

What It Takes to Sustain Significant Relationships

Personal Perspective: The art of mutuality.

By Dr. Kenneth Silvestri

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"Hope lies in the very fact that as living beings we are wired for relationships. It is only possible to express our humanity in relationship to other human beings." —Nora Bateson

"...my mother and father were right. They always said that it takes two to make a quarrel and nobody was better at it than they were!" —Gracie Allen

Introduction

I have been involved with couples/families as a systemic psychotherapist for the past forty years. They usually come to make a difference in their significant relationships, although they seldom initially understand how it is to be "within" those relationships. Having been trained in cultural anthropology to look at how change comes about, I have "learned to learn" to help them recognize the tipping point or readiness to make that difference.

Many therapists who work with couples and families fall into the trap of becoming part of the presenting problems by creating long-term dependency. That is only a "first-order change" and seldom goes beyond the therapeutic question of "how do you feel." I have found that when all involved, including myself, have a synchronized understanding of how relationships transcend individuality, this is when "differences that make a difference" occur in earnest.

I have incorporated "Warm Data" in my practice (developed by Nora Bateson, President of the International Bateson Institute.) It is "...information about the interrelationships that integrate elements of a complex system." My approach to gathering Warm Data uses a metaphorical systemic three-legged stool. It consists of contextual prompts regarding Commitment to making a difference within a systemic framework; Equity in altering decision-making/power; and Intimacy/Communication, the hundred-plus ways to have a relationship.

What follows is a summary of my qualitative participant/observations. It manifested in ingredients for sustaining win-win mutuality in relationships. They consist of a compilation of

interactions from thousands of therapy sessions with hundreds of couples/families, as well as cases of those I supervise. The results can be used as a recipe in any order and will be beneficial when the prompts are answered in the contexts of commitment, equity, and intimacy mentioned above.

What It Means to be Holistic

Recognizing the gestalt of our being is a prerequisite to savoring our relationships. This widens our perceptual lens to see more than the sum of the parts that make up our existence. We are much more than what any of us can offer individually.

Think about how nature works, allowing for unpredictability, for all species to hopefully evolve harmoniously. It can be messy and beautiful while offering a multitude of interconnected ways to survive. For us humans, it provides an ecological communication opportunity to thrive by sharing narratives that form an understanding of our interdependencies. It requires accepting what Nora Bateson describes as "Ready-ing." She believes that "This process is open-ended, always sensitizing, ever-learning and taking place within an already existing aggregate of perceptions."

In my experience and research, change is possible when it is understood and accepted how each plays a role in whatever communication problem may exist. I have found that knowing ourselves is an expression of all that lies between us. This is what influences our behaviors. It also proves the adage that as Gregory Bateson was fond of saying, "It takes two to know one."

Prompts: What is it like to be with another? (Think what is immanent in your relationships within the suggested contexts)

Start a short poem or narrative with the phrase; if I can change my life, I would be....

Imagine how your life can be enhanced if you take a moment each day and look beyond your immediate view, feelings, tastes, smells, and touches.

Ask questions that will change the narratives in your relationships

Those whom I've worked with have demonstrated how relationships that are healthy and reciprocal are sustained through a win-win communication volley. The consequence of adversarial or competitive interaction is like spiking the ball while volleying on a ping pong table. This results in both sides losing. A win-win volley consists of: Expressing/asking; Checking with all your senses if you are being heard; Restating or affirming your expression; and then, Reversing roles. These are the basic rules of win-win conversations.

We exist and evolve in our contexts which are simultaneously part of wider ones and so on. Asking questions is to learn from each other and it alters the growing narrative that influences subsequent contexts of our lives. What was evident in my observations was how little was known about each other's perceptions and beliefs with those looking to improve their relationships.

Prompts: How does being aware of the context of your interactions enhance your relationships?

How might your conversations be more conducive to getting your message heard?

Start a short poem or narrative with another that continues the phrase, when I am heard I.....



Pausing (c) Kenneth Silvestri

Respect pauses and gaps when mutually communicating

In working on relationship issues, it is necessary to savor introspection. These liminal moments dissolve barriers that formerly hindered communication. This is where we become collaborators in discovering the unseen available resources to combine our insights. It is a space offering mutually-learned information that motivates the emergence of possibilities.

Prompts: Ask "how" questions to get to the depth of what mutual learning is available to each other.

Think of ways you can create contexts of collaboration and in what ways you can adjust and maintain them.

What are the causes that hinder collaboration in your life?

Avoid compromises that stifle mutual learning

What was obvious in my observation of relational equity is that there was little success in trying to compromise. We all lose something when we compromise. The skill and opportunity to have win-win results are to blend with conflict. Compromise interrupts the creativity that is available to all of us, especially since aestheticism is the human metaphor for how nature works.

Prompts: How can you alter adaptive behaviors of communication that have left you unfulfilled?

How did you push through obstacles and produce outcomes that you may have thought were impossible?

Have you ever been in a conflict situation where the outcome could have been less injurious had you considered other options?

Most of those in my practice articulate how quick-fix cultural constraints hindered their ability to avoid narrow cause-and-effect reasoning. An exercise that I have used is to imagine that you have a built-in lens that zooms in and out whenever you need it to see how each situation is simultaneously part of wider transcontextual situations. The goal of being interdependent depends on how we combine and share our intimacy. What was most articulated by those in this study was that when using this lens, change occurred in wild weird non-linear unpredictable ways.

Prompt: Discuss how "the map is not the territory."

What personal implications do you feel would result from accepting an ecological view of relationships?

How would you be if you could improvise within your relationships?

We are all half-baked, however, I have found that using the above ingredients can regardless, help nurture relationships to be interdependent. This becomes an ongoing journey to better fulfill ourselves through mutual learning to sustain our relationships.