

5 Degrees of Communication for Men

Surface talk with surface friends punctuated by thumbs-up and smiley face emojis. Chitchat, which Merriam-Webster defines as “friendly conversation about things that are not very important.” How do we move beyond these ankle-deep acquaintances and develop real community with substantive conversations and more satisfying relationships in the deep end of true brotherhood?

In the classic book *Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am?*, John Powell walks us through five degrees of communication. Getting to the fourth and fifth degree is where we leave the shallows and begin to experience the depths of true brotherhood.

1. Cliché level – Elevator talk. “How’s it going?” without wanting to know how it’s really going. “What do you think about this weather?” “How ’bout them Texans ... Astros ... Rockets ... etc.?” You can have conversations like that with total strangers, if you want to call them conversations. They’re completely benign, low-risk exchanges with no real connections. Just clichés.

2. Fact level – Communication for a lot of guys is nothing more than transactional drive-bys. They tell themselves and others, “That’s how we get things done around here. Things move so fast, we don’t have time to exchange our feelings.” More often than not, it’s a matter of never taking the time rather than a time deficit. Facts reveal what you know, but they do little to reveal who you are. In fact, you can have a lot of exchanges like this and still keep people at a safe distance, never letting them in.

3. Opinion level – This degree of communication can be

deceptive for you and others because it appears to be deep conversation, but your heart can stay hidden behind your opinions. This is especially true with discussions about the Bible. The big questions are not “What did you think about the sermon?” or “What do you think the this Bible passage means?” Don’t stop there. Keep going and ask the deeper questions: “What does this mean to me?” “How does it intersect with my life?” “How and when will I respond to it?”

You may enjoy many robust discussions with other philosophers like yourself who love to share their opinions too. It’s cathartic, even energizing in the moment, but on the opinion level, you are primarily sharing what you think, not who you are. You still play your cards close to the vest and keep people at a safe distance. You can’t experience true brotherhood on opinions alone.

4. Emotional level – At this level you’re conveying your hopes and fears, your disappointments and defeats. Now you’re beginning to reveal who you are in your heart. A lot of men never reach this level because our default, which springs from our sin nature, is to think “I’ve got this! I don’t need anybody’s help.”

Sometimes a warped view of spirituality makes us think, “If I was really a good Christian, I wouldn’t have thoughts or feelings like this.” But that’s a lie. The Bible is filled with exhortations to humble ourselves; to speak truthfully, and encourage one another because life is hard. It exposes the disappointments and struggles many of the prophets and warriors like David wrestled with. It even reveals the deep emotions of Jesus at the graveside of his friend Lazarus and in the Garden of Gethsemane where He prayed and wrestled with His feelings the night before His crucifixion.

5. Transparency level – Transparency is very raw and powerful. It’s the freedom, the trust and the safety to get gut honest with another man. It invites accountability, and correction if

needed. And it's reciprocated. It moves backward and forward. It makes us better men. When you practice it with a true friend, you will find that friend increasingly drawn to you rather than driven away.

You can't just flip a switch and start communicating with transparency and vulnerability to someone you just met or barely know. Be smart. Rather, be wise and build trustworthy relationships that will move toward deeper levels of transparency.

These relationships are more than acquaintances and light years beyond Facebook friends. They transcend time and space, seasons and circumstances. If you have just a few relationships like this—even one—you are truly rich. {eoa}

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