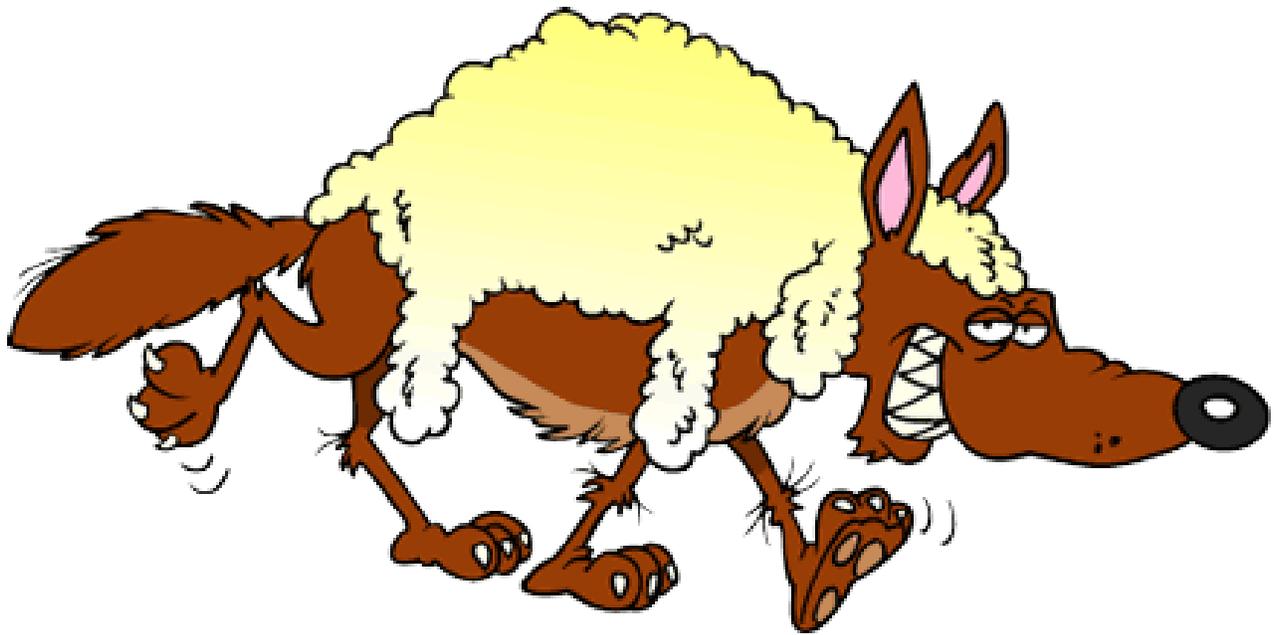


# META-MESSAGE



## META-MESSAGE—THE UNDERSTANDING AND RESPONSE

### GOALS

1. Establish the meaning of communication meta-messages.
2. Identify behaviors related to Passive-Aggressive Behaviors & Communication.
3. Identify behaviors related to Passive-Resistive Behaviors & Communication.
4. Identify behaviors related to Manipulative Behaviors & Communication.
5. Identify selective personal behavior choices to negative communication meta-messages.
6. Provide recommendations on dealing with negative communication meta-messages.

### KEYWORDS FOR APPLICATION

1. Implicit Message
2. Meta-message
3. Passive-Aggressive Behaviors & Communication
4. Passive- Resistive Behaviors & Communication
5. Manipulative Behaviors & Communication

I heard what you said—however, what were you *really* saying? So—it is not what people say in words—it is how they say it!! The message goes beyond the words! The underlying meaning of the words spoken is the meta-message—and the underlying message is the TRUE IMPLIED MESSAGE.

For example, A husband leaves his wife a phone message, “Today, I am so busy! I have two meetings at the Town Hall and a conference with my attorney.” The literal meaning (implied meaning) is that “Don’t bother me today!”

*All linguistic words, word changes, changing pace of a conversation, the pitch of the voice, loudness of the voice, tone of the voice, questions, storytelling, directness, and indirectness add to the communication meta-message.*

The concept of “meta-message” was invented by Gregory Bateson in the 1970s as a research study. The study showed that body language, mannerisms, and words are coded. Understanding the codes becomes necessary for effective and accurate communication between individuals. Knowing the meta-message is like an “AH-HA” experience, as it provides the listener with a hidden message that is usually not overtly intended but is implied. Therefore, no matter the language of a conversation/speech, the nonverbal accompanying the verbal message changes the meaning. Do people intend to have meta-messages? Yes!---they are just not aware that they do it!! However, the way the message is displayed provides a mixed bag of information for the listener/observer to decode.

## **UNDERSTANDING MENTAL HEALTH**

As defined by the World Health Organization, mental health is a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and fruitfully, and contribute to his or her community.

There are negative communication skills and behaviors related to communication that hinder the assumption of mental health. Such behaviors include Passive Aggression, Passive Resistance, and Manipulative Behaviors. It all happens as a part of ongoing communication and associated behaviors.

KNOW THIS: ALL BEHAVIOR HAS MEANING---AND CONSEQUENCES!!

PEOPLE WILL DO (AND CONTINUE TO DO) WHAT WORKS FOR THEM!!

## **ADMINISTRATIVE ROLE IN IMPLICIT MESSAGING**

As an astute administrator, why should you be aware of adverse communication meta-messages? Because the negative meta-messages are the unspoken words and behaviors that hinder meeting the organization's established standards (philosophy, mission, purpose, goals, and objectives). Learn to watch, listen, and identify abilities and hidden behaviors of others that could either be evidence of mental health problems or supportive of mental health. Mental health problems are behaviors and attitudes that could interrupt the flow of cooperative work efforts.

Job descriptions outlining expected job behaviors related to communication allow for control within the work setting. Evaluations of the dated and signed job description of an employee allow an administrative decision to retain or remove the employee from the organization's work situation.

Know, as an effective administrator, there is opposition in all things. To know what is "good," we must know of—and maybe experience the adverse. Therefore, the following negative behaviors with their suggested responses allow for a better understanding of common mental health problems that should be of administrative concern. Also, be watchful for other accompanying aberrant behaviors such as lying, cheating, stealing, personality disorders (thoughts and behaviors that are unhealthy and inflexible).

## **PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIORS & COMMUNICATION**

The most often used meta-message patterns are related to passive aggression during verbal communication. The words are spoken with implied meaning. The meaning and underlying aggression are obvious to the intelligent observer and listener.

### Passive-Aggressive Behaviors in Communication is a Disorder Characterized by:

1. Has a pattern of indirect expression of hostility, including negativistic attitudes and passive resistive behaviors. These behaviors show inadequate performance in social, communication, and occupational situations.
2. Shows hostility to those more fortunate, more educated, have more money, or anything else of worth.
3. Resents and has opposition to the demands/requests of others, evidenced through passive and indirect communication. (The indirect communication requests of information are to another person as a show of passive disdain for the demands of the person asking a question.)
4. Procrastinates and intentionally makes communication mistakes in response to the demands/requests of others.
5. Exhibits cynical, sullen, hostile attitude, sarcasm, and secret language during communication.
6. Damages personal and professional relationships through inappropriate communication.
7. Refrains from addressing a person by their name or title used in the past. This attempt is to distance oneself from the person for which the communication is directed.
8. Appears to be cooperative and doing a good job—but NOT!
9. Uses manipulation for subtle sabotaging.
10. Avoids confrontation.
11. Denies problems by not listening or caring about issues.
12. Is resentful—so, the frustration of others becomes a goal.
13. Denies personal feelings.
14. Is unhappy even after a resolution occurs.
15. Ideas are criticized constantly.
16. Passes off hostility as humor.
17. Refuses to engage in a conversation.

### Suggestions for “Dealing With” Passive-Aggressive Behavior:

1. Keep your distance, when possible!
2. Don't try to change them—not possible!
3. Don't allow this person to change you into a person you do not want to be!
4. Encourage the person to solve their problems and problems related to their behavior!
5. Keep a positive attitude and sense of calmness!
6. Give the person space to express and talk!
7. Hold the person accountable for their behavior!
8. Don't apologize if you did nothing wrong!
9. Put your needs first!
10. Don't play his/her game!
11. Manage *your* frustration by understanding this behavior might be just a fleeting moment in *your* lifetime!

## **PASSIVE-RESISTIVE BEHAVIORS & COMMUNICATION**

Patterns of resistance during communication are words spoken, but the meaning and underlying resistance are obvious to the intelligent observer and listener. Many people don't like change and are a creature of habits. Therefore, they might often say "Yes," when they mean "No" or "No" when they mean "Yes." It confuses the listener and stifles understanding. Entropy (universal movement toward randomness and disorganization) always occurs. The passive-resistant person handles this change with resistance and denies that changes bring natural disorganization and the need for different administrative outcomes. These changes are rejected and exhibited by passive-resistive behaviors that can easily sabotage the organization's standards (philosophy, mission, purpose, goals, and objectives.)

### Passive-Resistive Behaviors in Communication is a Disorder Characterized by:

1. Uses unrecognizable patterns for communication codes, big words, and legal jargon to impress and remove themselves from the reality of ongoing understandable communication.
2. Uses inconsistent means of communicating that keep others from clearly understanding the organization's leadership role, course of action, or behavior requirements.
3. Refuses using and regularly updating policies, regulations, rules, or other guiding organizational principles/standards.
4. Fails to encourage and include knowledgeable/intelligent people on boards or as guests to help resolve entropy issues, develop and support appropriate policies, and meet the organizational standards.
5. "Passes the buck" to any person/all people who he/she can use as a scapegoat for answering *important* questions presented by constituents.
6. Redirects the responsibility to answer *simple* questions to others.
7. Checks messages inconsistently and unpredictably.

### Suggestions for "Dealing With" Passive-Resistive Behavior:

1. Determine if the person is truly committed to the cause or situation!
2. Determine the real reason for the resistance! (incapable, disinterested, unprepared, control?)
3. Determine if the time is right (according to a reasonable perspective) and if there is a readiness to move forward to get the job done!

## MANIPULATIVE BEHAVIORS & COMMUNICATION

Speaking and acting in the interest of another is not manipulation. Everybody needs to win—therefore, communication with all its language, mannerisms, and words needs to set up a win-win situation for the listeners. However, the more devices and behaviors of influence used during speaking tend to *move the communication toward manipulation*. These excess devices move effective communication into the realm of ineffective *manipulative* communication.

We could say (and it is true) that all manipulative verbal communication with its many associated accompanying behaviors is of two types:

1. Verbal manipulation with integrity acts in the best interest of others and is considered good/positive. It deepens our thoughts and helps us to make effective, lasting choices. Positive manipulation is to act in the best interest of others.
2. Verbal manipulation without integrity does not act in the best interest of others and is considered bad/negative. It is an ultimate attempt to manipulate a person's feelings and attitudes in words and behaviors according to the intentions of the manipulating person.

Manipulative Behavior in Communication is a Disorder Characterized by:

1. Talking “over” people or appearing to listen with no response.
2. Turning the conversation to one's purpose or advantage for selfish reasons.
3. Attempting to manipulate a person's feelings and attitudes in words or behaviors.
4. Detecting your weaknesses and using them against you.
5. Trying to convince others that they gave up something to serve another person's interest.
6. Continuing exploitation behaviors and self-serving efforts until you put an end to the behavior.

**Remember the story of the manipulating behavior of the “Boy Who Cried, Wolf”? He cried, “Wolf” on separate occasions, and everyone ran with no wolf in sight. He was amused and entertained. Then, one day he called “Wolf” when there was a wolf, and no one ran. He consistently lied about the situation and happenings to manipulate others.**

Communication by telling lies and intentionally misleading others (to some) is entertaining. However, when manipulators lie for personal reasons (like the boy crying WOLF), they defeat their cause. Manipulating liars are soon not believed, even when they speak the truth.

Protecting oneself from manipulation involves keeping your distance and avoiding internalizing attempted exploitations and manipulation.

Suggestions for “Dealing With” Manipulative Behavior:

Ask yourself this:

1. Are you treated with respect?
2. Is there a positive shared relationship?
3. Are there reasonable demands?
4. Do you feel good about the relationship?

Then—you focus on the *manipulator* by asking probing questions that require an intellectual and contractual response from the manipulator. *Refrain from asking questions that can be answered by a “Yes” or “No” (closed questions).*

Ask questions of the manipulator that require a lengthy verbal response and commitment. Such as:

1. Tell me why you feel your comment is reasonable or a reasonable request from your perspective?
2. Tell me what you believe to be the relationship between us—(shared responsibility or a subservient role?)
3. Tell me who and why a certain person (you or me) is to make the final decision?
4. What are you asking of me or telling me to do?

**IF YOU FIND THE ANSWERS NOT TO YOUR LIKING OR NOT CONSISTENT WITH THE INTENDED ROLE/AGREEMENT, DO NOT CONFORM TO MANIPULATIVE REQUESTS—SAY: “I WILL THINK ABOUT IT.” DO NOT CONTINUE TO ENGAGE IN THE CONVERSATION(S).**

Some manipulative people deal in extremes—persistent and ongoing manipulation or extremely obvious behaviors that show no respect for others. The behaviors can be at either end of the spectrum—obnoxiously and inappropriately polite or with persistent extreme rudeness. The best advice—don’t deal with this person!

**REGARDLESS OF ANOTHER PERSON’S ATTEMPT TO MANIPULATE YOU, YOU DESERVE TO BE:**

1. Treated with respect
2. Able to expression your feelings, opinions, and wants
3. Able to set your own priorities
4. Able to say, No! without guilt
5. Able to get what you pay for
6. Personally opinionated
7. Able to protect yourself from all harm
8. Able to create your own happy and healthy life

## **SELECTING A RESPONSE TO COMMUNICATION META-MESSAGES**

Know the difference in POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE metamessage communication behaviors. Choosing a personal response to negative communication metamessages will allow your control (for better or worse) over your reactions. Resistive behaviors to negative meta-message communication can provide more individual control for positive outcomes.

### **PERSONAL *PASSIVE* BEHAVIORS TO NEGATIVE META-MESSAGE COMMUNICATION**

- Suck it up
- Hold it in
- Denial
- Feeling Guilty
- Feeling Shame
- Exhibiting Low Self-Esteem
- Being Passive
- Feeling that you need acceptance
- Being a “Door Mat”
- Not Having Personal Boundaries of Mistreatment
- Holding in Hostility
- Feeling Powerless
- Feeling Shame and Guilt
- Allowing Personal Manipulation from Others

### **PERSONAL *RESISTIVE* BEHAVIORS TO NEGATIVE META-MESSAGE COMMUNICATION**

- Set well-defined and clear boundaries
- Be Self-Sufficient and Confident
- Be Active
- Send Clear Messages
- Use “I” Messages
- Say What You Mean—Mean What You Say!
- Remain Powerful
- Be Comfortable
- Be Self-Accepting
- Be Self-Aware
- Radiate Contentment
- Be Well Respected

## PERSONAL **AGGRESSIVE** BEHAVIORS TO NEGATIVE META-MESSAGE COMMUNICATION

- Be Explosive and Attacking
- Be Arrogant
- Be Dominant
- Be Attacking
- Be in Need of Power
- Be Self-Absorbed
- Be Oblivious
- Be Overbearing
- Be Hostile
- Be Threatening
- Be Manipulative

### **THE OUTCOME**

Another person might say something that is not well accepted or has underlying aggression, resistance, or manipulation. The meta-message is not professional, sensitive, or representative of the demeanor expected of the job or role. Listen to the words and watch the behavior carefully. The person does not know that you know NOW (by the implicit meta-message) what they are PROBABLY SAYING!

The skill related to your awareness of what is inferred through implicit communication and behavior will guide your professional conduct. You are now in control of what you say and do because you understand how to control your implied meta-message. It allows for more effective (and accurate) professional communication and appropriate responses.

### **RECOMMENDED READING**

Ni Preston, MSBA—[www.nipreston.com](http://www.nipreston.com)---

“A Practical Guide for Passive-Aggressives to Change Towards the Higher Self.”

“How to Successfully Handle Passive-Aggressive People.”

Communication: Comparing Theoretical Options by this author

Job Descriptions by this author

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