

Conversation and Relationship Repair

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The two terms, conversation repair and relational repair are vital in understanding interpersonal communication. “Repair,” as used here refers to the willingness and ability to amend conversations or relationships. Repair is desirable rather than doing nothing when difficulties seem apparent or to just dump a relationship or ignore a conversation. Below, various forms of repair are discussed.

At times, conversations go awry. Comments made to another may be hyperbolic, hasty, harsh, abrupt, insensitive, boisterous, cynical, ego-driven, bitter, callous, exaggerated, condescending, overly personal, timed poorly, demanding, exploitive, apathetic, pompous, gratuitous, caustic, incomplete, overly emotional, dismissive, overly disclosive, too lengthy, profane, reticent, or unresponsive.¹ Seldom are these conversation flaws fatal unless they are repeated, ignored, or obviously done in ways so as to be hurtful.

One common repair strategy is to form direct restatements quickly after a defective comment is discovered. The corrected portion of the conversation is typically vocally stressed and/or the employment of meta-communication, the overt explaining what the corrective elements are and, perhaps why they are added, is used. This strategy usually works if the repair is short and easily recognized and if the motive of repair is evident. If, on the other hand, the original statement(s) initiated a response so negative that the listener may not be willing or able to decipher the repair, another repair strategy needs to be chosen. If the motive for the original flaw is sufficiently negatively attributed, such repair might be fruitless, at least at that moment.

Another repair strategy that can be effective when conversation problems are recognized as idea flow progresses is to stop and state the perceived error, then progress to the correction stage. Sometimes, conversations are compressed by external factors, are embedded in multi-person dialogue, or are uttered in sensitive surroundings rendering such repair strategies impossible, awkward, or impractical. If this tactic is employed too frequently, it will ruin the natural, coherent conversation flow and may reduce the acceptance of such repair by others.

Sometimes, even of conversation errors are uncovered as they occur, it is wisest to let these go unrepaired until later. Ex-post facto repair is fairly common. One can wait until later and approach the conversation partner and at that time explain what conversation repair is desired/needed. Care must be taken not to delay too long lest there be suspicion as to the speaker’s motive for the delay, or that the listener might have forgotten the need for repair, or that intervening time may have rendered the error worse.

Added care for speakers needs to be taken not to acquire a reputation for conversational sloppiness, callousness, or disregard for precision in statements, lest future repair attempts be refused. If a speaker has a reputation for flawed speech, they risk listeners’ attributing these flaws to uncaring or intentional conversational inadequacy.

There are times when conversational repair is impractical, terribly risky, or impossible. Under these circumstances, either proceed with the conversation flow or stop and gracefully end the dialogue. The risk here is that the listener might perceive repair to have been possible and even desirable/needed. Under that condition, some clue needs to be given by the listener to the speaker that repair is waned and is sought. The social dynamic created here is fraught with discomfort, risk, and awkwardness for all participants.

¹ Students are expected to look up those terms they are unfamiliar with as they might appear on exams and students can be expected by the professor and peers to use/understand these terms in class discussions.

In addition to conversations needing repair, relationships frequently unfold in ways that require corrective measures. Typical relationship situations that signal the need for relational repair include: being taken for granted, activity redundancy, dependency, ungratefulness, demanding partners, lack of empathy, minimal feedback, low disclosure, decreasing trust, lowered reciprocity, need for added support, high defensiveness, unsatisfactory conflict resolution, changes in relational saliency, perceptions of relational potency changes, relational definition needs/perceptions, and a desire for relational affirmation.

All of these dynamics afflict most relationships at one time or another. Healthy relationship participants remain vigilant of the potential relational barriers and who see to it that they let their partner know when they perceive repair as needed. Partners need to be able and willing to hear the other ask for repair and not deny, diminish, or ridicule such a request. One partner may be aware of, perceiving of, in need of repair and the other party may be oblivious to such a need. This is understandable at times; however, once apprised of the need, the unaware partner must geting gear as an aware and cooperative party if the relational repair is to proceed successfully.

The most frequently successful strategy for relationship repair is to engage in descriptive conversation with relational partners. Following is a definition by negation for descriptive dialogue. Description occurs when conversants are **not** argumentative, power laden, defensive, deceptive, evasive, obfuscating, domineering, tangential, monopolizing, apathetic, commanding, prying, judgmental, dismissive, haranguing, disinterested, distrustful, fear inducing, guilt inducing, highly emotional, agitated, not disclosive, distrustful, impatient, equivocal, ambiguous, forthcoming, impersonal, truncated, long winded, unable or unwilling to take conversational turns, fail to listen carefully to partner, and dogmatic.

The most vital aspect of descriptive dialogue is active listening. Among successful relational repair strategies involving listening is asking questions of clarification, amplification, classification, and specificity. Clarification questions request the partner to make clear possible ambiguity or listehne4r error when multiple interpretations are possible. Questions of amplification request that further detail be supplied so that as complete an understanding can be created. Questions of classification involve making clear names/labels and categories used or implied in the dialogue. Questions of specificity asks that greater detail [of kind, number, or degree] be made available to enhance complete understanding. Such questions offer evidence of active listening. Eye contact, forward lean, affirming nods, vocal affirmation all add non-verbal clues of active listening. Paraphrasing – content, feelings, and attributive -- of what the other says, as well as offering affirming examples of what is being discussed affords partners evidence they are being heard and respected.

Yet another aspect to relational repair is taking full responsibility for one's role in a relationship. Follow through, fulfilling promises made, honesty, pulling your load, timeliness, cooperativeness, team work, expressing emotions rather than displaying them, admitting to errors/failings, accepting reasonable criticism, knowing when to back off under debilitating stress or anxiety, being able to subordinate personal wants/expectations when these might cause relational injury, and seeing the relationship as a partnership rather than as one of individuals.

Relationships whose participants cannot or will not actively engage in prudent repair and descriptive discussions as to the need for repair and the desired means of repair are doomed to failure. Repair I essential to relationships lasting and remaining worthwhile to its participants. Relational repair is a set of skills that demand hard work and vigilance.