Develop the skill of speaking in a positive sense with good intent, being responsible for honest and direct communication.

What You’ll Discover in This Chapter:

• Why it’s better to be honest than to be “nice”
• How to heal damaged relationships
• How to Open The Front Door to positive communication
No one would talk much in society if they knew how often they misunderstood others.  
—Goethe

What’s the single greatest instrument in achieving your success?

Your mouth.

What you have to say determines how far you will succeed. How so? Because Quantum Success is built on relationships, relationships are built on communication, and communication happens mostly through the spoken word.

This Key Catalyst guides you to speak positively, or as the Native American orator Rolling Thunder put it, to “speak with good purpose” (Doug Boyd, Rolling Thunder). Speaking with good purpose means communicating directly, clearly, honestly, and with good intent. It requires you to choose your words carefully and to take responsibility for them.

When you speak with good intent, you’ve already chosen the purpose of your speech before you open your mouth. You’re assured that what you have to say will be beneficial to yourself and others because you’ve chosen your words specifically to serve this goal.

Speaking clearly and directly means that you state simply what you mean; you don’t speak around the subject, hide it in metaphors, or water down its strength. You don’t say you’re “just a little bit angry” if, in fact, you’re furious.

Speaking honestly—without the masks of sarcasm, condescension, or disdain—requires you to state your true thoughts and feelings, even if they’re not pretty, even when they’re not what the other person wants to hear. Honest speech is about revealing the true you.
Speaking with good purpose can be a challenge; it takes courage, effort, and practice. But until you master this skill, the quality of your relationships will be out of your hands; the satisfaction of deep, meaningful connections to others will elude you.

Why Speak with Good Purpose?

Words are powerful. They can build or destroy.

A few cutting words, let loose in a moment of anger, can wound someone for a lifetime. Remember when your best friend in high school said you had a “lame smile,” when your uncle quipped about your “bird legs,” or your teacher discouraged you from going after that high-octane math class because “you’re no good at numbers”? I remember to this day the pain I felt hearing my mother snickering to her friend in the stands at the ice skating rink, watching me flounder. Hurtful comments can stay with you a long time.

On the other hand, you’ve had times when a few kind words made all the difference. Have you ever had someone whisper, “I believe you can do it,” just when you needed to hear it the most?

Communication is the bridge between people—it’s the glue that holds all relationships together. It’s what forms the link between husband and wife, between parent and child, between teacher and student, between friends, siblings, partners, and co-workers.

Your relationships thrive or wither depending on the quality of the communication that serves them.

Success is built on relationships; relationships are built on communication.

Patterns of speaking become the accepted ways to interact. Look how many marriages fall into ruin when husband and wife slip into nagging, accusations, and blame. Think of the friendships
that have disintegrated because of a misunderstanding that was never cleared up. Consider budding relationships that never went any further because one party or the other wasn't willing to take the communication to a deeper level.

In any relationship, positive communication creates a healthy environment, just as random, ill-intentioned communication creates a toxic one. When relationships aren’t strong, apathy and distrust have room to grow. How productive can anyone be in an environment like that?

On the other end of the spectrum, when relationships come first, when the atmosphere is one of joy, trust, and safety, people function at a higher level. They’re more loyal, and they’re prepared to do whatever it takes to get the job done. Our SuperCamp staffers sometimes stay until midnight painting posters, organizing paperwork—doing whatever needs to be done. They don’t put in these hours because they have to; they do it because they love what they’re doing and it means so much to them to get it done right. You’d never see this kind of dedication in a workplace dominated by fear.

The same dynamics make or break families. A colleague once told me how she’d visited the house of a college friend and discovered a TV blaring in almost every room—even in the bathroom. The friend’s mother, father, and sisters seemed to be using the noise from the TVs as barricades to keep from interacting with one another. The tension in that household was palpable. Communication was nonexistent.

But, the same colleague recalled, the environment was completely different at another friend’s house. Dad, daughter, mom, and son went about their day in a spirit of affectionate laughter and silliness. Since the mom was from Denmark, they kept the Danish tradition of hosting a coming-of-age party for their daughter, my colleague’s friend. She remembers how bright her friend’s eyes were when she stood in the center of a circle of loving family who
took turns reciting made-up poems and singing goofy little songs that told the highlights of her life. The communication in that family was loving, supportive, and joyful. Who wouldn’t want to grow up in a family like that?

Words matter. I don’t know who came up with that phrase about “sticks and stones,” but they were wrong. Words can hurt. They can also heal. What you say has an impact.

How to Speak and Listen Positively

How do you make it happen? How do you direct your speech to forge strong bonds and create safe environments? How can you make sure you’re speaking with good purpose?

Speaking with good purpose begins with taking control of your thoughts. We tend to assume our thoughts are beyond our control, that they come to us unbidden. But we can train our thoughts just like we train our willpower. My partner at Burklyn Business School, Marshall Thurber, used to introduce this Key Catalyst with a reading from Doug Boyd’s *Rolling Thunder*:

> People have to be responsible for their thoughts, so they have to learn to control them. It’s not easy, but it can be done. First of all, if we don’t want to think certain things, we don’t say them. We don’t have to eat everything we see, and we don’t have to say everything we think. So we begin by watching our words and speaking with good purpose only. There are times when we need clean and pure minds with no unwanted thoughts and we have to train and prepare steadily for those times until we are ready . . . there is no use condemning yourself. You don’t have to pay attention to those unwanted thoughts. If they keep coming into your head, just leave them alone and say, “I don’t choose to have such thoughts” and they will
soon go away . . . keep a steady determination and stick with that purpose . . .

Listen carefully to what that little voice is trying to get you to believe about other people. Because if you don’t recognize what the voice is saying, its negative influence may be creeping into your speech. Ask yourself, “Am I saying something useful right now? Are my words encouraging or damaging?”

You don’t have to say everything you think.

Speaking with good purpose makes a difference at all times, but it becomes vital when people aren’t getting along. It’s hard to communicate negative feelings without slipping into negative patterns: laying blame, attacking, accusing, insulting. But to get at the heart of this Key Catalyst, recognize that these behaviors don’t accomplish anything positive. The only power they have is to damage, confuse, wound feelings, and inspire the other person to respond in kind. But bring in positive speech, and even in a tense atmosphere, you’ll have a chance to forge a bond of communication. Positive speech opens a path for discussing disagreements, clearing up miscommunication, and creating solutions.

The goal of positive speaking and active listening is to keep communication flowing. It’s as much about hearing the other person as it is about making yourself heard. When someone is speaking, don’t use the time to formulate your own opinion or response. Instead, focus all your efforts on understanding what the person is telling you. When the person is finished speaking, rephrase what he’s said and ask if you’re correct.

Catch Yourself—Why Was I Going to Say That?

Positive communication is a habit. It’s a matter of training yourself to monitor your thoughts before they become speech.
With practice, you’ll learn to focus on giving words to positive thoughts, to recognizing people’s strengths, and to offering praise and encouragement.

Don’t *avoid* expressing negative thoughts, feelings, and experiences, but learn to recognize them for what they are before you say them. Treat a negative thought like a wasp that gets into the house. Don’t overreact; don’t throw lots of energy at it. Simply think, “Okay, what am I going to do about that?”

If it’s simply a random unpleasant thought, you don’t like that person’s whiny tone or wish another person wasn’t so pushy, acknowledge the thought and let it go. Choose not to give it the power of spoken words. But if it’s one that needs resolution, you may need to express it.

Handle these times carefully. Think about the intention of your words. Are they meant to support the person and build a stronger relationship? Are they focused on finding a solution? Speaking positively is not just about what to communicate but what to *avoid* communicating. Gossip, complaints, and nagging are destructive ways of airing negative thoughts. They pollute the atmosphere in which your relationships are growing. Instead, let the pressure out of these negative thoughts by saying them in a supportive context. Give them words in the context of healing and preserving the relationship. Listen to the difference between, “You’re sloppy; you live like a pig,” and “I’m uncomfortable sharing a room with you because we have different ideas about tidiness.” The same idea, expressed without barbs, is a far more accurate statement of the situation.

**Don’t Muck the Conversation**

Beware—some speech that seems beneficial on the surface can impede positive communication.
How often have you heard these well-intentioned phrases?
“You don’t need to lose weight; you look fine.”
“Now, if I were you . . . ”
“I know exactly what you mean. The same thing happened to me . . . ”

People usually mean well when they say these things, but they actually impede productive communication because they deny other people’s feelings. Reassurance, advice, and identification actually shut down the flow of communication. I call this “mucking the conversation.”

You know what muck is. You’ve stepped in it. It’s a mix of mud, goo, and maybe a little manure that sticks to your feet and makes it harder for you to get anywhere. That’s exactly what you introduce into a conversation when you throw in these well-meaning phrases.

When people share a feeling, an experience, or a fear, and you respond with reassurance, you may mean to comfort them, but what you’re really doing is cutting off their sharing with the statement that they shouldn’t feel that way: “Don’t feel what you’re feeling. You have no reason to feel that way.” End of conversation.

When they communicate a problem they’re having, and you hand them a solution, you shut them down. Think of it this way: how could you find a solution to their problem in five minutes, when for weeks, months, or years, they haven’t found one? They’re the ones living it. You’ve just placed yourself in a position of superiority to them—a position you haven’t earned. They’re not likely to share their problems with you in the future.

When a person begins to tell you about something that he’s going through, and you cut him off with, “I know exactly how you feel . . . me too,” you’ve killed the communication. The speaker never gets to finish. You never get to find out whether his experience was anything like yours. Besides, even if your experiences are similar, they’ll never be exactly the same.
Don’t muck the conversation with reassurance, advice, or identification. Your goal is not to diagnose, pacify, or fix. Let your goal be to listen, and to let the speaker know he’s been heard.

Which Is Kinder—Being Honest or Being “Nice”?

As a child, you learned: “If you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all.” You wanted to be liked—we all do—so you tried to make yourself likable. When you thought something less-than-flattering about people, you learned to tell them the opposite of what you really thought.

But was that really kind?
Suppose your friend comes to you needing an honest opinion: “Does this hair color look good on me?”

Let’s say you really think it makes her look awful. But you don’t want to hurt her feelings, so you tell her, “You look fine.”

How good of a friend are you being?
Tell her a “little white lie,” and you might spare her some uncomfortable feelings—temporarily. But tell her the truth, and you could help her improve her appearance. You do need to be kind. You do need to be supportive. But be honest.

Telling her what you think, and the degree to which you think it, is a risk. It could lose you the friendship entirely. But it’s also the only way to deepen your relationship because it’s the only way to be a true friend. If she can’t take the honesty, and goes away, she was not that good a friend in the first place. As a true friend, you’re devoted to your friend’s growth, which means you have to be willing to talk about the places where she needs to grow. Turn it the other way around: To be a true friend means you can accept criticism from your friend without anger.

At SuperCamp we teach that NICE stands for Nothing Inside Cares Enough—to tell the truth, to support the person’s growth.
Being honest and direct is kinder than being NICE.

Let People Know What You’re Thinking

“Got a minute?”

Have you ever had someone ask you this? Doesn’t it immediately send up a yellow flag in your mind: *Why is he asking me this? Does he want me to have a cup of coffee with him or does he want a favor?*

It’s an evasive question. It’ll probably be met with an evasive answer: “Why are you asking?”

“I want to know if you’re free to do something.”

“Well, I’ll have to check my schedule . . .”

And on the dance goes. Your truthful answer is probably, *It depends on what that “something” is.* But you don’t feel comfortable coming out with it so bluntly. You feel as though you’re being cornered.

I get this a lot at work—and I catch myself doing it sometimes. I handle it by reminding the person to be visible: “Why are you asking?” or “Tell me more.”

It’s much better to say, “do you have a minute . . .” and complete the sentence with, “. . . to __________.”

When your goal is to speak with good purpose, make your communication visible. Visible communication makes your purpose clear; invisible communication, as in the example above, masks your purpose.

When your intent is clear, people don’t feel as if they’re being tricked or manipulated. They feel safe and respected. And they’ll feel comfortable responding to you in kind. They’ll give your direct communication a direct answer.

Visible communication, a vital component of speaking with good purpose, grows stronger relationships. It’s about making your intent “visible,” making your wishes known.
OTFD: Open the Front Door

In my company we teach two powerful tools for achieving clear, constructive communication. The first is an acronym to help you get a communication across; the second is a method for apologizing when you’ve wronged someone. Notice that both these tools are focused on letting go of negatives and moving forward with positives.

In our programs we teach people to Open the Front Door when they want to communicate something. It’s particularly good for communicating something you’re upset about, but it can be used in almost any scenario, with almost anyone.

OTFD communicates four vital pieces of information: Observation, Thought, Feeling, and Desire:

Observation: “I noticed that twice this month, you made plans with me in advance, then at the last minute you canceled them to do something else.”

Thought: “I thought when you did that it meant time with me wasn’t very important to you, or that your plans with me were only until something more interesting to do came along.”

Feeling: “Each time you canceled your plans with me, I felt frustrated and neglected. I felt lonely.”

Desire: “In the future, I’d like you to only make plans with me that you intend to keep. If you think something more interesting is likely to come up, please don’t schedule anything with me.”

Following these four steps tells the other person precisely what they need to know in order to understand you. Often, you’ll find when you finish communicating this way, the person you’re talking to will agree: “Yes, I see why you feel this way.” Compare this to what happens when you try to express an upset through blame, shame, judgment, or ridicule, and you’ll see the power in this tool.
Apologize with These Four Steps and Heal the Damage

OTFD’s twin sister is the four-part apology. Take these four steps when you’re on the other end of the communication, when you’ve wronged or hurt someone, or when you’ve made a mistake significant enough to impact someone else:

1. Acknowledge: Take responsibility for what you’ve done. Use “I statements” to show that you’re the one behind the action: “I acknowledge that I canceled our time at the last minute more than once and that this is upsetting.”

2. Apologize: “I apologize for hurting you by wasting your time and making you feel unwanted.”

3. Make It Right: Ask, “How can I make it right?” If the other person doesn’t have something specific in mind, offer something to make up for the thing you failed to give before. “Since you lost what could have been a wonderful Saturday, is there something you’d like to do together next Saturday that would make up for it?”

4. Recommit: Show that you’re following a plan to keep the upset from happening in the future. “From now on, if I make plans with you, unless a real emergency comes up, I’ll keep them.”

I believe the words “I apologize” are much more powerful than “sorry.” How often have you heard a nonchalant “I’m sorry,” as if that would change anything?

At one of the schools where our methods are used, the principal caught a young grade-schooler doing something that was against the rules. The girl mumbled a defiant “Sorry.”

The principal said, “You know, Elizabeth, in this school we use a four-part apology.”

The little girl replied, “Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry.”

I guess she didn’t quite learn the process! But it did get a laugh from the principal.
The four-part apology’s power lies in its ability to demonstrate that you’re taking responsibility for your actions. When the people in your life realize you’re willing and able to do that, they’ll be more open and trusting with you. Your relationships will be better.

Clearing the air of arguments releases tensions and feels fabulous. It releases positive energy and creates synergy, especially if it’s an argument that’s been festering for a long time. In the light of clear, positive communication, even long-standing miscommunications can be resolved. People whose relationships have faltered for years can get back on track when they apologize with this level of responsibility.

Speaking with good purpose allows you to harness the awesome power of words. When you speak positively, honestly, and directly, with the goal of keeping relationships strong, words cease to be a random force and begin to direct their awesome energy in the service of your dream.

Montessori’s Peace Rose Cleanses Relationships of Hurt Feelings

In many Montessori classrooms, you’ll find a small plastic rose sitting in a bud vase. This is the Peace Rose; its purpose is to help kids learn to resolve disputes.

Whenever kids argue, or a disagreement arises between teacher and student, the arguing parties sit down holding the Peace Rose between them. They tell how they felt about the incident in question and discuss how each party is going to change behavior in the future. When the discussion is concluded, the people holding the rose say, “I declare peace.” And with that, the dispute ends.

The Peace Rose helps kids practice the skill of conflict resolution. But most importantly, it teaches them to let go of
an argument. Left to fester, bad feelings act like a cancer in a relationship. This quietly powerful ritual provides a means to finish a dispute so that the relationship is cleared of its harmful aftereffects.

You can adapt Montessori’s Peace Rose and make it your own: Turn it into a Peace Feather, Peace Telephone, Peace Statue—whatever symbol says resolution to you.

Speaking with Good Purpose Gives You the Power

• Replace an environment of fear with one of trust.
• Speak your mind honestly and constructively when you have negative feedback that will serve others.
• Repair damaged relationships by apologizing with the Four-Part Apology.
• Build stronger, deeper relationships.