

Communication challenge?



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George and Grace

George pulled his mobile phone out of his pocket and held it under the table. Grace had her back turned to him and was tossing salad dressing onto the crisp summer salad leaves.

He was certain that she would not see what he was doing. He looked at the small screen on this latest model of mobile communication and scrolled down to find out the results of the football match. He became engrossed for a few moments and did not realise that Grace had finished tossing the salad and had come to sit down at the table.

"Can't you survive without that thing for two minutes, George?" Grace reprimanded.

"I was just checking the score. You don't begrudge me that, do you Grace? It only takes a moment." George did not like being caught out and he knew that he was wrong. He just could not help himself. What was the point of having on-tap access to information, if you did not take advantage of the opportunity?

"I'll bet that you can't do without your phone for a whole day." Grace was tired of sharing her husband with a mobile phone.

"I don't want to do without my phone for a day." George's face showed a tinge of fear at the thought of such a separation.

"Come on, try it." The thought of a whole day without George checking texts, emails and news flashes was starting to excite Grace.

"I don't want to try it. Suppose there's an emergency." George found it extremely irritating that he was suddenly having to justify using his phone.

"You know very well there are other ways of contacting you, George."

"OK, I'll tell you what." George had just had a flash of inspiration and had a smug look on his face. "I won't use my phone for anything other than telephone calls and you don't speak to people on the phone. We'll do a swap."

Grace looked at George as if he had gone slightly mad. She twirled the pasta around her fork, put it into her mouth and chewed slowly, digesting both the food and the thought.

They negotiated back and forth amicably and came up with the deal that for a whole 24 hours George would only communicate by verbally talking on a land line telephone or face to face with other people, apart from one hour in the morning and one hour in the afternoon when he would deal with the most urgent issues by email. Grace would communicate only face to face or by text or email and like George she would have one hour in the morning and one hour in the afternoon when she could use the phone for urgent calls. They promised each other they would not cheat and George gave Grace his mobile phone to keep for the next day.

The following morning they were woken up by their home phone ringing. Grace jumped up and was about to get out of bed when George grabbed her arm and looked at her with a what-do-you-think-you-are-doing look.

"This is ridiculous, George. No-one would ring in the morning if it isn't an emergency."

"OK, I'll answer the phone and if it isn't an emergency, you'll have to find another way to communicate."

"Good morning, Faith. No, I'm afraid she can't come to the phone at the moment. Is it urgent? Why don't you text her? I'm sure she'll be in touch as soon as she can. Yes, you too."

"What did mum want?" asked Grace.



"All you need to know is that it wasn't urgent. I'm going to switch the telly on to catch up on the news. Coffee?" George thought that he might actually enjoy the day after all.

"Sure, yes please. You never watch television in the morning." Grace was finding George's enjoyment very irritating.

"Well, as you said, there are means other than a mobile phone to get the information you need."

"Remember, you can only use your email at work for a set period of time," Grace reminded him.

"No, problem."

They left for work agreeing they would let their colleagues know what was going on. They would meet at the wine bar for a drink and a bite to eat at 6.30 pm.

As Grace walked into the wine bar later that day the first thing she noticed was that George was playing with the beer mat, doodling on it, flipping it over, sliding it back and forth on the table. Normally, he would have been completely engrossed with his mobile phone. Now he did not know what to do with himself. Grace smiled a huge smile, walked up to George and gave him a big hug.

Once they both had an ice-cold glass of white wine in front of them, they began to compare notes.

"To tell you the truth, Grace, I struggled for the first hour. I thought it best to keep the computer switched off and just did not know what to do, how to find out what was going on. I just sat looking at a blank computer screen. Then, I thought to myself, I'll just pop into the office next door, explain what is happening and ask for a verbal update. Well, I was in there for nearly half an hour and, as well as the work update, I learnt a lot more about Harry's personal life than I have in the two years I've known him. Did you know he keeps terrapins? Sort of explains him a bit and the way he approaches his work, don't you think? Anyway, I quite enjoyed myself, so I set myself the task of popping in to see everyone in my team before the end of the day and to mix the work conversation with a social one. What an eye opener! Fiona goes salsa dancing, Cesar is a karate black belt and little Georgie snowboards! I mean you'd expect her to ride horses or do ballet or something, but no, snowboarding. One thing about talking to people face to face, they seem to open up to you more, they're more willing to talk, they offer more ideas and the work conversation becomes more interesting too, more lively. Of course, I had to get a report written in the two hours I had the computer switched on which I did and I realised that being forced to concentrate on the task at hand meant that I was not wasting time checking every email as it popped up. I actually think I wrote a better report as a result. I'll have to catch up with the emails tomorrow, but they're not the urgent ones. It was well worth the experience. How did you get on?"

Grace pulled a face, took a sip of wine and then responded.

"Well, I didn't enjoy myself as much as you did, George. I texted or emailed everyone I thought would ring me to let them know I could only take calls at certain times of the day. When the phone rang I let the answer machine pick up. I felt sort of cut off, isolated, you know? I mean, everyone rings me all the time. But then I thought to myself, I might as well take advantage of the quiet and get on with the work. Well, I have to admit that I got loads more done than usual. It was actually really nice not to be interrupted by a phone call every few minutes. And, another thing. I noticed that because people had to email me or wait before they spoke to me they actually thought more about what they were asking me. More often than not I get calls because people find it easier to pick up the phone than to think for themselves even for two seconds. The queries were more considered than usual. It made me realise that I make myself too accessible. I'm too often at everyone's beck and call. I definitely gained something from it."

"Yes, me too," said George nodding his head for emphasis. "Now, what shall we do for the rest of the evening? We've got to keep up the deal till the morning. What do you think about a movie, followed by dinner at our favourite restaurant and then home for afters?"

Grace smiled a conspiratorial smile and squeezed his hand.



Why don't you try the George and Grace challenge. If you are used to emailing and texting, try talking on the phone and meeting face to face a bit more for a day. If you are used to talking on the phone a lot try using other forms of communication for a day. Everyone has a different preference and different modes of communication are more suited to certain tasks. Do you know what the preference is of those around you? Could you match your communication styles to tasks more effectively?

