



The Art of Communication

By Lyn Carman

No matter how accurate we believe we are being, we cannot represent the world accurately to ourselves.

I wonder who has ever had a misunderstanding, a miscommunication? When you had been sure you had fully explained your meaning, a time when you thought both parties were on the same page only to hear later "Well that's not what I understood it to be"

How does this happen? How can we improve our communication and understanding?

Do we perceive reality or do we perceive our version of reality?

We can only ever re-present the world to ourselves based on our own maps of reality, rather than reality itself.

Alfred Korzybski was a Polish-American scientist and philosopher who said that human knowledge of the world is limited both by the human nervous system and the languages humans have developed, and thus no one can have direct access to reality, given that the most we can know is that which is filtered through the brain's responses to reality. "The map is not the territory"

Your map of the world will be unique to your values, attitudes, beliefs, experiences and stories. No two maps are the same. Even when we think we are on the "same page" we are still talking about our own unique map.

When we consider everyone is walking around with their own maps, filtered through their beliefs, values, experiences and how they language the territory is it any wonder we have trouble communicating.

What this means for us to communicate well is the importance of clarity.

We cannot make assumptions about what another person believes simply because we know what we believe. We cannot assume someone likes or wants something because we do.

Removing assumptions when communicating with others, be it our patients, our work team, our families or friends, is about respecting their map of the world and being curious to explore it, seeking clarity.

There are around 2,000,000 bits of information coming at us every second (bps) yet we are only capable of processing 134bps, or 7 plus or minus 2 chunks of information. This means we are constantly deleting distorting and generalising this information so we can allow in what we consider relevant and leave out what we consider irrelevant. What we allow in and what we leave out depends on our map of the world.

Everyone is doing this all of the time. We can't possibly filter in everything all the time or we would be unable to function. We would be absolutely overwhelmed by the amount of information coming at our senses. We filter to protect ourselves, yet sometimes what we filter is what we need.

For example, if we believe the world is a harsh place and people are mean we will delete evidence of kindness as irrelevant or 'not really counting' and we will distort kindness as "They didn't really mean it," or "They were just saying that," or "They wanted something from me," and we will generalise evidence of hurt as "All people are like that."

In this example we filtered the information coming at us to support this belief. What if we changed our belief to "People are kind and compassionate and have good intentions?" Do you think it would change how we experience our world? Do you think it would alter our map?

Now we would delete evidence of people not being kind, or distort acts of unkindness to "That's not like them," or "They must be having a bad day," or "Maybe they didn't know what they said," and we would generalise an act of kindness to be evidence that they are always kind.

Do you see how powerful this theme can be in your life and in your role as a health professional?

In the words of Steven Covey "Seek first to understand and then to be understood"

All too often we jump into to communication with only our limited map in view, not taking the time to explore another's map, making assumptions theirs is the same as ours.

Taking the time to notice what we may have deleted, distorted or generalised to suit our map of reality and becoming aware of the richness of integrating other's beliefs, viewpoints, attitudes, actions and choices helps us to understand and then to be understood.

Our understanding, learnings, beliefs and everything else we have gathered can become a part of the journey ahead with an ever-expanding map of reality.

