

Breaking Barriers:  
Concrete Communication Tools  
For Working With People  
In Poverty

*Every human being needs to feel that they are important, valued,  
understood, respected, heard, and that they are making a contribution*

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## About Dr. Beegle

Donna M. Beegle, Ed.D. is a highly experienced National public speaker, discussion leader, trainer, and the author of articles providing insights and strategies for communicating more effectively across race, class, gender and generational barriers. Donna's inspiring story and work have been featured in newspapers around the nation, on local TV and on National programs such as PBS. Her book, *See Poverty: Be The Difference* is now available and Donna's work on poverty is being featured in a PBS Documentary titled: *Invisible Nation* in Sept. 06. Her personal history and her studies of communication, poverty, gender, and education make her uniquely qualified to work with organizations and individuals working to improve the lives of people living in poverty.

After growing up in generational poverty, leaving school for marriage at 15, having two children and continuing to cope with poverty, she found herself, at 25, with no husband, little education, and no job skills. What followed in 10 short years were: self-confidence, a G.E.D., an A.A. in Journalism, a B.A. (with honors) in Communications, a Master's Degree in Communication with a minor in Gender Studies (with honors), and completion of a Doctorate Degree.

Donna completed her Doctorate in Educational Leadership at PSU in 2000, where she taught speech communication courses for eight years. She is currently president of Communication Across Barriers, a consulting firm devoted to improving communication and relationships. Donna is also founder and CEO of the new nonprofit, PovertyBridge which is dedicated to changing lives for people in poverty.

Donna is available for workshops, curriculum development, organizational development and planning, and inspirational keynote presentations.

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*Effective communication occurs when a welcoming environment is created where all who are stakeholders feel respected, included, and heard.*

## **Breaking Barriers: Concrete communication tools for working with people in poverty**

### **Description**

This session explores the impact of life experiences on communication styles and provides a framework for improving communication skills. Income, educational opportunities, and life experiences shape communication and relationship styles. The fundamentals of effective communication (membership, perception, identification, motivation and empathy) are addressed along with strategies for reducing misunderstandings and increasing opportunities for building community.

How we get our information to live our daily lives shapes how we relate to one another and how we experience the world. People who get their information verbally or by asking someone, have an "oral" culture communication style. People who gain their information from reading develop a "print" culture communication style. Understanding these different communication styles can improve communication skills. Most people in poverty are oral culture communicators. Having knowledge to gain balance between oral and print culture communication styles offers critical insights and skills for reducing misunderstandings and increasing effective communication.

# 10 COMMANDMENTS FOR IMPROVING COMMUNICATION AND RELATIONSHIPS

1. Develop relationships and trust based on **identification**.
2. Help the client see you as a real person by **self-disclosing** something that is not known to others.
3. Ensure that there is a communication feedback loop by **paraphrasing, restating, and asking clarifying questions** to best understand client needs.
4. End power dynamics, role conflicts, and stereotypes by sharing information that you know and **following through** on what you say you are going to do.
5. Do not expect those you are working with to know what may be obvious to you. Use your expertise to **coach or mentor** them to get their needs met.
6. Hearing and actively listening is not the same thing. **Active listening** requires putting yourself in the position of the person you are working with.
7. One solution does not fit everyone. Obtain enough information to **customize** your services to those you are working with.
8. Promote **two-way communication** (not just what you think would work for those you are working with, but what do they think would work best for them).
9. Use **familiar words** and examples that people you work with can relate to.
10. Ask **open-ended questions** to discover motives and passion. Try to stay away from questions that ask “why” because they can put people on the defense. Instead, use “I” statements that allow for other perspectives.

## Understanding Communication Styles

### If you are more of an *Oral Culture* communicator:

- Relationships are more important than anything
- It is normal to interrupt and to have multiple conversations at once
- Telling the same stories over and over helps you in your understanding
- Sharing your personal experiences and stories is your way of connecting with others
- You are comfortable jumping from subject to subject
- You like to focus on lots of ideas at once
- It is normal to show emotions/feelings
- You are very physical and expect physical responses
- You focus on what is going on around you right now
- You focus on the big picture, not the detail
- When you need information, you ask those around you
- You learn best when you get to practice the learning in your environment

### If you are more of a *Print Culture* communicator:

- You are most comfortable focusing on one idea at a time
- You believe a plan is essential and your goal is to stay on task
- It is important to think abstractly about situations and analyze them carefully, detail by detail and apply in multiple contexts
- You like things in order...first this, than this etc.
- You approach tasks by breaking them into parts
- You sort and categorize information
- Time is crucial and you are rigid about it
- You do not show emotions or physical affection unless you know someone really well and you do not share personal stories
- When you need information, you look for a book or article on the subject

# Generational Poverty Survival Skills

The following are skills that you must know to survive in generational poverty.

Place a check by the skills you already have.

- Do you know which church or agencies give free clothes and shoes?
- Do you know which church or agency has free clothes that are not holey and stained?
- Do you know which dumpsters you could get returnable cans and bottles from without being caught?
- Do you know how to show "Proof" that you live in a neighborhood that you really do not live in to get better services?
- Do you know which stores will let you get food and pay them later?
- Do you know how to give off an aura of violence to avoid trouble?
- Do you know how to fix a car without any money for parts or a mechanic to help?
- Do you know where to cash a check without any identification?
- Do you know where to get a loan on your car title?
- Would you know where to go for help if your utilities were being shut off?
- Do you know how to get free medicine samples at an emergency room if you are sick?
- Do you know how to move in half a day?
- Do you know how to use a butcher knife as a potato peeler?
- Do you know how to go days without food?
- Can you survive winter nights without heat?
- Do you know how to live without utilities or a telephone?
- Do you know how to cook without a stove?
- Do you know how to keep food cold without a refrigerator?
- Would you know how to laugh if you were hungry, being evicted and had nowhere to go?
- Do you know where to find a bail bondsman to get your relative out of jail?
- Can you drive illegally?
- Do you know how to use torn up clothing for toilet paper, sanitary napkins, etc.?
- Can you entertain a group of friends with your own talents, musical instruments, singing, and humor?
- Would you know what to do if you were being evicted and had no money to move?
- Do you know how to get tons of newspaper and cardboard to sell at recycle centers?
- Can you survive in jail or prison?
- Can you smoothly change the subject to avoid answering humiliating questions?
- Can you get by without garbage service?
- Do you know how to fix your toothache with super glue?
- Do you know how to get food stamps or welfare?
- Do you know how to wash clothes without money, laundry soap, or a machine?
- Do you know how to get a two-week supply of groceries home without transportation?
- Do you know the rules for visiting people in prison?
- Are you used to constant crisis; someone you love arrested, evicted, heat shut off, sick, kicked out of school, out of food and so on?

# Defining Poverty

## Generational Poverty

- Family has never owned land
- Never knew anyone who benefited from education
- Never knew anyone who moved up or was respected in a job
- Highly mobile
- High family Illiteracy
- Focus is on making it through the day

## Working Class Poverty

- Working, but rarely have money for any extras
- Most do not own property
- Live paycheck to paycheck
- Few have health care
- Focus on making it two weeks or through the month
- Poverty seen as personal deficiency

## Immigrant Poverty

- Have little or no resources
- Language & culture barriers
- Seem to do better than those born into poverty in America
- Poverty viewed as a system problem

## Depression Era Poverty

- A time when the societal message was, “We are all in this together.”
- Poverty seen as society problem

## Middle Class Temporary/Situational Poverty

- Person grows up in stable environment
- Surrounded by people who are educated or able to earn a living wage
- Attends school regularly
- Has health care
- Has a crisis (health, Divorce, etc.) and income drops
- Generally is able to make it back to middle class
- Has not internalized the poverty as their own fault

To learn more on effective communication:

Gudykunst, William B. Stella Ting-Toomey, Sandra Sudweeks, and Lea P. Stewart. Building Bridges: Interpersonal Skills for a Changing World. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995.

Hall, Edward T. *Beyond Culture*. New York: DoubleDay, Random House, Inc., 1976

Hofstede, Geert. *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations Across Nations* (second edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2001.

To better understand poverty and how to help people:

Beegle, Donna "See Poverty Be The Difference." Available at [www.combarriers.com](http://www.combarriers.com)

Also on the website is a reading list for breaking poverty barriers

[www.combarriers.com](http://www.combarriers.com)