



## Communication Lessons from Mr. Rogers

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I never thought I'd write about Mr. Rogers. I grew up with Captain Kangaroo and Mr. Green Jeans and I must admit that when I first saw "Mr. Roger's Neighborhood," I chuckled at (what seemed to me) his odd communication style. At that time, it didn't occur to me that he was purposely speaking in that simple, deliberate way to connect with his audience. I soon recognized that my children—and virtually all children—were drawn to him and willingly gave him their undivided attention! No special effects, no costumes, no cartoon characters and absolutely nothing edgy to captivate young viewers. Success came simply from the power of one remarkably effective communicator.

He made communication look **SO** easy. So easy that I almost overlooked his power as a communicator.

When Fred Rogers left our earthly neighborhood, I heard adults expressing sentiments such as, *He's left us at a scary time when we really need him to talk to us.* I read several articles about him and talked with adults who were regular viewers as children. Someone described him as *quietly powerful.* The more I learned, the more I realized that Mr. Rogers practiced the foundation principles of what I call **Positive Power**<sup>™</sup> Communication.

In the same way I originally dismissed Mr. Rogers, it's natural to dismiss these basic principles as obvious—*Surely everyone knows this!* Or old-fashioned—*We don't need to be concerned with that anymore!* Or as not *cutting-edge* or *state-of-the-art* enough.

If everyone knows the basics, if we've somehow moved past them, why are there so many communication problems? Why do low morale, reduced productivity and high turnover affect so many organizations?

It's important to revisit the basics, even while learning intermediate and advanced communication techniques. The principles aren't difficult to understand. Remembering them and developing the awareness it takes to always apply the principles is a lifelong challenge.

### 15 Principles of communication Mr. Rogers taught by example:

**1. Belief:** Mr. Rogers had no doubt that communication and true connections were possible.

Some people give up too quickly: *There's just no communicating with her!* Mr. Rogers believed fervently in the power of communication to bring about good results. He demonstrated that by empowering others through how he communicated with them, he could help them to grow.

**2. Humility:** It would probably be difficult for someone who works with puppets and children to be arrogant.

Arrogance makes others defensive. Have you ever heard anyone say, "I really like him—he's so arrogant?" True humility keeps communication channels clear.

**3. Authority:** Despite his humility and his playfulness, Mr. Rogers didn't behave childishly.

If he had, his young viewers wouldn't have discerned the secure feeling they had when "visiting" with him. He was **Mr.** not **Fred** to his viewers. He knew that leaders inspire confidence in what they say by displaying a measure of authority. Another way he did this was by always wearing a tie, even with his famous sweaters. Visual cues send messages. His appearance and demeanor declared: *Perfect combination of warmth and trustworthiness.*

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**4. Respect:** Mr. Rogers demonstrated courtesy and respect for everyone.

He often told his young viewers: *There's nobody in the world just like you.* He believed that every person should be appreciated as a unique individual and valued diversity long before the concept became a priority in corporate, government and educational initiatives.

**5. Patience:** Did Mr. Rogers ever rush?

It's hard for me to imagine him frantic, interrupting someone or pushing them to hurry. When interacting with guests or puppets, he patiently listened. His facial expressions and body language assured the listener he was completely in tune with what they were saying.

**6. Flexibility:** To ensure that his lessons and insights reached each person in his audience, he adjusted his communication style.

Most of us are familiar with how he spoke to the children who watched him and with those on his show. When he addressed adults, he increased the pace of his speech, adjusted his tone of voice and used a wider range of vocabulary. Could he be stern or tough? Just imagine him defending a child.

**7. Authenticity:** Those close to him said what you saw on television was exactly what you saw in real life.

This doesn't mean he didn't adjust his communication style. Communicating with everyone in exactly the same way doesn't demonstrate authenticity. It shows either a lack of knowledge, self-centeredness or laziness. Being authentic means you have brought your behavior and personality in alignment with your core values. You do what's right and treat people well whether or not someone's watching.

**8. Purpose:** I recently heard someone say that we should *set our intentions* every day.

Could anyone doubt that Mr. Rogers had the very best intentions? He dedicated his life to caring for children and their families. Lack of clarity about your purpose (the big picture) or your objectives (the smaller details) will lead to fuzzy intentions, which result in fuzzy communication.

**9. Honesty:** Mr. Rogers said, *People long to be in touch with honesty. People sense that we're honest with them.*

His integrity extended to the fact that he never used his popularity to exploit the children who watched his show as consumers to buy products. Employees want to be seen as the special people they are and not as a nearly "invisible" means to an end for their organization. Mistrust is one of the biggest enemies of connection and the typical reaction to someone who seems untrustworthy is to stop communicating with them.

**10. Openness:** Mr. Rogers had many sayings, one of which was: *What is mentionable is manageable.*

He never hid from difficult issues and managed to write and sing songs about things I wouldn't dare to mention in this article! When organizations, departments, or individuals open up to discuss problems, they avoid compounding them, which is usually the result of attempts to conceal.

Openness about problems goes a long way toward solving them. If you've made a mistake, admit it – before someone else exaggerates it!

**11. Appropriateness:** Though he openly discussed what needed to be discussed, Mr. Rogers understood that openness doesn't mean "spilling."

He practiced what I call *selective self-disclosure*—not hiding from tough conversations or issues, but not dumping everything on everyone all the time. Soon after he began at PBS, he spoke on the air to parents about how to talk to their children about the assassination of Robert Kennedy. He cautioned parents to protect their children from the constant bombardment brought about by television.

He said, *There is just so much that a very young child can take without it being overwhelming.* A few days after his retirement in 2001, he returned to television to give a similar warning and to help parents to gently and carefully talk to their children about what happened on September 11, 2001.

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**12. Availability:** A complaint I often hear from staff members is that their leaders are not available to them. Mr. Rogers was always available and approachable.

He conveyed this, through the television screen, in every one of his 900 episodes—always there, creating a safe, open place for children to spend time. He was often approached by adults who as children had watched him daily. Many who had difficult childhoods told him that he had been there at just the right moment when they needed him.

The lesson for leaders is to give your staff members a sense of safety and security by being there to reassure them, to show appreciation for their contributions, and to support and constructively coach them when they inevitably make mistakes.

**13. Persistence:** Mr. Rogers used repetition and every available means to communicate his messages. His organization is called Family Communications. Everyone who wrote to him received a response. He personally answered many letters, and he signed all letters that left his office.

Soon after his death, his website encouraged parents and children to contact Family Communications. The site also offered extensive information for parents to help them explain to their children that he had died, despite the fact they would still see him on television. Persistence reduces chances for confusion.

**14. Warmth:** Communication is not all about the rational. Much happens in the realm of the emotions. Miscommunication will be a chronic problem whenever this isn't recognized. Mr. Rogers both demonstrated and validated feelings. Friends and coworkers say he loved to laugh. He smiled and his smile came through in his voice. He talked with children about their feelings of anger and sadness. A young man told me, *I really felt like he was a trusted caring neighbor who had invited me in.*

**15. Magnetism:** There are certain people who draw others to them. Mr. Rogers was one of these rare individuals. From what we know, he didn't pull back from others in any way—he either moved toward them or stood receptive to them. His body language, voice, facial expression, eye contact and choice of words conveyed that he accepted, understood and truly wanted to be with his young viewers. This positive energy emanates from everyone who genuinely believes in the best intentions of others and demonstrates that belief through supportive behavior, action and communication.

My favorite description of Mr. Rogers came from an ABC News reporter. After an interview, he said Fred Rogers was *determinedly gentle and soft-spoken*. People often say they are determined to be certain ways or do certain things. When I imagine someone saying that, I picture them with clenched fists and a competitive fire in their eyes. Mr. Rogers showed us all the impact of being, determinedly gentle and soft-spoken.

Fred Rogers said that the air between the TV set and the viewers was sacred. Take time to consider what happens *in the air* between you and those with whom you're communicating.

Mr. Rogers had a way of communicating that reached out of the television and placed him right beside the children he spoke to each day. He won't ever be forgotten, not because he was on television—he would have been unforgettable no matter where he might have worked. He will be remembered because of the person he was and the way he revealed that in how he acted, how he communicated and how he connected with others.

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