

Communication

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Our riding and racing can be profoundly affected by how we conduct our relationships. Teammates, competitors, training partners, coaches, employers, significant others: all can play important roles in the progress, fun and success we experience in cycling. As a result, communication is a crucial skill for the mentally fit cyclist.

Last month, I explored [Concentration](#), the fourth of the [five core skills of mentally fit athletes](#). This month, I look at Communication in more depth.

Let's briefly look at the big picture: our relationships play a central role in our life experience. They bring us joy, they bring us pain, and they bring us up against the opportunities for growth we find – if we have the courage to look – in ourselves. Relationship expert [David Schnarch](#) is fond of saying, "we don't work on our relationships; our relationships work on us."

Your cycling, like everything else in your life, exists in the context of a web of relationships that have meaning for you. To varying degrees, all of the people in your web have an impact on you. And what you think, feel, and do has an impact on them. (Actually, to be completely cosmic for a moment, many people feel that *all* of us on this planet are interconnected. This is what the Buddhist monk [Thich Nhat Hanh](#) calls *interbeing* and the scientist James Lovelock calls the [Gaia Theory](#).)

Coming back to Earth, or at least your local roads and trails, here are some common ways in which relationships can present challenges for your cycling:

- Your spouse, significant other, or children want more time with you, or you feel guilty about taking time away from them, or both;
- A rider cuts you off or causes you to crash;
- Your teammates are acting like "married singles": working too much for themselves rather than working together;
- The workout you had planned for the day is not what your riding partner wants to do;
- Your boss or your colleagues at work are becoming resentful that you take some Fridays off to race;
- You're ready to step up as a leader on your team, and you need to ask for your teammates' support;
- You're in a race or ride and want to get people from other groups/teams to work with you;
- You're in a breakaway with a teammate near the end of a race, and need to figure out who's working for whom, and when;
- You don't feel you and your coach are "on the same page."

Improving Communication Skills

All of the above situations call on you to communicate. Some tips:

1. To the best of your ability, know what's going on within you, and why.

The more self-aware you are, the more likely you are to communicate effectively. Are you feeling angry, tense, nervous, worried, happy? How can you tell? Where do you feel it in your body? Make sure you notice. Are any of your “hot buttons” being pushed? Recall from the [Positive Self-Talk article](#) that hot buttons often generate anxiety, and anxiety can distort your thinking in at least 9 major ways. For example, anxiety can fuel “emotional reasoning”: feeling “sure” of something just because you feel angry or sad or scared. Ever see that happening in yourself?

In working on your communication skills, improve your ability to *respond* rather than *react*: if you can detect a “knee-jerk” communication habit that isn’t serving you, you can intervene, interrupt, and stop/change it. Perhaps counterintuitively, this may require you to put more attention on yourself, rather than on the person you’re communicating with, in order to communicate better. Calming and focusing techniques such as breathing and positive self-talk may help you here. Also, personality self-tests such as the [Enneagram](#) and [Meyers-Briggs](#) may help you identify your hot buttons (if someone is not regularly reminding you of them already....).

2. Listen and empathize.

Basic, right? And yet so often whatever’s going on inside of us – thoughts, feelings, sensations – gets in the way of listening well. Plus, just because you’re listening attentively doesn’t mean you really get it. So, clear your obstacles out of the way, and practice tuning in. Try to receive all of the feelings behind the other’s person’s words. And check sometimes to see whether you do get it, perhaps by telling the other person what you think you heard them say, and what you thought you heard – no, felt – behind their words. Marshall Rosenberg’s [Nonviolent Communication](#) is an example of what might be a good, straightforward refresher for you on this crucial skill.

3. Be assertive.

Sometimes we can be afraid to speak the truth about what we want, how we feel, or what we’re thinking. Ultimately, our fear often boils down to a fear of harming or losing a relationship, of being excluded, of being alone. Sometimes it’s a fear of not being able to tolerate whatever the truth stirs up – in the listener and in ourselves.

To be fair, sometimes it’s good judgment that’s keeping us from speaking up. But remember what Mark Twain said: How do we acquire good judgment? Experience. How do we acquire experience? Bad judgment. So, unless you’re sure this is a good time to keep quiet, speak up. And when you do, try to start your sentence with “I.” Not as in “I feel you’re a jerk” – assertiveness is different from aggressiveness – but as in “I feel really bad about what’s happening on the team,” or “I feel guilty about taking time away from you,” or “I don’t like it when you wait until midnight the night before to give me the next day’s workout.” And be careful how you use the word “you.” Blaming, accusing, name-calling, and the like tend to throw communication off-track.

These so-called “[I-statements](#)” are often a hallmark of an effective communicator, and, as leadership expert [Jeff Janssen](#) notes, an effective team leader. For you ladies in the audience, Pamela Butler’s [Self-Assertion for Women](#) is an example of a good resource for those of you who want to improve your assertiveness.

4. Manage conflict with both feet on the ground.

As [John Gray](#) has explained so skillfully, there are often gender differences in how we communicate, and there are ways to tune our communication – particularly in conflict – depending on whether we’re speaking with a man or a woman. ([Kathy DeBoer](#) has written extensively on how this comes up in sports.) But regardless of whether a conflict involves men, women, or both, the most common misstep I see when I work with people on managing conflict is *rushing*. When you enter into a conflict, it’s natural for your anxiety to go up, and it’s natural for you to want it to decrease as quickly as possible, because let’s face it: anxiety doesn’t feel good. What’s our natural assumption about the fastest way to feel better? End the conflict! One way to end the conflict fast is to avoid it, so be careful with that one. Another way is to try to “fix” the

conflict as fast as possible. Sometimes that works, but occasionally in your haste you may not understand the other person, and that person may not understand you. So, especially if you see “problem-solving” isn’t working, first attend to any anxiety/stress/tension/worry/fear that you’re feeling, and get it under control. Then, *strive for understanding before leaping towards resolution*. If you slow things down, work to understand the other person, and work to be understood, you’re likely to find that the next step – moving towards a solution – will go much more smoothly.

5. Do your best to relax.

Just after my wife and I were married, we wandered into a convenience store in search of chocolate. The elderly cashier saw us “discussing” what to buy, and she said, “I’ll bet you two were just married.” “Yes,” I said, “have you been married a long time?” “50 years,” she replied. “What’s your secret?” I asked eagerly. She smiled and said, “Say ‘yes’ a lot, and don’t take things too seriously.”

So, in any of your relationships, notice how much your communication can be affected by how riled up you get. It’s certainly fine to have feelings and to be emotional; we’re not robots. But if you’re managing any emotions – particularly anxiety – that create obstacles during your communications with others, you’ll tend to communicate more effectively. Calming down, slowing down, not taking things personally, not taking things too seriously: all of these are ways you can stay relaxed – or relaxed enough – and communicate well with people who can have a big effect on your cycling.

The Mentally Fit Cyclist: Next Steps

We’ve come to the end of our series on the 5 Core Skills of Mentally Fit Athletes. We’ve covered [Goal-Setting](#), [Positive Self-Talk](#), [Managing Emotions](#), [Concentration](#), and now Communication. Thanks to all of you for reading, and to those of you who’ve emailed comments, suggestions, and questions. Stay tuned for my next series, Responding to Adversity: how to deal with pain/fatigue, overtraining/burnout, injury/crashes, and last but not least, pressure. Now, where does my wife keep the chocolate?



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