

Your Shop Might Need Marriage Counseling

By Matt Fanslow

If that headline made you roll your eyes a little, that means you are the audience I am talking to.

No, I am not suggesting your service advisor and your lead technical specialist need to sit on a couch and discuss their childhood while someone with a clipboard nods and asks follow-up questions in a calm voice. I am suggesting something much less dramatic. A lot of the communication problems that hurt repair shops follow the very same patterns that hurt marriages. Different setting, same humans.

If you have spent any time in a professional repair facility, you have seen it. One person thinks they are being clear. The other hears blame. Somebody gets defensive. Somebody gets sarcastic. Somebody else shuts down. The same argument keeps coming back with different details attached to it. Last week it was parts delays. This week it is documentation. Next week it is a comeback conversation.

We tend to write these things off as “personality issues” or “people problems,” as if they are separate from production, sales, and profit. They are not. Communication quality shows up everywhere. It affects estimate accuracy, how mistakes get handled, whether customers trust your recommendations, whether employees stay, and whether the team can get through a hard day without looking and sounding like an episode of “Kitchen Nightmares”.

That is why I think many repair shops, especially growing shops, can benefit from borrowing a few tools from a place they may not expect: marriage counseling. More specifically, from the work of Dr’s. John and Julie Gottman, who identified what they called the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” in communication: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. They developed the framework in the context of couples, but once you understand it, you start seeing it everywhere. Homes, businesses, teams, group texts, and yes, repair shops.

As mentioned earlier, watch almost any episode of *Kitchen Nightmares* and ignore the food for a minute. What you are often watching is a business culture collapse in real time through criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and shutdown. The menu is...rarely (no pun intended) the first problem. Usually, it is the lack of quality communication. The same thing happens in our industry. We just do it with serving properly maintained and repaired vehicles instead of risotto.

The first horseman is criticism, and this one is common in shops because it often disguises itself as being direct. Criticism is not the same thing as raising a concern. A complaint is specific. Criticism attacks the person. A complaint says, “This RO is missing test results.” Criticism says, “You never write decent notes.” A complaint gives someone something to fix. Criticism gives them a label to defend against.

That difference matters more than most people realize. If I say, “The estimate did not include the test steps, and that made it harder to explain value to the customer,” we can solve that. If I say, “Your estimates are always a mess,” I may feel better for about three seconds, but now we are no longer discussing the estimate. We are discussing my tone, your reaction, and whether this is about to become a full-contact meeting beside a vehicle on a lift.

A lot of communication problems in shops follow exactly that pattern. The original issue may be real, but the way it is delivered creates a second problem that is bigger than the first. Then the actual issue gets buried under attitude, rebuttals, and side arguments. Good people can spend an entire day “communicating” and somehow solve almost nothing.

The second horseman is contempt, and this is the one that can quietly poison a shop culture faster than almost anything else. Criticism says there is a problem. Contempt says I am above you. It shows up as sarcasm with an edge, eye-rolling, mockery, belittling, and talking to people like they are an inconvenience instead of a teammate or a customer.

Now, before somebody says, “We joke around in our shop,” good. Shops need humor. Humor helps people survive stressful work. Humor can build camaraderie and keep a difficult day from turning into a miserable one. But contempt is not humor. Humor says, “We are in this together.” Contempt says, “I am smarter than you, and I want you to feel that.”

You can hear contempt in the tribal language that creeps into a lot of facilities. “Advisors do not know what they are selling.” “The shop does not communicate.” “Management only cares about numbers.” “Customers are idiots.” Once that becomes normal, people stop being honest. They stop asking questions. They hide mistakes. They avoid conversations that could have prevented bigger problems.

That is not just a morale issue. It is a performance issue. It affects learning, accountability, and problem-solving. A shop that tolerates contempt eventually trains people to protect themselves instead of improve. Then leadership wonders why the team is not taking initiative. Usually, because the cost of being wrong has become humiliation, and most people would prefer to stay quiet than be publicly reduced to the daily punchline.

The third horseman is defensiveness, which is probably the most human one in the group. If people feel accused, they defend themselves. That is not shocking. It is basic survival behavior. In shops, defensiveness sounds like, “That is not my fault,” “Nobody told me,” “Yeah, but,” “I only did that because...” and the classic, “I would have if they had...”

To be fair, sometimes the person being defensive is not completely wrong. Sometimes there really was missing information, a rushed decision, or a communication failure upstream.

If every hard conversation in a shop feels like a courtroom, people start lawyering up. They become more focused on proving they are not at fault than on figuring out what to do next. Meanwhile the vehicle is still tying up a bay, the customer is still waiting, and the team is burning time and trust in equal measure.

One of the best habits a shop can build is partial ownership. Even if you are only 10 percent of the issue, own your 10 percent. “I should have documented that better.” “I should have clarified what I meant.” “I should have called sooner.” That language changes the whole conversation. It lowers the temperature and moves the team toward correction instead of prosecution.

This matters for leadership more than anyone. If owners and managers never model ownership, they cannot expect it from anyone else. A manager who can say, “I did not set that expectation clearly,” gains credibility. A manager who always has an explanation for why the communication failure was somebody else’s fault trains the whole team to do the same thing. Culture spreads from the top, including the bad parts.

The fourth horseman is stonewalling. It sounds dramatic, but in a shop it usually looks pretty ordinary. It is the shutdown. The one-word answers. The avoidance. The no-response text. The “Whatever, just do what you want.” The specialist who goes quiet because they know they are irritated and anything they say right now is going to come out wrong. The advisor who stops asking for clarification because the last few attempts turned into friction. The manager who delays a difficult customer call because they are mentally cooked and trying to make it to closing.

Stonewalling is often mistaken for laziness, attitude, or not caring. Sometimes it is those things. A lot of the time it is overwhelm. People get flooded. They are tired, behind, frustrated, and no longer convinced the conversation is going to help. So they disengage.

The problem is that silence gets interpreted as disrespect, and disrespect tends to trigger criticism, and criticism triggers defensiveness, and now the whole thing is running in circles. By the end of the day, everyone is exhausted, and nobody is even arguing about the original issue anymore. They are arguing about how the argument was handled.

The better move is not to force every conversation to continue in the moment. The better move is to normalize pause and return. "I am getting frustrated and I do not want to say something dumb. Give me ten minutes and let's come back to this." In some shops, that sentence would sound revolutionary. It should sound professional. Emotional regulation is not soft. It is a performance skill, especially in a high-pressure environment where one bad conversation can derail the rest of the day.

Now, if this all sounds like internal team dynamics, it is. But it also directly affects the customer experience, and this is where the business case becomes obvious. Customers are not only evaluating whether you are technically competent. They are evaluating whether they feel respected, informed, and safe enough to communicate with you and also trust your recommendation(s). You can be exactly right on the diagnosis and still lose the job if the conversation feels dismissive, defensive, or condescending.

We have all heard versions of it. "Well, if you had done your maintenance..." Maybe true. Still a bad opener. Or the advisor who treats every customer question like a challenge instead of a request for clarity. Or the manager who avoids a call because the customer is upset, which guarantees the customer will be more upset later. The four horsemen do not stay in employee conversations. They walk right into client communication, too.

The good news is that the same tools that improve internal culture also improve customer trust. Be specific instead of accusatory. Start with empathy before explanation. Clarify before defending. Ask questions. Confirm understanding. Give options without making people feel cornered. None of this requires scripts or fake enthusiasm. It requires intention. It requires a team that understands communication is part of the job, not an optional add-on after the "real work" is done.

And yes, all of this affects profitability. We rightly spend a lot of time in this industry talking about labor rate, effective labor rate, parts margin, car count, average repair order, billed hours, and productivity. Those metrics matter. But communication quality quietly influences every one of them. Bad communication creates unclear estimates, delayed approvals, unnecessary conflict, turnover, and customer attrition. Good communication improves trust, clarity, speed, and recovery when something goes sideways. Communication is not separate from profitability. It is upstream of it.

If you are reading this as an owner or manager and thinking, "Great, now I need to be a therapist," no, you do not. You need to become more intentional about how people communicate under pressure. That is different. You do not need a group hug in the morning huddle. You need a shared language for recognizing bad patterns and better habits for replacing them.

That can start with one conversation. Teach the four horsemen in plain language. Ask where they show up in your shop. Ask what they sound like. Ask what they cost you. Then work on replacements: specific complaints instead of criticism, respect instead of contempt, ownership instead of defensiveness, and pause-and-return instead of stonewalling. If you want better buy-in, do not present it like a lecture. Present it like diagnostics. Here is the pattern. Here is what it looks like. Here is what it causes. Here is the correction.

Most importantly, leadership has to model it when the day is ugly. Anybody can sound professional when the schedule is light, the parts arrive on time, and every job sells. Culture is revealed when the day is behind, a customer is upset, a vehicle is tying up a bay, and everyone is one sentence away from making it worse.

A lot of shops invest heavily in tools, training, equipment, software, and process improvement, and they should. But many still ignore the communication habits that determine whether those investments pay off. You can have excellent technical skill in the building and still create a culture that burns people out, drives customers away, and turns every problem into a blame contest.

If borrowing a few ideas from marriage counseling helps fix that, then call it whatever you want. Call it leadership. Call it professionalism. Call it communication training for adults who are tired, under pressure, and trying to do difficult work well. I do not care what you call it.

Just do not call it optional.

Because in a lot of repair shops, the biggest breakdown is not in the vehicle. It is in the conversation.