Some time ago, David and Ellen came to my office seeking help for their marriage. Their relationship was basically a good one—they felt a great commitment to each other. But they were finding it increasingly difficult to communicate without contention, and they wanted to learn how to work together to solve their problems.

They began with an incident that had occurred a few nights earlier. David had arrived home late from work. Ellen was upset.

“You knew I had an art class at 7:30,” she said.

“Sorry, honey, but I just had to work late.”

“Didn’t want me to go and leave you with the kids, did you?”

“No, that’s not it at all. I had a lot to do to get ready for inventory. You know how important that is.”

“That’s all you seem to care about. Why should your job always come before me and the kids?”

“I’m just trying to provide for the family. Sometimes that takes more time than you realize. Besides, your place is at home, not at some art class. I don’t like the idea of your going back to school so you can get a job. If you’d just let me work at it, I could make enough money to support us.”

According to David and Ellen, this confrontation was similar to many others they’d had. They always repeated the same general pattern of communication: one accusation led to another, and the original point of contention was soon lost in a storm of spiraling debate, criticism, and recall of past mistakes. Nothing was ever resolved.

Anyone who has been trapped in a vicious cycle of conflict knows the accompanying feeling of helplessness and hopelessness. But David and Ellen found their way out. The following principles proved helpful to them. I believe the principles could benefit most marriages.

1. Be teachable. Paradoxically, those who need, want, and even seek help are sometimes unwilling to accept it when it is given. Efforts to solve marital problems are unsuccessful when partners refuse to be teachable or to change when change is necessary. Problems will remain unsolved if either
the husband or the wife pretends to go through the motion of solving problems but is intent upon influencing or manipulating the other partner into doing all the changing.

Before proceeding any further, David and Ellen, for example, agreed to fast and pray for the Spirit of the Lord to be with them. They recognized a great need for divine intervention, and prayed that the Lord would touch their hearts. They also prayed for purity of purpose and for a willingness to share and learn from one another.

2. Use sound relationship principles revealed by the Lord. One of the Lord’s standards for relationships between his children is given in D&C 121:41–42: “No power or influence can or ought to be maintained … [except] by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned; By kindness, and pure knowledge.” If a couple wants their problem-solving efforts to be effective, they must strive to incorporate these qualities in their marital relationships. They must pray for the Lord’s help in learning to treat each other in Christlike ways.

The Lord also warns against those who would “exercise control or dominion or compulsion upon the souls of the children of men.” Not only is “the Spirit of the Lord … grieved” (see D&C 121:37), but marital relationships suffer.

One common mistake couples in conflict often make is to judge the intents and actions of one another. It is a mistake for couples to speak for each other, as if they possessed the ability to read thoughts:

“You’ve never really considered my needs. All you’re interested in is your job.”

“You don’t care at all about my work. You don’t appreciate what I do for you.”

These kinds of statements are easily identified by the overuse of the word you, and are sometimes referred to as “you messages.” “You messages” put others on the defensive by placing blame upon them. But when we follow the Lord’s principles for good relationships, we concentrate on improving ourselves before attempting to encourage others to change their behavior.

3. Strive to fully understand your partner’s point of view. Most couples enter marriage with a preconceived notion of what a husband or wife ought to be like. Problems arise when each has a different view on the matter, or when either or both views are not in harmony with the will of the Lord for how we should conduct our lives.

Ellen thought a good husband ought to be home more of the time; David believed he was fulfilling his responsibility best by reaching financial success, no matter how much time it required. David thought that a good wife ought to be content to stay home and take care of the children; Ellen believed she ought to go to school and help support the family. The reasons for these divergent views can be seen in the background experiences each brought to the marriage.

Because his own family had been very poor, David felt compelled to become financially independent. Relentlessly, he had striven to rise within the management levels of the company he worked for, and to invest in stocks and real estate. He was just beginning to realize the financial benefits of
his extensive commitments. To him, the idea of cutting back on the job was equivalent to failure.

Ellen was reared in a home where both parents were employed and shared in domestic responsibilities. Both were college graduates and encouraged each of their children to obtain degrees. After marriage and the birth of her first child, Ellen had dropped out of school. But she had retained a strong desire to graduate. To abandon her desire to go back to college would have meant giving up some of the ideals that had meant so much to her family and been part of her background.

An important part of the communication process must be an understanding of your own and your partner’s expectations in marriage. With such an understanding, the change process can be much easier.

4. Fully and sensitively share your view of the problem. When marital problems occur, some husbands and wives share so little information about their feelings that the partner is unable to understand the problem. Instead of clearly sharing their own perspective, some people pout, displace angry feelings (slam the door or bang pots and pans in the sink), downplay the problem (“Nothing’s bothering me”) or give insufficient information (“I’d like to crawl in a hole and stay there. I’m so unhappy”). Sometimes, to avoid facing the issues involved or to avoid personal responsibility, the individual may attack and blame the spouse.

The Apostle Paul said, “Except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken?” (1 Cor. 14:9.)

When helping couples share a problem, I encourage appropriate disclosure so that marital partners may understand one another. Appropriate disclosure leads to better understanding; inappropriate disclosure may offend, accuse, or wound.

There is an important difference between clearly and sensitively disclosing one’s experience and saying anything and everything that comes to mind as a means of venting feelings. Couples who “let it all hang out” usually end up hurting each other and destroying a relationship. Where there are angry feelings, couples should look for underlying causes (which usually include unmet needs or some kind of painful experience). By focusing upon the underlying problem and resolving it, one can defuse angry feelings. The ideas that follow will help couples get at the core of most relationship issues and problems, while avoiding the temptation to dwell on secondary angry feelings.

Specific information to be disclosed includes—

• What we see, hear, or otherwise observe through our senses. (This is pure sensory data, which a television camera or microphone would record, if present; not information that has been distorted by feelings, such as, “I can see from the look on your face that you don’t love me anymore.”)

David more accurately reported his observations this way: “Ellen, when I came home from work last night and entered the door, it seemed to me that you turned your back on me, set the utensils on the table, and walked away. You only spoke to me once during dinner—when I tried to talk things out with you. Then you said I cared more for my job than for you.”
• How we process or interpret the information received: “From your actions I felt you were angry at me. I felt you avoided me for the rest of the evening. I felt your actions were unjust.”

• The resulting feelings: “Whenever I see you respond to me that way, it hurts. I begin to wonder if it’s really worth it. It seems like I end up feeling like a failure no matter what I do.”

• What we’d sincerely like to do about a given situation: “When I arrived home, I wanted to apologize to you for being late, and yet I didn’t want to because I felt you were being unfair to me. [This includes the interpretation.] The reason I work hard is to be able to provide you and the kids with a good standard of living. And yet, I want to be fair and better understand your point of view.”

• What we are actually willing to commit ourselves to do: “Let me hear what you have to say about the situation.”

After David had disclosed himself in this non-accusing, sensitive way, there was little question in Ellen’s mind as to his immediate perception of the problem.

5. Seek a shared understanding. When a husband or wife shares a problem, the most typical response of the partner is to defend himself (justifying his actions) or to counterattack (blaming the partner for the problem just shared). Couples who argue seldom listen to each other. While one is talking, the other is busy formulating his counter-argument.

Instead of lashing back, Ellen sought to better understand her husband’s thoughts, feelings, and intentions. This was done by—

• Expressing her intention to understand: “I’d like to make sure I understand what you’re saying.” Or, “Let me see if I heard you right.”

• Summarizing in her own words the message she heard, asking for confirmation of her understanding: “You’re saying that you really do care for me and that you work long hours to help make sure the children and I will be well cared for. Is that right?”

Other approaches that invite helpful disclosure include—

• Asking open-ended questions: “Can you tell me more about what you’re feeling?”

• Reflecting feelings: “You feel hurt when you believe I’ve unjustly accused you.”

• Checking out your perception of what is being said: “The tone of your voice and the expression of your face tell me that you’re angry, too. Is that right?”

After listening carefully to her husband until she understood his feelings, Ellen began to disclose her own thoughts, feelings, and intentions concerning the problem (see step 4, above). David refrained from counter-arguing, using instead the understanding skills (step 5) to invite full disclosure from his wife.
Since their problems and misunderstandings were complex, David and Ellen spent several hours discussing them over the ensuing weeks. Because they were learning to communicate in a new way, there were times when they found it easy to slip back into old habits of blaming, criticizing, and refusing to share true feelings. Recognizing the need to solve the problem, however, they persistently refocused their attention on the communication skills being learned, and they gradually became adept at the process and responsive to each other. Also, each came to understand and appreciate the situation and viewpoint of his partner.

6. Seek solutions to the problem. After obtaining a shared understanding, Ellen and David then went to the next and important step of generating possible solutions. They did this, first, by identifying Church guidelines and scriptural counsel related to their challenges. Then they brainstormed several possibilities. They wrote down every idea that came up, without criticizing each other’s suggestions:

“You could quit your job and find another one that only requires forty hours a week.”

“You could give up your idea of going back to school.”

“I could find someone to trade babysitting with so I could have a night to do as I want.”

“I could re-evaluate my work situation. Maybe by delegating more, I could spend more time at home.”

Finally, they evaluated each suggestion. After writing down as many suggestions as possible, they proceeded to evaluate each suggestion, fully disclosing feelings, thoughts, and intentions, while seeking a shared understanding of each other’s viewpoint:

“I really love my job. I believe it offers the potential for growth and financial success. However, I love you and the children even more. I’d prefer not to sacrifice the job unless I have to, and I really don’t believe I do. I’d like to scratch the suggestion of quitting my job and consider re-evaluating my work situation and making whatever adjustments need to be made.”

“I don’t want to give up the idea of going back to school. Not only do I like a break, but, to me, an education is a measure of security. If anything were ever to happen to you, I’d like to have some marketable skills in case I had to go to work. I’d still like to take a class if possible.”

David and Ellen proceeded through each suggestion, alternately sharing and listening to the feelings of each other. There was no attempt to persuade or manipulate each other into a particular selection. They evaluated their ideas in light of gospel standards and Church counsel and then made their decision a matter of prayer. Eventually they worked out a solution that was mutually acceptable and in harmony with the Lord’s will.

David agreed to talk to his employer about his need to cut down on long hours. To his surprise, he found that his boss was also somewhat concerned about his long hours at work and the possible strains it placed upon his family. He assured David that his value as an employee could even in-
crease if he learned to delegate a little more.

David experienced a change in attitude toward his job and family. And because there was less conflict at home, he found that he could concentrate more on his job responsibilities while at work.

Ellen agreed to be more responsive to her husband and children. She also arranged to begin an evening class at a local university. With the additional support of her husband, she noticed that her feelings toward her domestic responsibilities dramatically improved, and she found it easier to be loving and giving.

The couple faced additional challenges in life. But their improved ability to communicate with each other enabled them to work more effectively toward finding solutions. They felt that the Lord was blessing them for their efforts—and they found greater peace and satisfaction in their marriage.

As you strive to improve your way of communicating in marriage, these steps may seem awkward at first. Like most new skills, they require practice before they will come naturally. But I've seen these steps work over and over again, particularly when the individuals invite the Lord to help them and when they are sincere and willing to share responsibility for the causes and solutions to marriage problems.