

## Communication Is Key To Constructive Conflict Management

Have you ever noticed that arguments usually get louder as they progress? The reason for this is that each party in the argument thinks (at least subconsciously) that the other is not listening. So what do we usually do if they are not listening? We restate our position over and over, perhaps using new words, saying it louder, hoping that they will finally get the message. There are other options! You will be amazed what happens in an argument when one person is willing to listen and summarize so the other knows they have been heard.

Communication is central in managing conflict constructively. Communication is far more than speaking your mind! Communication is only completed when the listener has heard and can summarize what the speaker was saying, both facts and feelings, so that the speaker says, "yes, that is what I was saying."

In a VORP meeting it is very unlikely for people to raise their voices beyond a healthy animated volume. The reason for this is that the mediator is leading them in a process designed to help them hear each other. It does not mean that they don't convey their negative experiences and accompanying anger, hurt, or other intense feeling resulting from the offense and the aftermath of the offense. Conveying these experiences is a central part of the process but the speaker knows that the other is listening and will be summarizing and that they will have a chance to be heard also.

A summary doesn't mean that the listener agrees or disagrees, just that they have heard and can summarize what the other has said. After a communication loop is complete the speaker may want to add something to further clarify their point or perhaps they are satisfied that they have been heard and now they are ready to listen to the other side.

In your next argument, if you want to be constructive, I would encourage you to try listening and summarizing. It slows the argument down. It will reduce the volume and give you both time to think more about what it is you really want to communicate. After a party has been listened to and summarized (caution: if you do it cynically you will make things worse) they are more inclined to be open to listen to the other side. Then problem solving can begin.

## VORP Volunteer Perseveres And Brings Case To A Successful Resolution

■ Our VORP story this month is from Gail Levin, a member of the Valley Christian Center, which has been an actively supportive church for many years.

According to the case file, a foster child, Robert, had destroyed a sizeable amount of his foster mother's property. Because of their personal relationship, this seemed like an interesting case.

At first, events proved frustrating. Robert's current foster mom was on vacation. For several days I only reached the answering machine. When I finally spoke with her she told me Robert had been moved to a group home the week before. I called there to learn he'd been moved again, to Valley Teen Ranch.

I felt this was good news since I know Valley Teen Ranch is an excellent group home. I immediately called Robert at the ranch and he readily agreed to meet with me. Since he's a minor, the ranch's therapist plus Robert's social worker from the foster child program chose to act as his guardians throughout the VORP process. This combined effort by professionals from several agencies working together on Robert's behalf was a model of cooperation.

This initial meeting with Robert and his "guardians" was very positive. Robert seemed quite affirmed by the presence of his social worker and therapist. He took full responsibility for the offense. The only concern raised was that the restitution amount mentioned on the referral seemed inflated and, even if accurate, would be very difficult for him to meet. I assured everyone that the figure was only a rough estimate and would be open for discussion

**"At first, events proved frustrating..."**

at the point in the VORP process when we talk about how to restore the equity between them.

My next step was to contact the victims, Bonnie and her husband, Ed. I called them right away and we met that same afternoon. They said they were a Christian couple and wanted what was best for Robert. As Bonnie, and earlier Robert, described the crime incident, it began when he was having trouble with his homework. In a fit of frustration, he wanted to get his bike and leave. Knowing his pattern of running away, Bonnie said "No." Robert flew into a rage and began breaking things, including the windshield on the family car. He finally forced the garage door open, grabbed his bike and ran.

Bonnie and Ed told me the only restitution they were seeking was for the broken windshield, as the other damages were relatively minor. Bonnie felt it was important, for Robert's personal growth, that he experience the consequences of his behavior. She also expressed the financial hardship the repairs placed on the family. However, the amount was less than one-third of the original estimate.

**Those present sensed the unique opportunity the VORP process offered.**

With the groundwork in place, the actual meeting ran smoothly. In my role as mediator, I felt like an honored spectator as Robert, his "guardians" and Bonnie discussed their experiences, positive and negative, and worked through their feelings and needs. All parties happily agreed that the restitution request was reasonable. Robert accepted responsibility,

*(Continued on back)*

*(Story continued from front)*

apologized to Bonnie and agreed to pay the restitution amount by earning money from chores he'd perform at Valley Teen Ranch. He affirmed the need to learn new, healthier ways of managing his anger. Bonnie expressed her continuing support for Robert and the good results that accountability and love can produce. We all agreed to meet again when the restitution is paid.

One of the greatest blessings for me was to be a small part of the networking process. Those present sensed the unique opportunity that the VORP process offered. It was the social worker's first experience working with VORP and she commended Bonnie for

her courage and follow through. This is also the first time VORP has had an opportunity to work with a young man living at Valley Teen Ranch. I felt I was witnessing a unique second chance for Robert, surrounded by caring adults, to turn his life around.

Finally, all through the process I sensed God's presence. As to how Robert felt about what had transpired, his big smile at the meeting's conclusion told it all.

Thanks Gail!!

## Volunteer Mediator Training Scheduled For September and November

**PLAN NOW TO ATTEND THE NEXT VORP VOLUNTEER MEDIATOR TRAINING AND BRING A FRIEND:** The next VORP mediator training sessions are Sept 17 & 24, and Nov. 10 & 17. VORP Mediator Training includes instruction and practice in collaborative leadership skills, listening skills, conflict styles, and leading a cooperative process to heal an injustice. The training fee is \$75 or "FREE" for Mediators who take at least three cases. The materials fee for everyone is \$10. Scholarships are available. College Undergraduate or Professional Development Credit is available through Fresno Pacific College. Call Elaine to make reservations.

## Your Contributions Make VORP Possible

**VORP RELIES ENTIRELY ON YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS!!** Your contribution makes VORP possible. Each time you contribute, you help train a volunteer mediator to make Restorative Justice possible. Please enjoy the stories and know that your contributions make them possible. Another contribution that we need is your prayer support. Please remember the mediators, victims and offenders who are meeting today and throughout this month.

## Special Thanks!

The Fresno Sunrise Rotary (facilitated by Denise Jackson) contributed \$500 and David Kleshold and Mark Hill contributed many hours to purchase and set up a networking system in our office. With our new case management software now on line and these improvements in our computer system, we are ready to support more volunteer mediators working with more cases.

Also, thank you to Lachelle Hannickle, who has been a great help at the VORP office. Lachelle, a member at Valley Christian Center, volunteered to help out at the office for a month before she goes to France.

This is a month of transition for VORP. We said goodbye to Mark Bakker and are welcoming new volunteers from the Mennonite Voluntary Service Program. In the next few months we will be introducing them.



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