

*A Big Youth Ministry Topic
in a Single Little Book*

THE SKINNY

ON

COMMUNICATION



Jeff White
with Jeffrey Wallace





The Skinny on Communication

© 2015 Jeff White



JESUS- CENTERED

Guide your entire ministry toward a passionate Jesus-centered focus with this series of innovative resources. Harness the power of these dynamic tools that will help you draw teenagers and leaders into a closer orbit around Jesus.

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There are always far too many people to thank for their roles in helping me create a project like this. Even the little things matter—those forgotten moments that didn't end up in a photo album but certainly helped shape who I am and what I've learned. I'm grateful for them all, and I hope I've remembered to thank them personally whenever they've left their imprint in my life.

Two people, in particular, have done more to influence my life than any others (outside of family and best friends). Thom and Joani Schultz mean the world to me, having been leaders, coaches, mentors, and true friends for more than 15 years. I wouldn't be who I am today without them, and I am eternally thankful for their unending positive impact. And when it comes to the skills of communication, you couldn't ask for better teachers and examples than Thom and Joani.

I'm also forever grateful to my wife, Amy, who has supported me for far more years than I deserve. If there's ever been a place I've failed the most at communication, it's at home. Her love, patience, and anger have been the forces that have made me a better (though far from perfect) communicator.

— **Jeff White**

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COMMUNICATION

CONTENTS

BEFORE YOU GET STARTED	1
INTRODUCTION	3
CHAPTER 1 <i>You Cannot NOT Communicate</i>	5
CHAPTER 2 <i>Four Surprising Communication Strategies That Totally Work.</i>	23
CHAPTER 3 <i>Misconceptions, Mistakes, and Revelations About Communication.</i>	57
ENDNOTES	79

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BEFORE YOU GET STARTED

The book you're holding might be “skinny,” but that's because it's all-muscle. This means that Jeff White and Jeffrey Wallace have cut away the fat and focused on the “first things” that make communication in youth ministry powerful and long-lasting. In our Skinny Books series, we've paired a thought leader (in this case, Jeff White) with a master practitioner (in this case, Jeffrey Wallace) as a one-two punch. We want you to be challenged and equipped in both your thinking and your doing.

And, as a bonus, we've added an Introduction written by Thom and Joani Schultz that explores communication through the filter of a Jesus-centered approach to ministry. Jesus-centered is much more than a catchphrase to us—it's a passionate and transformative approach to life and ministry. Thom and Joani's Introduction to communication first appeared in my book *Jesus-Centered Youth Ministry*, and we couldn't think of a better way to kick off this little book. It's time to get skinny...

—RICK LAWRENCE

Executive Editor of Group Magazine

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INTRODUCTION

What do people mean when they call someone a “great communicator”? Generally, they mean the admired youth pastor delivers polished lectures, keeps an audience’s attention for a period of time, and often hears “I really enjoyed your talk.” In short, a “great communicator” is an entertainer. Entertainment is a nice thing, but is it the goal of a Jesus-centered youth ministry? Did Jesus’ ministry hinge on today’s definition of a “great communicator”?

We think not. In fact, the youth ministry world has been sold a lie, though with good intentions. Many youth workers look longingly at the higher profile of their senior pastors and conclude that ministry success looks like a riveting speaker. But that’s not Jesus-centered ministry. That’s a ministry model borrowed from the entertainment world—and the academic world. In the centuries following Jesus’ ministry, the keepers of the church began to view faith as a subject to be mastered, much like any other subject such as literature or history. So, the thinking went, if we have a subject to teach, we need a studious professor to lecture rows of passive students.

The trouble is, faith in Jesus is not a subject to be mastered. Faith is a relationship. And the goal of a great relationship is an ever-deepening love, trust, and commitment to one another that demonstrates itself through self-sacrifice.

Jesus sometimes communicated truths in front of a crowd. He also mentored one-to-one, led a small group, told stories, used visual aids, challenged his friends with tough questions, and led his people through highly memorable experiences in order to cement the relationship. For our own communication to be truly effective and life-changing, it must pattern itself after Jesus. And he was a R.E.A.L. communicator—Relational, Experiential, Applicable, and Learner-based.

- **Relational.** Communication (and relationship) is greatly enhanced when everyone gets to talk.
- **Experiential.** People learn—and change—by doing. That’s why Jesus used so many memorable experiences: washing the disciples’ feet, calming a storm, mixing spit in the dirt to make a healing mud, and so on.
- **Applicable.** Our communication should give young people a clear idea of how to live out today’s message in everyday life.
- **Learner-based.** It’s not about you. It’s about your kids—and their relationship with Jesus. Just as Jesus did, we need to adapt our approach to how our teenagers will most effectively be reached.

Effective communication in ministry looks a lot like the kinds of communicating found in a healthy friendship.

—Thom Schultz, *Founder and CEO of Group Publishing*

—Joani Schultz, *Chief Creative Officer of Group Publishing*



CHAPTER



1

*You
Cannot
NOT
Communicate*



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You've seen this before:

A mother and young son sit down to eat together at a fast-food restaurant. It starts out with smiles and anticipation. She squirts some ketchup on a napkin for the kid's fries while the boy sticks his straw in his drink. The 5-year-old talks animatedly about how excited he is to open his meal toy, while his mom unwraps her sandwich. They're both happy to be together. But before the fries even have a chance to get cold, their encounter changes.

The mother pulls out her phone.

From that point forward, the conversation is reduced to a scattering of "mm-hm's" and "yeps" from the mom while the boy's chatter eventually fades to silence.

Most might assume that, in this moment, the mother stopped communicating with her son. But that couldn't be further from the truth. Whether she meant to or not, the woman sent some very clear messages to her child: "This phone is more important than you. I don't want to talk to you. I'm happy to sit with you, but I'm going to mostly ignore you." You couldn't blame the kid for hearing any of those messages, even though they weren't said out loud.

Intended or not, the mom communicated clearly to her child without saying a word.

This book isn't about the pitfalls of modern technology. Nor is it about parenting. It's about the importance of communication, and how just about everything you do and say sends a message to the people around you.

I could list a million different scenarios that demonstrate the principle of communication not having an "off" button:

- A young couple at the end of their first date. The man says he really looks forward to seeing her again. She changes the subject and begins talking about how delicious the dinner was.
- A homeless man sits on the sidewalk, his cup of nickels held out in shame. People avoid eye contact as they quicken their pace.
- A boss asks a room of employees who would like to take on the next assignment. Everyone stares into their laps. No words are spoken, but the message is clear.

We all do it every day, often without giving it any thought. We cannot *not* communicate. When others try to send us messages, we always send a message back, whether we intend it or not.

We don't know anyone who communicates too much, or too well. Every one of us could list at least one communication shortcoming for each of our closest friends. We *all* have improvements to make—and we

always will. This book is meant to help you as a leader and a youth worker.

FOCUS OVER FORMULA

I'm not a fan of formulas. I don't believe in (or fall for) five-step plans that will solve your problems. I don't buy into the thinking that a universal set of rules will cure all your communication ills. And I'm certainly not naïve enough to think that every person reading this book is going to soak up and apply everything and become a master communicator.

I do know, however, that focusing on specific principles can move us closer toward mastering a skill like communication. I also know that there will be a handful of points in this book that will stand out to you and cause you to change your behavior, if at least a little.

Grab a highlighter and mark whatever makes you furrow your eyebrows, narrow your eyes, and say "Hmm."

This book would be worthless if you found yourself just nodding in agreement and thinking, "Oh, yeah, I already do all that stuff." (I can assure you that you don't.) You'll have opportunities here and there to try a few things out and see if they work. Challenge yourself to be wrong once or twice or a dozen times. Allow yourself to be surprised.

I also believe that any nonfiction book worth reading should do two things:

1. Tell you something you haven't heard before ("I did not know that")
2. Challenge you to rethink your assumptions and give you a fresh perspective ("I never thought of it that way before")

I don't expect you to agree with everything I've written here, but I hope you'll grapple with a lot of it and allow yourself to try a few new things.

The artist James Christensen said, "Different isn't always better, but the same is never better."¹

We're here to try something different.

➔ A YOUTH WORKER'S PERSPECTIVE *Jeffrey Wallace*

In general, people don't process information the same, and there is not just one "cookie cutter" principle that will teach you how to effectively engage and communicate with every teenager. The purpose of this book is to challenge you and stretch you to reach beyond your comfort zone. This generation of young people sees the world with a highly eclectic lens. With that in mind, it is vital for you as an influencer and a voice speaking into the life of this youth culture to expand your insight, concepts, ideas, and practices for being an efficient and effective communicator.

THE PURPOSE OF COMMUNICATION IN YOUTH MINISTRY

Before jumping into the practices and principles of effective communication, it would be worthwhile to qualify it all with a premise. What's our goal?

Communication principles are generally universal—that is, they apply to the majority of people in the majority of situations. (There are always exceptions, of course.) However, this book is about communication in youth ministry and the unique challenges and opportunities along our path.

The purpose of effective communication in youth ministry is based on one primary idea:

Faith is a relationship.

Stop and think about that for a moment. *Faith is a relationship.* It's not a topic to be studied. It's not a checklist of things to do. It's not something ethereal or intangible. Faith is all about a relationship—our relationship with Jesus and with each other.

When the religious leaders asked Jesus to name the most important commandment, Jesus started by saying that it was to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. But he didn't stop there. Jesus also said, "The second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself' " (Mark 12:28-31).

Jesus said, above all else, we must put loving God AND loving others first. They're equally important, according to Christ.

That's why healthy, effective communication is so critical in youth ministry. Our most significant responsibility—arguably our *ONLY* responsibility—is to love God and love teens (as well as their parents, our volunteers, and our fellow church leaders). That's nothing if not relational. And communication is the fuel for any relationship. We love people through our actions, our words, our attitudes, our facial expressions, and every other way we communicate.

First Corinthians 13 proves it. Every characteristic of love mentioned in that profound chapter involves communication.

The opposite is true, as well: We communicate our *lack* of love through our actions, words, attitudes, expressions, and every other form of communication.

So we can say, “I love you” and “God loves you” as much as we want, but unless we communicate it through our whole being, it means nothing.

If you want to fulfill your calling and make the most of your ministry, learning to communicate love effectively must be at the top of your priority list.

➔ A YOUTH WORKER'S PERSPECTIVE *Jeffrey Wallace*

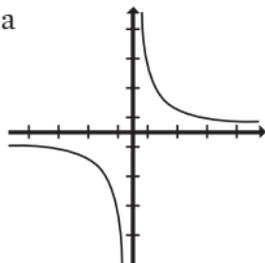
Far too often, we think having a “catchy” topic and using slang and youthful jargons are the most necessary methods of engaging teenagers when it comes to communicating with them. That is not always true. You’ve likely heard the age-old saying, “People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” More than your fancy titles, young people connect with communicators who love them and who live authentically before them. When teenagers know you love them, they will listen to anything you have to say. For a lot of young people, especially those who are coming from unhealthy home environments, it is the simple things, like love, that matter most.

“Communication is a path, not an event.”

— AUTHOR AND ENTREPRENEUR SETH GODIN²

THE ASYMPTOTE

If you remember your high school geometry classes, you might recall a word called “asymptote.” An asymptote is a line that continuously approaches a curved line—but never touches it.



The majority of church ministry today is asymptotic. It goes on and on, year after year, but never actually connects with the people it's aiming for. The asymptote of ministry does a lot of preaching, a lot of teaching, a lot of singing, a lot of Bible studies—a whole lot of one-way communication—but doesn't ever get close enough to form a relational bond. For a while it may appear as though we're running parallel, but in reality there's no connection. We miss the curve.

The lines of love never touch.

Fortunately, our ministries can avoid this problem (and be “nonasymptotic,” if you like fancy words). The solution for the asymptote in ministry is actually quite simple: **frequent, continual, two-way communication**. The lines touch, the connections are made, and relationships happen.

WHAT TEENAGERS NEED

Not only could I list a million reasons teenagers tend to shy away from church, I could also list a million different things kids say they want and need in their lives. It could melt your brain if you try to create a strategy that addresses the countless ways you can impact their lives. This book is designed to prevent brain melting.

Life-shaping discipleship isn't a random event. It's an intentional adventure, and teenagers need someone who's walking with them on the journey and helping them grow as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Jesus modeled this for us through relationship with his closest disciples. He spent time with them, shared life with them, taught them to obey, shared experiences with them, gave them direction, and promised to be with them. This is what we are called to as youth workers—the model for us to follow.

The Skinny on Discipleship will become a practical guide in your role as a disciple-maker. You'll discover practical insights and powerful encouragement for knowing Jesus, loving him, and placing him at the center of your life—and then helping teenagers along on that same journey.

When it comes to discipleship, there are no shortcuts, there's no handbook for teenagers, and there's no timeline on what it will take to help each teenager draw closer to Jesus. But you can follow the model of Jesus, rely on the truth that he's with you, and remember that ultimately he loves teenagers even more than you do.



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