

Berry Kruijning

Last week I had a chance to walk my talk as conflict resolution professional, when a police detective showed up at my doorstep. Apparently one of my neighbors had complained to the police about something that one of my children had done in a case of outright teenage stupidity. I mentioned to the officer that I just came home from work. When he asked me what I do for a living I answered politely that I am a mediator and conflict resolution coach and he laughed. I did not fathom the irony yet.

I'm not going to share with you details about the incident, because my face is still red from embarrassment. Trust me, besides running my own business, raising two teenagers by myself is the best personal growth program I've ever "attended."

So here I go at 10 p.m. in the pouring rain, with the culprit, my direct neighbor and ladder, and my conflict communication toolkit, prepared to use every tool I possibly can to keep the teenager out of juvenile court. Yes, the neighbor was that angry.

First I had to take my neighbor's perspective on this (which was a little different than mine) and listen empathetically and without judgment, to better understand why it was so important for her to fix this so late at night. I stepped into her world, established rapport with her by mirroring her body language and tone of voice and acknowledged her feelings of anger and rage.

I managed to stay calm, although internally I was shaking. After she calmed down I could express my belief that my kid is a good kid and this was a-typical behavior. I think she heard me too, because she acknowledged what I said. After the wrongdoer apologized, we fixed the issue and parted somewhat amicably. I was grateful that the neighbor didn't press charges.

Reflecting on the incident, I remembered something I've heard once about the significance of the word **communication**. Take a closer look at it: Comm-**U-N-I**-cation. Which letters do you see in there? U (you) And I, right? This week I realized it is commUNication for a reason (first U, then I), and not commINUcation (first I, then U), although a lot of people still think that way.

I was reminded that, in order to be successful in conflict communication, it is so important to first look at the other's point of view. Where are YOU coming from? What's going on in YOUR world, YOUR reality? This is often very different than what is going on in MY world. So I focus on understanding the other first, before I convey my truth to the other.

Effective interpersonal communication is about first connecting with someone, being attentive to someone's feelings and needs, and then, when I have listened and acknowledged what I've heard, I have created space for myself to communicate and be heard. First You and then I. This I believe.