



How To Improve Communication Skills

a discussion for employees
Workbook

The Program

Welcome/Learning Points

What Makes Communication Effective?

Assertive Communication

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Nonverbal Communication

Problem-Solving

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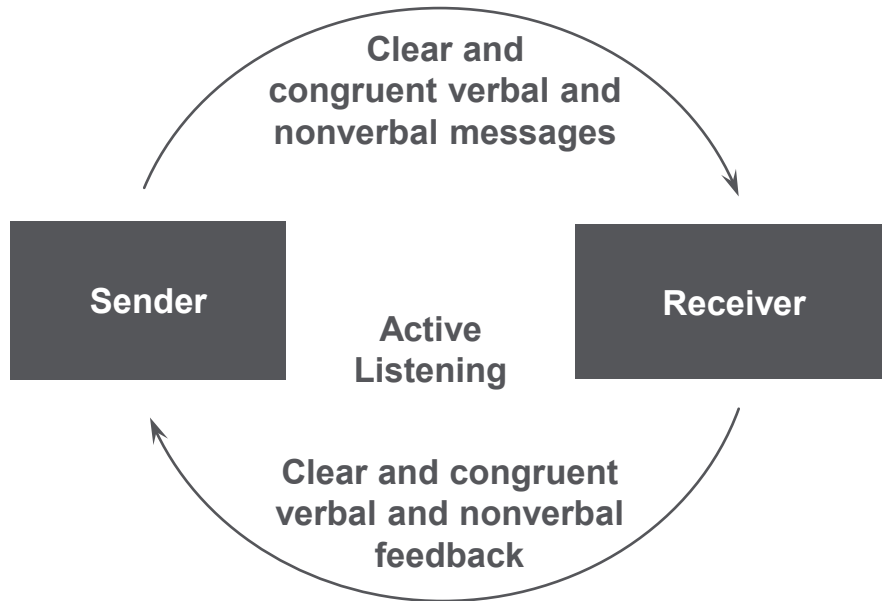
Learning Points

Participants will:

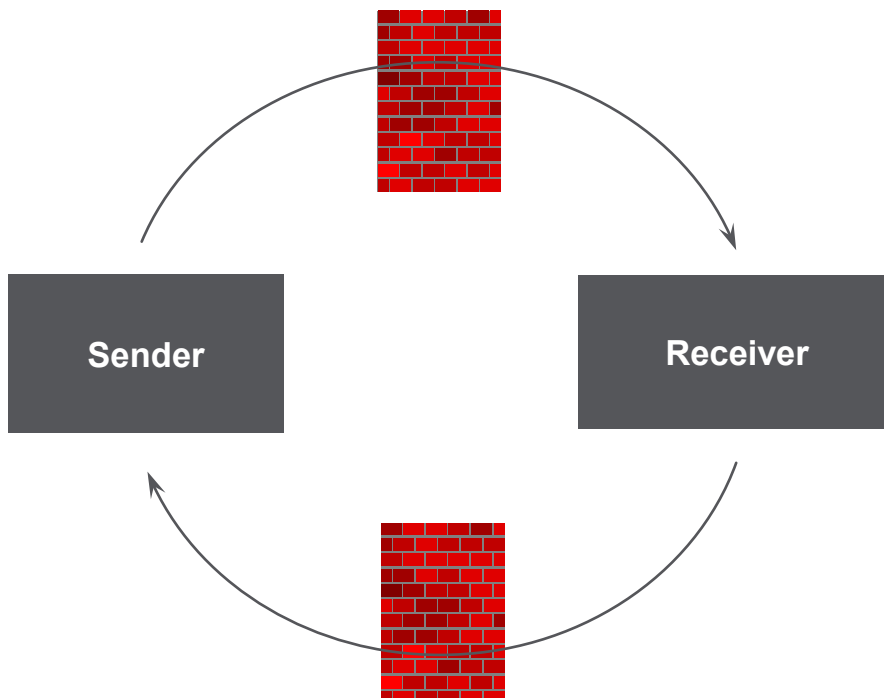
- Determine what makes communication effective.
- Learn the value of assertive communication.
- Practice active listening.
- Discuss the role of nonverbal communication.
- Use positive communication for problem-solving.

What Makes Communication Effective?

The Effective Process



The Ineffective Process



- The sender is responsible for designing a clear, concise message, gearing the message to the receiver and asking the receiver for feedback.
- The receiver is responsible for taking in information, listening carefully, asking questions and providing feedback to the sender.
- Feedback is a link that ensures understanding between people. The sender should remember to ask for feedback and make it easy/comfortable for the receiver to give it.
- Barriers occur when our life experiences, cultural influences and values determine our assumptions and interpretation of the message, or we are unable to obtain clarification.

Assertive Communication

Assertive communication carries with it both rights and responsibilities:

- You have the right to be treated with respect as well as the responsibility to treat others respectfully.
- You have the right to have and express your own opinions as well as the responsibility to listen as others express theirs.
- You have the right to ask for what you need and want as well as the responsibility to acknowledge the needs and wants of others.
- You have the right to set reasonable limits as well as the responsibility to honor the limits and boundaries of others.

Own Your Message

**Take
responsibility
for your
thoughts,
feelings and
behaviors.**

“I’m sorry I upset you.”

vs.

“Don’t be so sensitive!”

**Avoid
blaming
others.**

“You’re always late and it messes up my schedule!”

vs.

“When you’re late, it impacts my schedule and makes it difficult to complete work requests in a timely manner.”

**Accept that
you are in
charge of
your choices
around what
you think,
how you feel
and how you
behave.**

“I decided to stay late and finish the project, but I think that was too hard on my family.”

vs.

“Did I ever get grief from my family for working late — what do they want from me?”

Own Your Message

Transform the following “you” messages into messages reflecting ownership:

1. “Great! Late again! What’s your excuse this time?”

2. “You’re always coming up with off-the-wall ideas that don’t stand a ghost of a chance of working!”

3. “You’re so inconsiderate! Can’t you see the No Smoking sign, or is it that you just can’t read?”

4. “Look at this letter! It has so many errors, it makes me wonder how you ever got this job!”

5. “Communication training is a crock! Just tell people what you want to say and be done with it!”

Active Listening

Behaviors that support effective listening.

- Reflecting emotions.
- Leaning slightly forward if sitting.
- Maintaining relaxed body posture.
- Maintaining appropriate distance.
- Reflecting meaning (paraphrase.)
- Maintaining an open posture.
- Offering simple acknowledgments.
- Providing non-distracting environment.
- Facing person squarely at eye level (be aware of cultural differences.)

Behaviors that hinder effective listening.

- Judging.
- Criticizing.
- Interrupting.
- Diagnosing.
- Acting distracted.
- Offering no response.
- Changing the subject.
- Giving advice/solutions.
- Invalidating response, put downs.
- Reassuring without acknowledgment.
- Telling your own story without acknowledging the other person's story first.

***“It is the province of knowledge to speak,
and it is the privilege of wisdom to listen.”***

— Oliver Wendell Holmes

Active Listening

To listen actively and ensure mutual understanding:

- **Suspend judgment.** If we can suspend our judgment and values, it will be easier to hear what the other person is trying to communicate. By doing so, we set aside — not abandon — our own prejudices, preconceived ideas and biases about the person or information being communicated. We can also acknowledge and validate the other person's experience, opinions and beliefs.
- **Reflect feelings.** There is an element of emotion present in almost every interaction. Acknowledging these emotions can add depth and make the interaction more meaningful. You don't have to be a therapist to do this well. A simple statement such as, "It sounds like you're angry or sad or confused or upset," is enough.
- **Paraphrase main ideas.** One of the most effective ways to confirm that mutual understanding has taken place is through paraphrasing — the act of re-phrasing in your own words your understanding of what the person just said. Examples of paraphrasing include: "What I understand you to say is ... is that what you meant?" or "My understanding of what you mean/want/need/ is ... am I on track?" Paraphrasing not only helps the person receiving the information clarify what they heard, it also allows the person giving the information to evaluate if what they said was what they meant to say. We sometimes don't have our own thoughts, ideas or requests fully clarified in our own minds before we make requests or give information to others.
- **Clarify questions.** It may be necessary to interrupt the other person to ask questions or clarify what you are hearing. Done appropriately, the interruption will not be viewed as disrespectful, but as a way of ensuring your understanding of what is being said. For example, "Does that mean ...?" or "Do I understand you to say ...?"
- **Make summarizing statements.** When a decision is reached or action items decided, confirmation of the decision or next steps is crucial. This will prevent misunderstandings or confusion. For example, "Let me make sure I understand ..."

Nonverbal Communication

Much of our communication is not what we say, but how we say it. Therefore, it's crucial that you pay attention to your nonverbal body language.

Remember that nonverbal communication varies from culture to culture. The following suggestions reflect mainstream U.S. culture. Use sensitivity and discretion with co-workers from different cultural backgrounds.

- **Eye contact** is important, particularly when you are listening. Be aware that some cultures may interpret eye contact differently, so modify as necessary.
- **Body language/posture** can be used to communicate interest in what the other person is saying by slightly leaning toward him or her. If the individual moves away from you, use that as a sign to ease up.
- **Avoid hyperactive gestures** such as pencil tapping, foot tapping, jigglng knees, etc., as these motions may communicate boredom or lack of focus. They take the attention off the person who is speaking and place it on the gestures.
- **Nodding** occasionally as a person talks to you encourages him or her to continue and communicates that you are following the train of thought.
- **Facial expression** can be used to communicate compassion, empathy and interest.
- **Proximity** is another cultural variable. Sitting or standing too close to a person can make him or her feel intruded upon. Too much space communicates hesitancy or disinterest. Three to five feet is optimal from a Western perspective.
- **Be sensitive to touching others.** Some people may not want you to touch them at all, while others may feel quite natural about a hand on a shoulder. In particular, this is a very sensitive gender and cultural issue. When in doubt don't touch at all, or ask before you do.

Nonverbal Communication

Being culturally sensitive is critical since nonverbal behavior in one culture may signify concern, while in another culture, it may represent confrontation or disrespect. For example:

- Is a smile a gesture of friendly agreement and acknowledgement, a sign of embarrassment or an attempt to preserve harmony?
- Is a stare a challenge or a demonstration of passionate involvement in the subject at hand?
- Do lowered eyes demonstrate subservience or respect?
- How do individuals from different cultures show they are listening? Do they look at you or away from you?

Problem-Solving

The nature of both the workplace and human interaction make problems a reality. Using the skills covered in today's presentation, we can respectfully and creatively solve these problems. List ideas for each point from what you have learned today.

1. Use "I" messages.

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2. Listen to the other person's response.

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3. Ask questions.

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4. Put any agreement you reach in writing.

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5. Expect improvements to occur in small increments.

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6. Follow through.

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Problem-Solving

Scenario

On Thursday, Chris says to Dana, “If we decide to work together, I want to start promptly. It’s really important to me that we complete this on time!”

Dana responds, “By all means, let’s start Monday and every day at 8:30 a.m.”

“You’ve got a deal!” says Chris.

All is well on Monday and Tuesday. On Wednesday, Chris has not heard from Dana, and it’s 9 a.m.

Finally Dana comes rushing in at 9:15 a.m.

Both parties should try to use effective communication skills to have a successful dialogue regarding the above situation. Consider the following points before you begin:

1. Are there possible barriers which may affect the conversation?
2. How can your character use message ownership to effectively communicate perception, interpretation, feelings, wishes and intentions?
3. What listening skills can you use to make the other party feel understood?
4. What nonverbal messages will you send to underscore your verbal messages?

About Professional Support

You may consider seeking professional support if you experience any of the following:

- Sleep problems.
- Performance issues at work.
- Relationship difficulties with family or friends.
- Loss of interest in hobbies you normally enjoy.
- Lack of care about normal everyday work tasks.
- Excessive anxiety or worrying more than normal.
- Feeling overwhelmed or sad for more than two weeks.
- A noticeable change in appetite, eating too little or too much.
- Behavior and coping methods have become harmful to yourself or others, whether that is through aggressive behavior or unhealthy habits, such as drinking too much alcohol or taking drugs.
- Thoughts of harm to self and/or others.

Keep in mind some of these conditions may warrant more urgent professional help and you should seek support if you are unsure.

Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is available to all employees and their covered dependents and may include some free counseling sessions per issue, per year. Please check with your employer or your health plan for details.

Citations

American Psychological Association: How to choose a psychologist.

<http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/choose-therapist.aspx>.

Helpguide.org: Depression Symptoms and Warning Signs.

<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/depression/depression-symptoms-and-warning-signs.htm>.

Helpguide.org: Suicide Prevention.

<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/suicide-prevention/suicide-prevention.htm>.

Appendix A: Written Communication

Unlike the oral presentation of ideas, the written presentation of ideas is governed by some very specific rules. Each of us has an individual writing style that we have developed over time. These guidelines are offered as suggestions to help you edit and criticize your own (and others') written material.

1. Proofread — aloud — everything that is going out. Your ear will catch what your eye misses.
2. Make no assumptions. The ideas you are presenting must be explained in full to be understood. People read only what is on the page.
3. Avoid lecturing. Write only what must be understood to make the proper decision or choice.
4. Create rough drafts of all important letters and reports. Check them for content, sequential development of ideas and conciseness.
5. Always put yourself in the other person's shoes. Ask yourself, "Would I want to read this letter or report? Why? Does it say something of value and of real importance to me?"
6. Be sure your ideas are clear and easy to follow. Many people are too busy to read carefully. As a general rule, the most effective manner to develop an idea is: concept > benefit > example > data. This method leads your reader to the conclusion you want because it is already clearly stated as the concept or hypothesis. Your examples and data are support for the conclusion.
7. Define all terms and eliminate vague pronouns. These two traps cause more problems in writing than anything else.
8. Grammar, punctuation and spelling should be perfect. Use a dictionary and style guidelines.
9. Plan time for proofreading and correcting. When your success depends upon the quality of your letters and reports, there is no substitute for excellence.