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## The Four-Second Rule for Improved Communications

"If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." Chances are you've come across this phrase sometime during your life. This piece of advice has been passed down for generations for a good reason--it's excellent advice.

I'm sure if you think about it--okay, think hard now--you can come up with a few instances when you've said things that you wish you could take back. Whether you spoke during a time when you were stressed, angry, disappointed or frustrated, or you offered up a piece of unsolicited advice during a period of relative calm, thinking about what you said still triggers feelings of discomfort and regret.

Okay, I admit it, in the past, like so many others, I've been a victim of the "open mouth/insert foot" syndrome. Upon occasion I've also been self-diagnosed with the "open mouth/insert leg" syndrome. Yes, there are times when, as a communicator, I've wanted to crawl under a big rock.

If you're prone to saying things that you later regret, here's my best advice: STOP! And, to aid you in this effort, I'd like to share with you the "*Four-Second Rule*" for better communications.

I hit upon the *Four-Second Rule* when working with individuals at NASA. During one of my communication workshops, a participant shared that astronauts are trained to make critical decisions *in four seconds*. So, in the same four seconds that the average person thinks, "Hmmm, do I want a Coke or Pepsi," astronauts are trained to make decisions which may affect whether or not they will successfully return to earth.

So what does the *Four-Second Rule* have to do with communications? Everything. Throughout the day as communicators we make critical decisions: what we say, the tone we use, who we communicate with, and what non-verbal messages we'll use to accompany our communication. Just think of how much better our relationships will be when, before we start to communicate, we take four seconds to consider the impact that our message will have.

Picture yourself in a stressful scenario where you need to communicate your feelings to someone. Now apply the *Four-Second Rule*:

Second #1- Take a deep breath and consider what it is that you want to say. Determine the point you want to make and what you'd like for the outcome to be. Realize that some words build up relationships and some words tear them down. Choose your words wisely.

Second #2 - Consider the tone of voice that you'll use. A calm and friendly tone certainly beats a tone that is loud, harsh, condescending, or sewn with sarcasm. If you know that you're "not in the mood" to be talking about something, then DON'T. Similarly, don't deliver messages that you know that you'll be apologizing for later, as doing so puts unnecessary strain on relationships.

Second #3- Make sure you're about to communicate your message to the right person. Misplaced anger or frustration is at the core of many communication problems. If you have an issue with a doctor, communicate that directly to him or her. Don't misdirect your communication to others on the unit, as doing so only *contaminates the communications climate*.

Second #4 - Consider your non-verbal behavior and how it contributes to or distracts from your message. When delivering your message, face the person, make eye contact and have an open stance. Remember, eye contact is one of the biggest indicators of how a relationship is going. Eliminate huffing, puffing, groaning and eye rolling from your non-verbal vocabulary. By doing so, you are guaranteed to increase the likelihood that positive communication will ensue.

Sometimes we need to "take a step back, to take a step forward." By using this *Four Second countdown* you'll communicate in a way that will keep others from going into orbit around you. And as those at NASA might say, by using the *Four- Second Rule* you will successfully complete your mission by keeping your communications *down to earth*.

*Susanne Gaddis, PhD, known as the Communications Doctor, is an acknowledged communications expert who has been speaking and teaching the art of effective and positive communication since 1989. Gaddis' workshops, seminars, and keynote presentations are packed with tips and techniques that can be immediately applied for successful results. Gaddis also provides quality training and executive coaching for organizations, corporations, and associations across the United States. For more information, call 919-933-3237 or visit [www.CommunicationsDoctor.com](http://www.CommunicationsDoctor.com).*