

If I Understood You, Would I Have This Look on My Face? My Adventures in the Art and Science of Relating and Communicating Alan Alda

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The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines relate, and communicate, as follows: relate – to give an account; to show or establish logical or casual connection between, and communicate – to convey knowledge of or information about; make known.

In this book, Alan Alda, acclaimed actor, science enthusiast, and co-founder of the Center for Communicating Science at Stony Brook University in New York, chronicles how an invitation to host *Scientific American Frontiers*, led him on a 20-year quest to figure out what makes communication work.

Many different theater techniques, as well as different research studies, are highlighted in this book. Alda describes the difficulties he encountered in his initial interview for *Scientific American Frontiers*, and how he referred back to those theater techniques he knew so well to better the interviews he was conducting. The turn-around he saw in his interviews led him to ask the question, “Could scientists become more personal, more available to their audience if they studied improvisation?” (pg. 14)

Relating, listening, and communicating... The first part of the book states that, “Relating is Everything.” If this is true, a person should keep the following key fundamentals in mind when it comes to relating: empathy and being aware of what is happening in the mind of the other person. Also, the more things the audience has in common with a speaker, the better they will understand.

Many people don't realize that they are actually improvising when they are communicating with another person, but in reality, they are. Why is this? When people communicate, most of the time no preparation has taken place and the individuals are simply listening and reacting to what the other person is saying, both verbally and non-verbally (tone of voice, body language, etc.). However, Alda's work with scientists showed him that listening actually begins before a person starts to communicate. Many things to consider before talking to a group include, (pg. 63).

- What is your audience already aware of?
- Where should you begin?
- How deep into the subject should you go?
- What are they eager to know?
- If I start too far in, will I be using concepts they really don't understand.

Alda's research also showed that “scientists are being taught that it's not necessary to tell the audience everything in one gulp. Sometimes, telling just enough to make us want to know more is exactly the right amount. (pg. 73)

The Three Rules of Three (pg. 98)

- When talking to an audience, make no more than three points.
- Explain difficult ideas three different ways.
- Find a subtle way to make an important point three times.

If you're interested in reading this book, please stop by the Center for Teaching and Learning. We'd love to loan it out to you.