



Communication Skills

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

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Communication Skills

Defining Communication

Defining the Terms

What is communication?

Communication is the ability to send messages and have the other person understand those messages, even if they do not respond.

How do we communicate with others?

We communicate through writing, speaking, and body language.

Test Your Knowledge

What is your definition of a skilled communicator?

Think of a time when you are at your best as a communicator. What do you do? How do you act?

Think of a time when you are at your worst as a communicator. What do you do? How do you act?

Think of someone you know, perhaps through work (now or in the past), or in your network somewhere, who is an excellent communicator.

This barrier comes from one person always sharing their own experience, and not allowing others to provide input. This can also occur when a newer employee meets existing staff and feels that they need to prove themselves independently, instead of listening to or respecting the experience of their new colleagues.

Emotions

Anger can stop up from hearing what someone says. Love can cloud our judgment.

Background

If someone comes from a very wealthy or very poor background, we might make judgments about them. People can also make judgments based on the area that a person is from.

Attitudes

These can stop us from hearing, observing, and perceiving the truth. A negative attitude can prevent someone from adapting to a change. An overly optimistic attitude can stop someone from seeing what is really going on.

Culture

If we do not have respect for what other cultures contribute, or the positive attributes of our own culture, people experience discrimination.

Subject Knowledge

If one person tries to push their knowledge on others, resentment can arise. On the other hand, if someone pretends to have knowledge and is lying, they will lose credibility and erode trust.

Prejudice

Prejudices are another thing that can cloud our judgment. Examine what triggers your prejudices (and why you have these thoughts) in order to deal with them.

Mood

If we are tired, grumpy, or feeling upset, it's possible we won't hear others or want to engage with anyone. If we are excited and joyful about things and interrupting other people's work, it's possible they won't get things done either.

Wording

How do you feel when someone starts an e-mail without a greeting? If this is also your style, it might be fine because there are no wasted words in the e-mail. Other people might feel that the tone is abrupt for no reason, or that the writer is angry at them.

Education

If I am intimidated because someone approaches me and they have a lot more education than I do, even though they are asking me for help, I might become nervous, short tempered, etc.

Noise Level

If there is a lot of noise around and I don't hear properly, I'm not likely to get the entire message.

Ambiguity

Clear language helps to remove uncertainty and avoid confusion.

Non-Verbal Messages

Non-verbal messages can convey a lot of meaning, even if you aren't saying anything. If I enter your office and you turn your back to me, I will know you don't want to talk to me, even though I need to speak with you.

Hearing Difficulties

In order for messages to be understood, we need to express ourselves. For listeners who are hard of hearing, we may give up before they have understood, or we may avoid calling them in order to avoid having to take extra steps to make sure that they hear us.

Active Listening Skills

Active listening means that we try to understand things from the speaker's point of view. It includes letting the speaker know that we are listening and that we have understood what was said. This is not the same as **hearing**, which is a physical process, where sound enters the eardrum and messages are passed to the brain. Active listening can be described as an attitude that leads to listening for shared understanding.

When we make a decision to listen for total meaning, we listen for the content of what is being said as well as the attitude behind what is being said. Is the speaker happy, angry, excited, sad...or something else entirely?

Responding to Feelings

The content (the words spoken) is one thing, but the way that people feel really gives full value to the message. Responding to the speaker's feelings adds an extra dimension of listening. Are they disgusted and angry or in love and excited? Perhaps they are ambivalent! These are all feelings that you can reply to in your part of the conversation.

Reading Cues

Really listening means that we are also very conscious of the non-verbal aspects of the conversation.

- What are the speaker's facial expressions, hand gestures, and posture telling us?
- Is their voice loud or shaky?
- Are they stressing certain points?

- Are they mumbling or having difficulty finding the words they want to say?

Demonstration Cues

When you are listening to someone, these techniques will show a speaker that you are paying attention, providing you are genuine in using them.

Physical indicators include making eye contact, nodding your head from time to time, and leaning into the conversation.

You can also give **verbal cues** or use phrases such as “Uh-huh,” “Go on,” “Really!” and, “Then what?” You can use **questions** for clarification or **summarizing statements**. Examples:

- “Do you mean they were charging \$4.00 for just a cup of coffee?”
- “So after you got a cab, got to the store, and found the right sales clerk, what happened then?”

Tips for Becoming a Better Listener

- **Make a decision to listen.** Close your mind to clutter and noise and look at the person speaking with you. Give them your undivided attention.
- **Don’t interrupt** people. Make it a habit to let them finish what they are saying. Respect that they have thoughts they are processing and speaking about, and wait to ask questions or make comments until they have finished.
- Keep your **eyes** focused on the speaker and your **ears** tuned to their voice. Don’t let your eyes wander around the room, just in case your attention does too.
- Carry a **notebook** or start a conversation file on your computer. Write down all the discussions that you have in a day. Capture the subject, who spoke more (were you listening or doing a lot of the talking?), what you learned in the discussion, as well as the who, what, when, where, why, and how aspects of it. Once you have conducted this exercise 8-10 times, you will be able to see what level your listening skills are currently at.
- Ask a few **questions** throughout the conversation. When you ask, people will know that you are listening to them, and that you are interested in what they have to say. Your ability to summarize and paraphrase will also demonstrate that you heard them.
- When you demonstrate good listening skills, they tend to be **infectious**. If you want people to communicate well at work, you have to set a high example.

Test Your Knowledge

Write down the names of three people that you consider good listeners.

Did you write down the name of a person that you do not like?

Do any of the three people fit into one of these categories?

- Someone you like
- Someone you love
- Someone you respect

If you wish to be liked, loved, or respected, how is it that you need to behave?

Questioning Skills

As leaders, we should be spending a lot of our time asking questions and providing answers. When it comes to asking, however, we often aren't aware of our technique. Open questions in particular often give us difficulty, which is unfortunate since they are the most important ones for us to become skilled at using. If you are having trouble with open questions, it can be helpful to get more comfortable with small talk and easing yourself into the conversation at hand.

Building relationships with others (including our employees and our co-workers) becomes easier as we become skilled at asking questions that give us more information about that person and their wants and needs. Questions help us find common ground with someone, show the person we are interested in them, and puts the emphasis on them rather than us.

Open Questions

These are broad, general questions that require your conversation partner to provide more than just a "yes" or "no" answer. They also permit the other person to decide how much information to give.

Open questions can do the following:

- Give us more information
- Encourage your conversation partner to speak openly
- Encourage people to share opinions and ideas
- Help us determine if people have interpreted what we say accurately

Closed Questions

Closed questions can be answered with a single word or two, such as a simple yes or no. They can begin the closing process in a conversation, or provide confirmation of a detail, but they don't usually lead to a richer conversation or gathering more information. The advantage of closed questions is that they give you control over the questions and the type of answers you receive. Closed questions are easy to interpret and more questions can be answered in less time.

However, closed questions don't allow for detailed explanations or for the other person to share how they feel about a particular circumstance. If you wish to encourage a richer response or to encourage a frustrated person to talk freely, then you need to avoid asking closed questions.

Here are some examples of closed questions:

- "Does this make you angry?"
- "Do you think that meeting was fun?"

To open up those same questions, you could try these open-ended statements:

- "Please explain how you feel about this situation."
- "Tell me how you feel about this meeting."

Probing Techniques

When we do not get enough information by using open-ended questions, we can use probes to expand the conversation.

Verbal and Non-Verbal Probes

A probe will encourage your conversation partner to add to their previous response. Verbal probes are often a single word or short phrase. Some examples are:

- "Tell me more about that."
- "That's interesting. Tell me more."
- "Really?"
- "Why?"
- "Can you give me a specific example of what you mean?"

Non-verbal probes rely on your body language and gestures to get the same results as a verbal probe. Some examples are:

- Raising the eyebrows as if you are surprised
- Nodding
- Frowning
- Pursing the lips

Probing Techniques

There are many ways that you can use probing in your conversations. We've provided some techniques for you below.

Ask an open question.

Some good questions include:

- "Can you describe that more clearly?"
- "Would you give me a specific example of what you mean?"
- "What do you think we should do?"

You'll soon recognize that if you ask too many of these questions, your conversation partner will feel like they are under interrogation, so use them carefully.

Pause.

Many of us feel uncomfortable when silence overtakes a conversation, and we will fill the silence by expanding on what was said previously.

Use reflective or mirroring questions.

For example, if an employee says "I just don't feel interested in my work anymore," you may respond by just reflecting back to them, "Interested?" Then pause. Usually, the other person will provide you with an expanded answer without you asking more questions or interrogating. These kinds of statements also serve to focus or clarify and summarize without interrupting the flow of the conversation. They demonstrate your intent to understand the speaker's thoughts and feelings.

Paraphrase.

Reflect what has just been said in your own words. "So if I understand you correctly, you..." This technique shows that you want to understand your conversation partner and that you want to be accurate. It also allows the sender to hear back what they have said from someone else's point of view.

Use summary questions.

Summary questions are a helpful way of probing and winding up the conversation at the same time. "You have spoken to your colleague about his foul language in the office, you have tried to ignore it, and you remain concerned about the impact his swearing has on our visitors and staff. None of these techniques have worked to reduce the amount of swearing and now you are asking me to intervene. Have I got it right?"

Here is another example: when we asked an employee why it would take until next week to finish the project, one of her reasons was lack of cooperation from the production department.

Rather than come back with yet another question, you might just say "Cooperation..." in a reflective tone of voice, and pause again. Usually, the other person will recognize that reflection as a clue to expand or provide you with additional information.

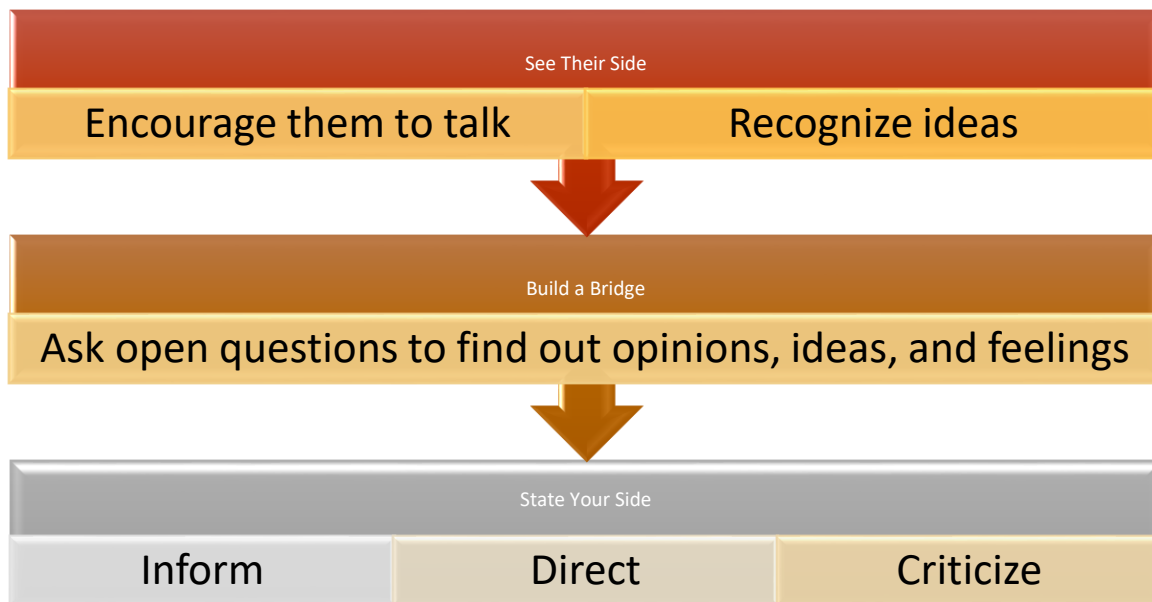
Summary statements or paraphrases sum up what has been said, and will show that you have listened and absorbed what's being said. Don't use them to take over the dialogue.

The summary is the stronger cue that the conversation is winding down on that topic. However, if necessary or appropriate, you can follow this up with a fact-finding question (usually a closed question), such as, "Did you want to say more about the issue?", or, "Do you have any other suggestions?"

The Communication Process

Process Overview

When dealing with an employee who is agitated or emotional (for example, very excited, frustrated, or angry), it can help to have a framework that we can use to guide our words and actions. We find this simple process to be very helpful.



Breaking Down the Process

The first step is to acknowledge the employee's side.

- Acknowledge what they are feeling.
- Encourage them to talk about their feelings.
- Acknowledge their ideas for ways to deal with these feelings or to ease the situation.

The middle item is the bridge between you listening and you talking. You ask open questions to find out their opinions, ideas, and feelings. Only after employees have had their say do you go to the bottom three items in the funnel and:

- Inform people
- Direct them or give them instructions
- Criticize what they are doing

Tips and Tricks

Here are some other tips for good communication:

- Focus on the goal (what you want to achieve).
- Pick a time and place that are conducive to having this conversation.
- Tailor the message to the other person's language, posture, background, etc.
- The outcome cannot be just what you want to happen; you must maintain the other person's self-esteem, build trust, and establish good rapport for the future.

Further Reading:

