

SUMMARY

VERBAL

JUDO

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Summary of “Verbal Judo” by George J. Thompson and Jerry B. Jenkins

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Learn the art of effective communication.

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Introduction

We've all been there: that moment when you say something, thinking you've said the right thing, only to be met with a horrified stare from your conversation partner. Too late, you realize you've misspoken, you've made it awkward, or worse, you've offended them. And what might have been a successful and effective conversation now leaves you flustered and desperate to backtrack as you try to explain what you meant. There's no doubt about it: this is one of the worst feelings in the world! And unfortunately, it's all too common. But the authors-- experienced police interrogators-- acknowledge that it doesn't have to be. So, if you want to put a stop to this feeling once and for all, just dive in and keep reading. Because over the course of this summary, we'll explore their groundbreaking tips for revolutionizing your communication practices.

What is Communication?

Have you ever thought of communication as an art form? Most of us haven't and the authors observe that this is often where the problem starts! Because talking is something human beings do all the time, most of us assume that we're already gifted communicators. But as the author learned on his first day as a rookie cop, communication and talking are two very different things! And if you're relying on your communication skills to keep you safe in a high-stakes situation, effective communication just might mean the difference between life and death! So, how can you be an effective communicator? Well, as you might imagine, the first step is changing your mindset.

And it starts with recognizing the difference between talking and communication. For example, if you've ever snapped at someone in anger or taken the brunt of someone's bad mood, you already know that in each case, a person might have been using words to communicate something-- i.e. their displeasure-- but they weren't practicing good communication skills. One of the key differences between talking and proper communication is their intent. If you're simply talking to someone, you might say whatever is on your mind, whether it's the right thing to say or not. For example, you might yell things like, "Stop that!", "Come here!", or "Are you an idiot?!"

Likewise, you might be tempted to use a number of very common but unhelpful phrases. Some key examples include phrases like, "Because I said so," "You wouldn't understand anyway," "Never mind," and, "Rules are rules." As you can see from simply reading these phrases, each of them have a negative, hostile, or accusatory tone. You might also have noticed that they are all "shut down statements." This means that they prevent a free and open exchange of information. Rather than simply conveying an idea and inviting the other person to engage with what you've said, each of the above phrases are commanding and provocative. It might help if you think of them as "sit down and shut up" phrases! Therefore, this means that they

are the opposite of good communication and in direct contrast to the standards of verbal judo. In the next chapter, we'll take a look at the positive differences that characterize verbal judo.

The Art of Verbal Judo

So far, we've established that good communication is the opposite of "shut down" statements or commands. So what does good communication look like in practice? And how can you incorporate it into your daily life? Put simply, verbal judo is about gently explaining everything. For example, let's consider some of the phrases we looked at in the previous chapter. Imagine that you told your teenage daughter, "No, you can't go with your friends to a house party on a school night." When she asks why or argues that she should be allowed to go, you might be tempted to reply with something like, "Because I said so!" or "Because rules are rules," or "Never mind, you wouldn't understand." But these responses are both unhelpful and an example of poor communication skills.

So instead, try practicing verbal judo by taking a little extra time to connect with your daughter and explain the problem. Rather than saying, "Because I said so," explain, "Because I don't think it's safe for you to go to a party where there is no adult supervision and likely underage drinking. And even if the party is perfectly safe, I think it's unwise for you to stay out late on a school night because you will be tired and grumpy the next day. I believe school and your health are important and if you don't get enough sleep, you'll sacrifice both your grades and your mental and physical health." It might take a little more time and emotional involvement, but it offers a variety of benefits in return. For starters, you'll successfully de-escalate the tension in your conversation with your daughter. Statements like "You won't understand," or "Rules are rules" incite tension because they insult the other person's intelligence and disrespect them from the get-go. By contrast, when you calmly explain the issue, you're conveying, "I see you. I'm treating you as an equal. You are worthy of my time and respect." So, when you de-escalate the tension and communicate trust and respect, you're also setting the tone for positive communication practices in the future.

This might seem like a small gesture, but when people feel disrespected, tension and resentment build. So, when you reply with a “shut down” statement, you probably don’t intend to foster ill will and anger in your daughter. Rather, you’re probably just trying to end the conversation quickly. But it’s highly likely that she will walk away from the conversation feeling angry and disrespected. So, the next time you two have a conversation, that anger may be boiling beneath the surface, even if you’re discussing a totally unrelated topic. And if this pattern builds up over the course of several conversations, it’s likely that you’ll permanently scar your communication patterns with your daughter. So, isn’t the outcome worth taking a little extra time and effort to explain?

The authors assert that practicing verbal judo is necessary for civilians and police officers alike. Many people in positions of power-- like parents or police officers-- find it far too easy to abuse that power by employing violence or “shut down” statements. But neither of those responses are constructive; in fact, they actually generate an increase in hostility. So, if we have the opportunity to learn alternative communication methods, don’t we all have an ethical responsibility to do so?

Put Yourself in Someone Else's Shoes

We hear this expression all the time, but how often do we really put it into practice? Most of us would like to think that we're kind and empathetic beings-- and for the most part, we are!-- but in tense situations, it's all too easy to become myopic. When we lose sight of alternative viewpoints, it decreases our empathy and increases our hostility. Because rather than looking at the situation from someone else's point of view, we get frustrated because they won't think like us. It's no surprise that this increases the tension in our relationships and leaves everyone feeling uncomfortable. So, how can you diffuse the tension? The authors posit that empathy is the answer.

Empathy means to literally put yourself in someone else's shoes, to imagine how it feels to be in their position, or attempt to see the situation from their point of view. By its very nature, empathy is the absence of selfishness and conflict. Because when you're trying to be empathetic, you're not worried about whether the other person agrees with you or even whether or not you like them. You're simply trying to connect with them and understand. So, whether you're interviewing someone in the context of a police interrogation or resolving an office dispute with your co-worker, empathy is the core tenet of verbal judo, and therefore the key to any successful conversation.

Speaking from their experience as police officers, the authors observe that any conversation without empathy is like talking to a brick wall. Rather than attempting to genuinely communicate, you're lambasting each other with conflicting ideas and hoping the other person will give up and see things your way. It might work sometimes, but it's hardly the best practice. So, try practicing empathy-led communication instead. As the authors have learned firsthand, empathy can literally save lives. They discovered this on one night in particular when they were called to do a welfare check on a suicidal man at his residence. When they arrived at the scene, they found

the man sitting in a full bathtub and holding an electric heater, which he intended to plunge into the tub.

What would you do in that situation? What would you say to convince him not to end his life? Would you try to tell him that he has so much to live for? That life can't be as bad as it feels right now? That things will get better? If these are the first suggestions that spring to your mind, don't worry; most people would opt for this route because they sound like the right things to say. At first glance, they sound kind, encouraging, and supportive. But it might surprise you to learn that none of these statements are in alignment with the tenets of verbal judo. That's because, believe it or not, all of these phrases lack empathy. They might be kind and well-intentioned, but they're all spoken from the viewpoint of someone who believes that they have everything to live for. Or, at the very least, from the perspective of someone who has never considered suicide. But if you've never found yourself struggling with so much pain that you just want it all to end, you can't presume to know-- based on your own experience-- how that man in the bathtub might feel.

Instead, you have to look at the situation from his eyes. An empathetic perspective would acknowledge that he has probably heard all of these platitudes before. In fact, he's probably tried to convince himself of their truth on more than one occasion. But because he no longer believes in any of those things at the moment, those statements are worthless to him. So, an empathetic perspective attempts to meet him where he is, without judgment. And that's exactly what the authors did. Rather than using force or unhelpful statement, one of the authors acknowledged and validated the man's desire to die. This was so unusual that it took the man by surprise and made him listen.

Once he had the man's attention, the author went on to say that he could understand if life felt too hard right now; it was okay to be depressed. He said that he could even understand wanting to end it all, but cautioned that if the man wanted to take his life, there were less painful ways to do it. He pointed out that death by electrocution is extremely painful. Rather than

the peaceful end the man craved, his suicide would be agonizing and his last moments would be torture. Surely, he argued, if you want to kill yourself, you should choose a less painful option. He even suggested a handful of other suicide methods that would be preferable to electrocuting yourself in the bathtub! Now, of course, he didn't want the man to kill himself and he was by no means attempting to encourage his suicide. But he did understand that an empathetic perspective was vital if he wanted to connect with the man. And that meant meeting him where he was, without judgment.

So, the next time you're faced with a crisis-- whether it's an argument with a family member or a dispute with a co-worker-- don't let the tension get the best of you. Don't allow yourself to become blinded by a myopic perspective. Instead, let empathy lead your communication and seek, above all, to see the situation from the other person's point of view.

Final Summary

Many people feel that talking and communicating are the same thing. But as the author has learned firsthand, nothing could be further from the truth! Proper communication skills (otherwise known as Verbal Judo) require a gentle and empathetic approach that can be implemented in literally any conversation. So, if you want to practice Verbal Judo, try to avoid inflammatory phrases or using “shut down” statements to assert your authority. Instead, take time to calmly and gently explain your perspective to the other person and use empathy-led communication practices to understand their point of view.

Adopting these practices will take considerable time and effort, but the rewards are worth it! Because once you master Verbal Judo, you’ll be able to communicate effectively with anyone and avoid that awkward tension.



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