



Communication Skills for a Trainer

Learning Outcomes

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

- ✓ Understand how to apply listening skills
- ✓ Develop rapport building strategies
- ✓ Recognize key skills in a trainer's toolbox and identify skill areas for development

Communication Skills for a Trainer

Asking the Right Questions

Asking Good Questions

Types of Questions

Two of the most basic elements of good communication are asking questions and listening to others. Some of us naturally ask a lot of questions, while for others this is a learned skill. We can plan questions prior to training as a way to ensure our questions have thought and depth to them.

There are two kinds of questions: open and closed.

Closed questions are those that can be answered by either “yes” or “no,” or with a specific bit of data, such as your name, date of birth, or occupation. These questions restrict our responses and give us little opportunity to develop our thoughts before answering. As a result, these questions require very little effort on either person’s part. They can be used (intentionally or unintentionally) as a way to close down a conversation.

Closed questions tend to get over-used, in part because they are so easy to work with. They are easy to phrase and we get quick answers. This type of questioning can lead us to make assumptions as we create fuller answers in our minds, and assumptions can be big barriers to good communication.

Open questions, on the other hand, encourage people to talk. These questions are phrased so they cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. Open questions often begin with a variation of the five W’s (who, what, when, where, why), or can ask how.

Open-ended questions can be used to:

- Get information
- Focus conversations
- Solicit opinions
- Gain consensus

Improving Communication with Questions

The unintentional use of a closed question can often be overcome by simply following it with a short open question. For example:

- "Do you feel that was the right thing to do?"
- "Yes, I do."
- "Can you help me understand why you feel that way?"

Here is an example of a closed question:

- Do you like ice cream?

Replacing it with an open question provides us with more information:

- What's your favorite flavor of ice cream?

The first question will only tell us whether the person likes ice cream or not. That's a closed situation. The second question will let us know a little bit about the person. It could also lead to follow up questions depending on their answer. Questions that are open ended will help us learn more about the people we speak with, establish things that we have in common, develop rapport, and make meaningful connections.

It is possible for you to ask someone an open question and for them to be evasive or try to shut the conversation down. Children are famous for this when a parent says, "What did you learn at school today?" and they reply, "Nothing."

You may ask a trainee, "How did the training go?" and they may say, "Fine." If you want to engage them, you'll have to ask a follow up question. Some examples:

- What was the most interesting point raised during training?
- What were the challenges that we need to consider?
- What questions did the group ask?

Types of Open-Ended Questions

There are several different types of open-ended questions. We can ask **leading questions** to influence how people think ("Don't you just love the way vanilla ice cream smells?").

Rhetorical questions are ones that we don't really want an answer to, such as "Do I look like I care?" Rhetorical questions can be used to engage your conversation partner and make them think about the obvious answer. (They may also be something that you blurt out because you are thinking out loud!) A rhetorical question can engage the listener in a persuasive manner as they process your ideas.

Probing questions can also help you to investigate in more detail.

Probing

Many people are better at presenting their own point of view than they are at drawing out information from others. Your role as a good communicator is to draw out information from the individual that will help you understand the issue. A good name for this skill of gathering information from others is probing.

When you probe, you:

- Get others involved and participating. Since probes are designed to produce a response, it's unlikely the other person will remain passive.
- Get important information on the table. People may not volunteer information, or the information they present may not be clear. Your probes help people open up and present or clarify their information.
- Force yourself to listen. Since probes are most effective in a sequence, you have to listen to a person's response.
- Help improve communication on both sides of the table.

There are five ways to probe.

One of the most common ways of probing is to ask an **open question**, such as:

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

The difficulty here is that if you ask too many of these probing questions, the other person begins to feel like they are under interrogation. Be thoughtful about what and how you ask. Consider how many probes you really need to offer.

A second, very effective way of probing is a **pause**. Stop talking. Let the other person fill the silence.

A third way is to ask a **reflective or mirroring question**. For example, let's say the person has just said, "What I really want is more variety in my work." You may respond by just reflecting back to them, "Variety?" The reflective question usually provides you with an expanded answer without you needing to ask more questions. Of course, it is best used in conjunction with a pause.

Reflective questions or statements focus on clarifying and summarizing without interrupting the flow of the conversation. They indicate your intent to understand the sender's thoughts and feelings.

A fourth method that is particularly useful to make certain you are clear about what the individual has said is **paraphrasing** what has just been said, in your own words. An example: "So if I understand you correctly, you..."

You can use this response to show that you want to increase the accuracy of your understanding of what has just been said. You may also want to use it to ensure the sender hears what he has just said. Finally, paraphrasing reassures the sender that you are trying to understand what he/she is saying.

The last method, most often used as a conversation is winding down, is the **summary question**. Example: “You have already taken courses on adult learning, training development, knowledge testing, and communication. You feel that your next area of improvement is adding humor. You plan on attending a workshop and shadowing a really creative trainer to help you with this, and you would like some recommendations. Have I got it right?”

Pushing My Buttons

Statement

Probes

Statement

Probes

Listening Skills

Can You Hear Me?

Example One

Example Two

Example Three

Example Four

Example Five

Active Listening Skills

The problem is that listening and hearing are not the same thing. Most of us were fortunate to be born with hearing, but listening is a skill that must be learned and practiced in order to use it successfully. When you **hear** something, sound enters your eardrum, passes through your ear canal, and registers in your brain. **Listening** is what you do with that sound and how you interpret it.

Here are some tips for successful listening:

- Listen intentionally for people's names.
- Listen with interest.
- Try to get rid of your assumptions.
- Listen for what isn't said.

Listening is hard work. When other people are listening to us, they have the same difficulties we do in trying to focus on a message. Our minds wander, noises or thoughts distract us, and we can be thinking about what to do next.

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?"

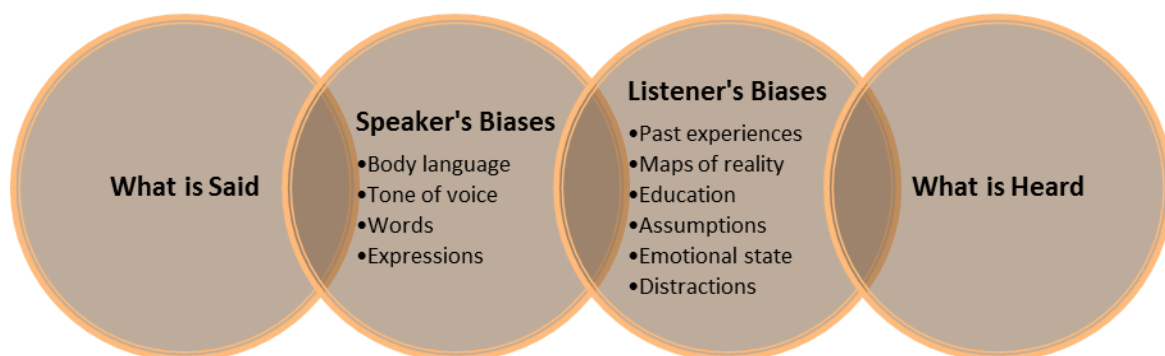
- “So after you got a cab, got to the store, and found the right sales clerk, what happened then?”

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.

What is Said and What is Heard

What we say isn't always what the other person hears. Our message goes through a complicated system of filters and outside influences before it reaches the recipient. We must always clarify that the person has received the message that we intended to send.



Connecting with People

Rapport Building

Training that sticks or is successful has a lot to do with the relationship that you build with your trainees. You do need to be a people person in order to be a trainer.

The opening to any training program sets the stage for the experience. Getting participants actively engaged, buying into the material, and learning to follow instructions, is best done by giving them a chance to greet the other participants, helping them to relax, and encouraging them to fully take part in the day.

It is essential that a trainer has the ability to connect with trainees so that they are ready to learn. Good trainers understand how to use **body language, tone, and pacing** to connect to their participants. Using **good questioning and listening techniques** can make those connections easier.

Once the connection has been established, the trainer often uses a **carefully planned activity** to build interest and encourage participants to buy into the subject matter. Adults need to know what the purpose of any training is and how they can apply it in order to stay engaged. As well, if trainers know a bit about the trainees, they can ensure that training draws from past experiences and builds on it. When trainees can build on what they already know, learning is more effective.

Another connection factor is achieved through a different approach to training, which we will refer to as facilitative training.

Facilitative Training

Key Differences

Conventional training is required to cover essential work-related skills, techniques, and knowledge. Although skill development which is important, it's not the whole picture. Often, attitudes must change in order for skill development to be sustained.

Facilitative training can help with this shift to enabling learning and development for people as individuals. This extends the range of development outside traditional work skill and knowledge, and creates far more exciting, liberating, motivational opportunities for employees and their employers.

Why are these opportunities important? Organizations are facing great pressure to change these days. Facilitating and encouraging whole-person development and fulfillment are part of these changes. This type of training also supports current challenges, such as improving retention rates. It also supports positive employee morale and builds a knowledgeable and creative workforce.

You might not immediately be able to put great emphasis on whole-person development. Corporate attitudes and expectations about what training is and does will only change as the workplace evolves and they see the benefits to a broader scope in training. Many organizations still see training as being limited to work related skills, classrooms, and PowerPoint presentations. However, if you start imagining, thinking, and talking about concepts and expressions such as enabling learning, facilitating meaningful personal development, and helping people to identify and achieve their own personal potential, then your skills as a trainer will far surpass the more familiar “workplace trainer” scope of practice.

Other Methods to Consider

There are many different training and development methods, including:

- On-the-job training
- Informal training
- Classroom training
- Internal training courses
- External training courses
- On-the-job coaching
- Life-coaching
- Mentoring
- Training assignments and tasks
- Skills training
- Product training
- Technical training
- Behavioral development training
- Role playing and role play games and exercises
- Attitudinal training and development
- Accredited training and learning
- Distance learning

All of these opportunities can make the trainer’s job one of the **most interesting and stimulating** in the entire organization (if you like that sort of thing, of course).

Training is also available far beyond and outside the classroom. More importantly, training includes anything offering learning and developmental experience. Training and learning development should, in fact, include aspects such as:

- Ethics and morality
- Attitude and behavior
- Leadership and determination
- Skills and knowledge

Development isn't restricted to training; it's anything that helps a person to grow in ability, skills, confidence, tolerance, commitment, initiative, inter-personal skills, understanding, self-control, motivation, and more.

The Tipping Point

If you consider the attributes of really effective people, whether they are leaders, managers, operators, technicians and so on, the important qualities which make good performers special are likely to be related to **attitude**. Skills and knowledge, and the processes available to people, can be taught easily. What makes people effective and valuable to any organization is their attitude, which is much more difficult to teach.

Attitude includes qualities that require different training and learning methods. Attitude stems from a person's mindset, belief system, emotional maturity, self-confidence, and experience. These are the great training and development challenges. There are better ways of achieving change and development than putting people in a classroom for conventional business or skills training.

A Shift in Training

Facilitative trainers are able to see that development must take place in the most appropriate place for learning to occur. They recognize that training and learning must extend far beyond conventional classroom training courses. Be creative, innovative, and open-minded, and you will discover learning in virtually every new experience, whether for yourself, your team, or your organization. If you want to make a difference, think about what really helps people to change.

To facilitate means to make easier or less difficult; to help forward; to assist a person's progress.

Facilitating, then, is about leading a trainee through an experience, not to simply bring new information or train in a particular skill (as conventional classroom training might).

Do I Have What it Takes?

What are the essential elements of connecting with people? (Review the previous session if you need help.)

Am I a people person? If so, how does this make me an effective trainer? How can it interfere with my training? If I am not a people person, how does this make me an effective trainer? How can not being a people person interfere with my training?

What are five elements of connecting with people that I find easy or enjoyable?

What are five elements of connecting with people that I would like to learn more about or become better at?

Defusing Difficult Participants

Most training sessions will have a problem of some kind. However, if you're ready to deal with them, you can easily prevent problems.

You know that participants are mandated to attend the workshop and aren't motivated.

You notice that participants seem restless and/or bored.

The topics to be covered are challenging, controversial, or dry.

You know that this particular group does not work well together.

Essentials for Success

What Makes a Good Trainer?

In the list below, put the statements in order from 1-15, where number one is the most important statement and number 15 is the least important. You may only use each number one time. You must put a number beside each statement.

Rank	Statement
	Someone who cares about their trainees.
	Someone who gives feedback that is positive, encouraging, and clearly targeted.
	Someone who sets appropriate, specific, and challenging goals.
	Someone who makes the purpose and content explicit.
	Someone who plans carefully.
	Someone who uses systematic assessment tools and feedback.
	Someone who encourages trainees to think about thinking.

	Someone who is highly knowledgeable and up to date about the subject matter.
	Someone who does not pretend to know it all and is willing to learn from trainees.
	Someone who treats all trainees questions seriously and does not intimidate or ridicule.
	Someone who understands that, since we learn at different rates and in different ways, we need to have a variety of activities, tasks, and pace of work.
	Someone who can use breaks and activities to engage thinking and interest.
	Someone who shows flexibility in responding to trainee needs.
	Someone who shows enthusiasm for the subject matter.
	Someone who can create a relaxed training atmosphere.

Do's and Don'ts for New Trainers

We'd like to leave you with a brief checklist of things to do and not to do when training.

Do

- Prepare, prepare, prepare.
- Review the materials and make sure you have any supporting materials (such as handouts or PowerPoint slides) ready.
- Bring some extra activities with you.
- Make sure your appearance says what you want it to.
- Have a backup plan. For example, if you plan to use PowerPoint slides, make sure you have a hard copy of the information.
- Make sure the training room is set up the way you want it and has the resources you need.
- Have an emergency kit ready with extra markers, tape, an extra pair of pantyhose (if you're female), band-aids, an extension cord, safety pins, tissues, and a bottle of water.
- Practice writing on flip chart paper before the workshop. You may want to draw lines on the paper (lightly, in pencil) to help you.
- Work with your nervousness. It's a normal feeling, even for experienced trainers. Use it as energy for the program.
- Arrive at least an hour early.
- Get a good night's rest and eat something the morning of the program.
- Keep an eye on the time and try to stick to your schedule.
- Involve participants in determining the agenda for the day.
- Act assertively, not aggressively.

- Remember that the participants need this information and your expertise.

Don't

- Fly by the seat of your pants.
- Lose your temper with participants or talk down to participants.
- Be afraid to say, "I don't know," and find the answer out later.
- Drink too much water during the day.
- Cut out breaks or activities if you're running low on time.
- Use any activity (particularly controversial or difficult ones) without practicing it first.
- Stress out if something doesn't go as planned. Treat it as a learning opportunity and move on.
- Assume anything!
- Take criticisms or negative behavior personally.

Further Reading:

- ✓ *Boothman, Nicholas. How to Make People Like You in 90 Seconds or Less. Workman Publishing Company, 2000.*
- ✓ *Carnegie, Dale. How to Win Friends and Influence People. Pocket Books, 1998 (Reprint).*
- ✓ *—. Public Speaking for Success. Tarcher, 2006.*
- ✓ *Charney, Cy, and Kathy Conway. The Trainer's Tool Kit. AMACOM, 2005.*
- ✓ *Goad, Tom. The First-Time Trainer. AMACOM, 2010.*