Understanding Misunderstandings

NESS: Hello, everyone. I'm Ann Ness. Please welcome today's guest—communication expert Ellen Sands.

SANDS: Thanks for having me. You know, Ann, I think we're seeing a lot more verbal conflict these days than in the past. There seems to be a lot more rancor and a lot less civility. Today I want to talk about ways to avoid verbal conflict, or at least minimize it.

NESS: Sounds good, Ellen. Tell us more.

SANDS: All right. First, people need to listen actively to each other. We hear things, but often we don't really listen. A couple of weeks ago, I was at a restaurant in Los Angeles, sitting near an Indian couple being served by an American waitress. The service was slow, and the couple seemed distressed. When the waitress brought the check, the man said, "The bill seems very high. Did you include the service in it? How much is the service?" The waitress said, "You have to pay the tax." The man said, "The service was very slow. We have never waited so long to be served. We will pay the bill, but we won't pay for service." Then they left angrily. The waitress just glared at them and didn't say anything. It wasn't a good situation, mainly because the waitress didn't listen actively.

NESS: Let me see if I understand. When the waitress brought the check, the man said the bill seemed very high. He asked how much the service was. The waitress said they had to pay the tax. The man said the service had been very slow and they had never waited so long to be served. He said they would pay the bill but they wouldn't pay for service. Now, what did the waitress do wrong?

SANDS: She didn't listen carefully. The man asked if she had included the service in the bill. Unfortunately, she never answered his question. That was the key thing he wanted to know.

NESS: Did she do anything else wrong?

SANDS: She didn't address his concern about the slow service. She could have said something like, "Yes, I'm really sorry about the service. We're short-handed[1] today."

NESS: Very interesting. Now, what's another way to avoid verbal conflict?

SANDS: Another really good strategy is to state things positively instead of negatively. Recently, I was sitting in as a consultant at a school board meeting. Right at the start, the chair gave instructions in an arbitrary way: "We're on a very tight schedule. Make your reports brief; no one will be allowed to take more than three minutes. And no one will be allowed to interrupt the person who's speaking. No one will ask any questions." It wasn't a good meeting. You could have cut the silence with a knife.

NESS: How could the chair have done better?

SANDS: He told them to make their reports brief, but he could have asked them to try to limit their reports to three minutes. He said no one would be allowed to interrupt the person who was speaking. He also said no one would ask any questions. He had a rigid manner, spoke with a self-righteous tone, and basically treated the attendees like schoolchildren instead of like adults. That's a good way to inhibit any kind of productive discussion. He could have asked them to hold their questions for the duration of the speeches. The bottom line is this: You don't have to sugarcoat[2] your statements, but people will respond much better if you put a positive spin[3] on things.

NESS: All right. Thanks, Ellen. We'll be back shortly, after this commercial break.

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1 *short-handed:* without enough help
2 *sugarcoat:* make something appear or sound nicer than it really is
3 *spin:* interpretation

AFTER YOU READ

A VOCABULARY Match the words in **bold** with their meanings.

____ 1. You should treat people with civility, not with **rancor**.	a. time something lasts
____ 2. The couple seemed **distressed**.	b. unreasonable
____ 3. The waitress didn't **address** the couple's concern.	c. stiff, inflexible
____ 4. The chair gave instructions in an **arbitrary** way.	d. discourage
____ 5. He spoke in a **rigid** manner.	e. angry feelings
____ 6. The chair's tone was **self-righteous**.	f. properly deal with
____ 7. That is a good way to **inhibit** a productive discussion.	g. upset
____ 8. The audience had to hold their questions for the **duration**.	h. sure that one is right

B COMPREHENSION Complete the sentences based on the reading.

1. Ellen Sands is a(n) _____ expert.
2. Sands believes there is _____ rancor in communication today than in the past.
3. She also believes there is _____ civility today than previously.
4. Sands says that a key aspect of good communication is _____ listening.
5. In her first example, the couple from India thought the service was too _____.
6. In her second example, Sands talks of the need to state things in a(n) _____ manner.
7. The chair in her second example treated the attendees like _____.
8. Sands suggests that in a discussion, people should be treated like _____.