these days.

George: You should see what \$40 dollars puts in the gas tank.

I know it may sound corny, but when you're angry, taking a small break can really do wonders to calm you down. Some things that help me are going on a brisk walk, listening to some music, or taking a good shower. The other option is to speak when you are angry. Most of the time, it will not result in positivity. After George excused himself, he allowed himself to think about what he was going to say; in those 5 minutes he thought about it and realized the absurdity of his thoughts. But how often do we find ourselves regretting the things we said out of anger? It happens all the time. So, if you find

yourself angry, give yourself a time out. It will allow you to communicate better as well as really listen to what others are saying. You will use words that are derived from a calmer mind. Words from an angry mind are designed to hurt, belittle, scorn, or bully; and you can avoid this! Learn to take small breaks when you are angry. Your communication can improve.

Communicating better!

In review, here are some tips on what to avoid and instead do, despite feelings that might inhibit communication:

Feeling ‘dumb/stupid’:

- Ask, ‘Can you please repeat that?’
- Ask, ‘Can you explain it to me in a different way?’
- Ignorance is not necessarily a bad thing; it just means not knowing.
- Flip the conversation.
- Force them to acknowledge the real issue.
- Proceed with your original request.
- Defend yourself against words used to belittle.

Feeling depressed:

- Talk about it.
- Find someone you trust.

- Surround yourself with non-judgers.
- Speak truth about your feelings.
- Don't hide under a smile.
- Seek professional help, if necessary.
- Weigh the pros and cons of therapy and medication.

Feeling angry:

- Try not to speak when angry.
- Stay away from 'absolute' words.
- Finish a conversation you start.
- Try to end a conversation with a smile, handshake, or kiss, where appropriate. Think of what this communicates. You will feel better too!
- Think about what you are going to say.
- If you catch yourself speaking out of anger, ask to excuse yourself.
- After cooling off, return to the conversation.
- Seek professional help for repeated issues that contribute to anger.

YOUR NOTES:

Section 3

WHAT TO SHARE, HOW TO IMPRESS

Managing Your Privacy

Sometimes it can be difficult to share with others about our circumstances as an ex-offender. With whom do you talk about your days being in prison? Is it safe to share information about that jail stay with her? Do you tell him what you were arrested for? How do you know when it is appropriate to tell a potential employer you have a criminal record? Do you tell all, or do you share only certain information on a need-to-know basis?

In communication studies, researchers have looked at how people decide when and with whom to disclose information. Communication scholars have found that people decide what information they want to share based on who it is with the information is shared, the potential consequences of sharing, and the absolute necessity of sharing.⁸ For example, let's say a woman is pregnant. Does she tell her partner right away? Does she wait? It is possible there will be consequences of sharing: maybe her partner will not be happy to hear of the news. If the couple is elated, perhaps the expectant mother will swear her partner to secrecy, telling him not to dare tell his family.

⁸ Littlejohn, S., Foss, K., & Oetzel, J. (2017). *Theories of Human Communication* (11th ed.). Long Grove, Il.: Waveland Press.

Out of necessity, though, she will have to share the news with medical staff to receive the proper medical care.

Another example: Who do you tell details of your offense to? Who should know? Who needs to know? Remember, you are the owner of the information. (It is true that with databases, some may be able access your court case information and specific details without your prior knowledge.) However, for those that don't know this, the only way they might find out is if *you* decide to share. What about a potential job situation? Do you tell an interviewer you were formerly incarcerated? Do you tell them what you were convicted for? Some states are enacting so-called 'ban the box' legislation which generally states that no employer may question you about any past criminal history until a job offer has been made.⁹ However, the laws are so new, that many are still unsure of the process. In a later section, I've discussed how, and with whom you might decide to share sensitive and otherwise private background information.

Making the Good Impression

When I was homeless, one time I was stopped by a police officer in downtown Los Angeles. He asked me for my identification. After I handed

⁹ Ali, A., Lyons, B., & Ryan, A. (2017). Managing a perilous stigma: Ex-offenders' use of reparative impression management tactics in hiring contexts. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 102*(9). 1271-1285.

him my driver's license, he studied it carefully and asked me what my address was. I politely told him it was on the license. He said that he needed my home address. I told him it was right there. Again, he asked for my home address. I repeated that it was right there on the card. He said it was a P.O. Box. I said that, yes, it was where I received my mail, for I was living in my car. He looked at me and indignantly stammered, 'Well, you certainly don't look homeless'. I then told him that surely, I was!

If I were to ask you what 'homeless' looked like, what would you respond? Perhaps you imagine someone in tattered clothing. His hair is matted. Maybe he is pushing a shopping cart with his meager belongings. He probably hasn't showered for days and smells like it! And yet, before this officer that day, stood a man who was showered and neatly dressed. His hair was gelled and nicely styled. He was wearing his favorite cologne and carried a nice backpack with school supplies inside it.

That is the way I always presented myself. I cannot tell you during the time I was homeless how many people could not believe I was living in my car. I showered at the school gym every other day, washed my clothes every two weeks or so at a local laundromat, and made sure I was always presentable. I managed an impression that communicated signals of responsibility, respectability, and order--this, despite experiencing some difficult circumstances.

Have you ever heard the saying: 'First impressions, make lasting impressions'? It is true. No matter what your individual circumstances are, people are likely to remember the first impression you left them. You can have all the money in the world and leave a nasty impression. The opposite is also obviously true. Money cannot necessarily get you in the door of favorable impressions, but preparation can. How we dress, how we speak, and how we carry ourselves can leave an indelible, positive mark on others. I believe that first impression I communicated with that officer prevented me from getting a ticket. I was indeed guilty of jaywalking that day and he had me dead to rights; I couldn't argue my way out of it. Maybe, just maybe, my respectful, firm tone, and the way I presented myself said to him, 'give me another chance'!

Communicating Impression and Disclosure

Despite being an ex-offender, you too can work at making a lasting and favorable impression with others! You can discern when to disclose. Your story involves much, much more than being a formerly-incarcerated individual. Let's discuss some ways you can communicate this.

1. **Don't sound fancy.** Have you ever felt that you had to use the most complicated, longest words to sound like you know what you're talking about? Some people feel that using technical, or more elaborate sounding phrases makes them more favorable to landing that job. Maybe you've found out your potential mate has an

advanced degree and you have only finished high school. You feel inadequate since you don't feel as smart to hold a conversation. Do not feel the need to be uncomfortable. Whether at a job interview, or talking to a date, just say what you mean and mean what you say. When in doubt, keep it simple. Don't complicate the explanation. Usually people are appreciative of simple, and clear language. If a job interview requires you to use specific terms that you know (since you are qualified), that is one thing; but an expert in the field of your potential job will easily recognize when you're in over your head. When carrying a conversation, a girlfriend or boyfriend will appreciate you 'being yourself'.

2. **Background checks.** New laws are helping ex-offenders in the job search process. Recently, here in California a 'Ban the Box' initiative took effect. This means that a prospective employer cannot ask you about your past criminal record until a job offer has been made. Job applications cannot include a box to check that asks about prior criminal history.¹⁰ It is important for you to communicate as a way of advocating for yourself as an ex-offender and to know your privacy and disclosure rights. Also make sure you know what is contained in your background reports. Some application packets even include an

¹⁰ www.nelp.org/publication/ban-the-box-fair-chance-hiring-state-and-local-guide/

option to obtain a free copy of the report the prospective employer utilizes to make a hiring decision. Ask for a copy so you know what yours says. It can be an effective tool to use as you communicate your past to prospective employers.

3. **Be honest.** When it all comes down to it, do not lie. If your lie is uncovered, your reputation will precede you. Not only will future employers know of your history, some could obtain knowledge that you've lied to other employers. I know of a fellow ex-offender who got a coveted job. He lasted one month. He told me that someone who he worked with found out from a friend some information that he hadn't previously disclosed to the boss. It was in the background report, but the employer had missed it. As he told it, while he was working at his desk one day, he got an impromptu call into the meeting room. Present were the boss, a manager, and a guard. He was told to clear out his things, given a severance check, escorted from the premises and told to never return.
4. **Some people want to give you a chance.** Whether it's finding a new relationship or getting a job, your past does not have to be an obstacle. There are people who are willing to see the complete picture. They want to learn to trust you in hopes that you are now a different person. I've experienced this countless of times. What has helped me is to be transparent. As I got to know people better, I have

learned to be honest with them. I have told them that yes, I was previously incarcerated. The truth is, the people that want to give you a chance for friendship, relationships, and employment don't care where you were in jail and what you were arrested for. Most of them will appreciate the upfront honesty of you sharing your past. This does not mean, however, that you jump the gun immediately at the first meeting and tell them, "Hey, guess what; I used to be in jail." No. You must use **tact**.

Tact is defined by nearly all dictionaries as using sensitivity when talking about difficult issues. Hence, to start right out telling someone on the first date, or first meeting that you were a former inmate would most likely startle them. First you want to use ice breakers. Ask them about themselves. Get to know their interests. Build rapport. Try to establish things you might have in common. Depending on the situation, you could draw them out. Ask what they think about giving people second chances. Get a sense of their stance. If it's harsh, you might want to wait. Whenever you feel the time is right, just tell them. If they ask what you were arrested for, you might tell them you do not like speaking about it, since you are now a different person. You might mention that you prefer talking about positive topics. For example, you can speak about what the experience has taught you. You can tell them *how* the experience has

made you a better person. If the person is genuinely interested in your positive story, they will hear you out. Some people, no matter what you tell them, just will be turned off by the subject; but yes, there are people out there willing to give you a shot!

5. **Know that some people are ‘mandatory reporters’.** In most states, certain professionals such as teachers, counselors, doctors, nurses, and mental health workers are **mandatory reporters**. This means that any information disclosed to them regarding possible domestic abuse and/or child molestation, or anything else they deem the authorities should know, about must be reported to the local law enforcement. I know that when having received counseling, I have signed papers stating this. Most will have it in the fine print. But not always! Be aware of what you are signing. Be aware who you are speaking to. Understand that if you mention specific information to such professionals, you are likely giving them permission to report it to the police. It is of course, entirely up to you what you share, and with whom. I do not take a pro or con stance on this; I am simply informing you of the process.
6. **When you talk to your children.** When I was first arrested, my children were young. All they knew at the time (the oldest was barely 6 years of age) was that their dad was gone. They, of course, did not understand anything, let alone why it happened. As I was

incarcerated, the phone conversations I had with them changed throughout the years. Soon, I would get questions from them such as ‘Dad, why are you in jail?’ or ‘Did you do something bad daddy?’ As difficult as it was, I figured early on that I would be truthful with them but shared the information that they would be able to comprehend at the time. Experts in the field of child psychology cannot agree on the best age to disclose such sensitive information. As it is often said, children do not come with care manuals; often we raise our kids through trial and error and on advice from those who have successfully mastered the challenge. A female friend of mine who was taking care of her granddaughter said she decided when the child was 9 to tell her that her mother was in jail. She felt that the child was old enough to understand, in simple terms, that her mom did something bad and would not be coming home for a while. The grandmother just filled the child with love and reassurance in the meantime. The key is to **be honest with them**, she told me. Experience has taught me that if you lie to your children, they will resent it later. But what if the child is younger? What could you say until they are able to understand? Note the following conversation:

Child: When is daddy coming home?

Parent/Guardian: He will be gone for a while.

Child: Why?

P/G: He has some very important things to take care of, but until then [mom/grandma/other] will be here to make sure you are safe and loved.

Child: But I want to see daddy. I miss him.

P/G: I know. I miss him too. But we will see him soon.

The key is not to deceive or lie. Give the child enough information and most importantly, be reassuring.

Communicating better!

In review, here are some tips on how to manage your privacy and make better impressions:

Privacy and disclosure:

- Share the information you feel comfortable disclosing.
- Use simple language.
- Give children information as they can understand it.
- Tell your kids the truth.
- Understand what 'mandatory reporting' is.
- Know what your privacy rights are.
- Read the fine print.

Giving good impressions:

- Be honest.
- Do not misrepresent or mislead.
- Use tact.

- Don't complicate it.
- Avoid technical language.
- Be yourself.
- Say what you mean; mean what you say.
- How you dress communicates.
- People can see confidence.

YOUR NOTES:

In Conclusion

Communication is more than words. How you effectively code your messages and use other forms of nonverbal communication will be the determining factor in getting your message across. Remember the importance of context and its vital role in message sending. We can receive the wrong message if we fail to take into consideration tone and other factors. Culture, too, plays a key role in communication. Sometimes we must remove ourselves from the way we normally communicate to understand a message. Proper decoding includes asking questions to ascertain meaning from their point of view. Paralanguage is important to consider when communicating interculturally.

You can improve our communication skills when you realize how intellectual inadequacy, depression, and anger attempt to block up the communication channel. When you are feeling dumb or stupid, question the reality behind those feelings. Simply not knowing a fact or how to perform an action is ignorance. It is not a negative word. It just means you have to learn. If others attempt to make a joke out of what they feel is stupidity, let them know! Quickly, however, get back to the purpose of the conversation. Depression is a real feeling. More of us suffer of it than you may realize. Find someone you trust and talk about your feelings. The worst thing you can do is keep it bottled up inside. Anger is something we can all relate to. In order

not to communicate hurtful words out of anger, take a break if you have to. Recognize when you are in that state and know it is not best to talk at that moment. As with depression, seek professional help if necessary. Often, with more complex cases of anger, there are other issues that must be dealt with to reach the underlying cause. Do not discount therapeutic interventions. Medication might be an option. Once you give a chance to have the real issues treated, communication can improve.

Often the hardest thing for you to decide is with whom, what, and when you should share sensitive information about your past. It takes skill and tact to know how to decide. The first thing is to be honest. Share what they need to know. You can decline to tell them any information you deem is not appropriate. You are the owner of your information. You must weigh the risks and benefits of disclosure. As an ex-offender, your aim is to make the best impression possible. When you speak, speak factually. There is no need to use fancy words and make up stories to seem more impressive. Say what you mean and mean what you say. Those who want to give you an opportunity will appreciate your genuineness.



Finally, a few other ‘Golden Rules’ of communication to consider:

1. **Follow through.** Don't keep people waiting. If you are busy, remind them with a simple word of "I'll get back to you shortly". It is so easy and takes a few moments. A few minutes of failed response might mean that job goes to someone else!
2. **Acknowledge them.** Before anything, greet them with a simple hello and a smile. Ask how they are doing. One of the things that bugs me is when I greet someone; and they fail to greet me back. It is plainly rude. If you add in missed context through social media or texting, the rudeness is amplified.
3. **You are never 'too busy'!** How often have you said this to someone, "I am too busy"? Think about it. It is not true. We tell ourselves this, but the reality is it only takes a few seconds to make that communication that lets others know that their time is important and that what they have to share matters.
4. **Honor people.** I don't know about you, but I weary at people calling me 'boss' or 'guy' – especially in service-related situations, and if the person addressing me is younger than me. I don't know whatever happened to using 'Sir' or 'Ma'am' but it seems like a lost art. Use these honorifics in addressing people. Most will appreciate it. It tells people you have manners and are refined in your communication!

5. Give your full attention. Our mobile phones have now become the central conduit to our communication lives. However, most of us could do a better job of giving people our complete attention when communicating—especially in person. When we are talking with someone it is a good idea to engage fully. Face them. Make some eye contact. And above all, put that phone down! Nothing is ruder than when someone is talking to us and we are staring into our phone. It is virtually impossible to multitask: you cannot truly hear what people are saying while you are scrolling on your phone screen for that latest sports score or Instagram post.



It is my sincere hope the information contained in this guide has helped you. You'll notice that there are certain rights I listed that we, as ex-offenders, are deserving of with regards to communication. Please ensure that you are treated as such. Also, in your growth as a communicator come new responsibilities. I wholeheartedly encourage you to take the pledge as found in the back of this guide!

Let me tell you: as a fellow ex-offender, none of this came easy. It took time. It takes practice. With continued effort, you too can communicate better. I encourage you to obtain other information on communication. This

is only the beginning! Hopefully, now, this guide has piqued your interest. If so, I wish you well on your communication journey!

Ex-offender's Pledge of Communication Responsibilities

As an ex-offender you pledge to:

1. Be honest.
2. Be willing to earn trust.
3. Clearly as possible explain your circumstances.
4. Be respectful.
5. Be thankful.
6. Be appreciative.
7. Be polite.
8. Not engage in misleading tactics.
9. Be in control of your emotions.
10. Listen.

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