



UNIT-11 Communication Skills

Learning Outcomes

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

- Identify common communication problems that may be holding you back
- Develop skills to ask questions that give you information you need
- Learn what your non-verbal messages are telling others

Unit 11

Communications Skills

Good communications skills are critical to your success in business. You have to be able to communicate your ideas as well as respond to ideas from others. You have to be able to respond to questions, handle conflict, and listen.

Communications starts when two or more people need to exchange information. Perhaps one of your coworkers wants to ask you a question. Perhaps you want to ask your boss something. Perhaps you want someone to do something for you. Each of these situations involves communication.

Talking is not the same thing as communication. Communication is more complicated; it often involves listening and speaking skillfully as you interact with people who are fearful, angry, or frustrated. Miscommunication occurs when we fail to communicate clearly. Many times it is the cause of the conflict in the first place.

Giving Feedback

Feedback means giving information back to someone. When we think about feedback, most of us think of it as an opportunity to give someone our opinion about something that person did. The purpose of the feedback is to make the situation better next time.

When you offer feedback in business, think about the following:

- Be clear about what you want to say to the person.
- Focus on the positive rather than the negative aspects of the performance.
- Be specific and use people's names and project names rather than pronouns like him, her, it, that, and them.
- Focus on the behavior, not the person.
- Explain what should be changed about the behavior.
- Be descriptive about the change you desire, rather than evaluating the behavior as good or bad.
- Give your own feedback, not someone else's.
- Avoid generalization words like always, never, or all.
- Listening Well

Only about 25 percent of listeners grasp the ideas being communicated. To be a more effective listener, mentally summarize what a speaker is saying. Listen between the lines to the tone of the person's voice. Weigh any evidence the person provides in stating his or her position. As you listen, think about what's in the message for you. How can you benefit from what the speaker is saying? Fight distractions and concentrate on the person and the message. Avoid judging a speaker until he or she has finished offering all the evidence that supports his or her position.

Don't get distracted by a speaker's poor communications habits. Skip over the delivery errors and focus on the message. Look for central ideas that are the main point of the conversation. Try to keep eye contact with the speaker and help the speaker along by showing an active body posture. Good listeners listen with their faces as well as their ears.

To help remember what was said, take notes during the talk or immediately after the speaker has finished.

Nonverbal Communications

Nonverbal communications include facial expressions, tone of voice, speaking style, gestures, eye contact, posture, touch, and movement. In the case of nonverbal communications, it's not what you say, it's how you say it. Nonverbal messages are an essential part of the communications process.

Your awareness of nonverbal behavior will allow you to better understand what a speaker really means. You'll become a better communicator yourself if you learn how to use nonverbal signals that reinforce your point.

Some of the major nonverbal communication behaviors are:

- Eye contact
- Facial expressions
- Gestures made with the arms and hands
- Posture
- Body position in relationship to the listener
- Closeness between the speaker and listener
- Paralinguistics

Eye contact is an important aspect of interpersonal communication because it helps regulate communication. It's like the "uh-huh" of the telephone, which acknowledges that the listener is still there and tuned in. Eye contact shows you are interested in the speaker. Eye contact by a speaker helps increase the speaker's credibility and shows interest, concern, warmth, and credibility.

Perhaps the most powerful facial expression is the smile. Smiling shows happiness, friendliness, and warmth. If you want to come across as likeable and approachable, smile when you speak or listen.

If you don't use your hands while speaking, you come across as boring and stiff. The use of gestures animates your communication as a speaker, capturing your listener's attention and making the material more interesting. As a listener, your head nods to indicate that you are listening.

The way you walk, stand, or sit also communicates information about yourself. Standing tall and leaning slightly forward indicates that you are approachable, receptive, and friendly.

Cultural norms dictate maintaining a certain distance between communicators. You should look for signs of discomfort from others, including rocking, leg swinging, finger tapping, and averting one's gaze. Typically, in a group meeting, being too close is not an issue. In fact, there is usually too much distance. To counteract this, arrange your meeting rooms so presenters can interact with their audience and make eye contact with everyone in the group.

Paralinguistics is an aspect of nonverbal communication that involves the tone, pitch, and rhythm of your voice. The idea is to avoid being monotone and boring. Good communicators learn to modulate their voices, use pauses, vary the pitch, raise and lower the loudness, and use inflection as additional communications tools.

Customer Service

Because an administrative assistant may often be a point of contact with the customers of a business, it is important that the customers have a great customer experience whenever they speak with an administrative assistant, whether on the phone or in person.

The term "customers" also applies to people within your own organization with whom you have interactions. They may request information, leave messages, or ask for your assistance. It is important that you treat every interaction as an opportunity to deliver exceptional customer service.

Delivering great customer service is everyone's job. Good customer service means satisfying a customer and fulfilling his or her needs. The key to understanding what that signifies is to think about your interaction from the customer's point of view. Is the person having a great customer experience? Customer experience is how a customer feels about the interaction he or she has with you. It is an emotional feeling. It goes beyond just meeting a customer's expectations to exceeding and wowing them.

Think about the times you've had a great customer experience. They were probably situations where you got something more than you expected. And it usually came not from the product or service itself but from the people who you interacted with as part of doing business. You remember those times when you had a great customer experience and you tend to want to shop there or eat there again.

So in your own work, your goal should be to create that emotional experience with all of your customers. Whether it is on the telephone, in a meeting, or via email, there are countless opportunities to practice good customer service every day.

Customer Services as a Value Proposition

There are many different ways to develop a relationship with your customers, but the most important is to hear them, see them, to learn about them, and to be able to respond to them in a way that makes them feel like you know who they are and what they are trying to achieve.

One popular term used in business today is “value proposition.” A value proposition is the value a company offers its customers in exchange for their time and money. That value consists of three things: its product, process, and price. Some organizations make their products the biggest piece of the pie. Think about Nike shoes or Apple computers or Bentley cars. Other organizations don’t have products. Instead, they offer a process, as does a bank, airline, or hotel. A third group focuses on price as their value proposition. Wal-Mart is a good example of a business that offers value to customers based on price.

Those businesses that focus on a process or service put the biggest emphasis on customer service. Some examples of businesses that are famous for their customer service include Starbucks and Disney.

Regardless of the value proposition a business relies on to be competitive, customers demand that service be the biggest part of the pie; that is the way they try to ensure customer loyalty. A mega-store like Wal-Mart may attract customers based on price, but it takes friendly employees to keep customers coming back. The same is true for Southwest Airlines. In order for the airline to save money, customers don’t get assigned seats; they board based on when they checked in, choosing their seats at that time.

Today, customers assume they are getting a good product at a fair price. Companies that have poor products or high prices don’t survive very long. With that in mind, customers now look at their customer experience as one of the key reasons they choose to do business with one company over another. The customer’s standards for service are rising, too. With email, the Web, and overnight delivery, customers now expect instant results. They don’t want to wait. Administrative assistants should keep this in mind when responding to requests from customers on behalf of their managers.

Likewise, customers cannot tolerate a one-size-fits-all process any longer. In order to know the specific needs of their customers, many organizations maintain customer profiles in computer databases. If your organization keeps such records, make sure you have access to it. Otherwise, you should keep your own database in order to learn about the customers with whom you have interactions, so that you’ll better be able to respond to their needs again in the future.

High service standards from companies like Disney, FedEx, and Amazon influence customer expectations for all other companies. If Amazon can get a purchase to you tomorrow, why can’t you send something from your business just as quickly? If FedEx can answer the phone on two rings, why can’t you? And if USAA insurance company knows everything about your case regardless of who you talk to, why can’t you respond the same way?

Similarly, whether or not you have personal contact with the company’s customers, you still have customers. One way or another, every action you take on the job has some impact on the folks who contribute the money to pay the bills. The best way to have customer service on the outside is to have great employee service on the inside. The way you serve your business associates who interact with customers affects how effectively they serve their customers. Everyone in your organization is either

directly serving a customer or serving someone who does. Therefore, great customer service is everyone's job.

Customer Service Fundamentals

Many companies survey their customers to get their opinions on things like customer service. One of the factors that comes up frequently in these surveys is the need for consistency. Also, the number one attribute that customers value in the service they receive is reliability—an organization's providing what was promised, in a dependable, consistent, and accurate manner. Customers expect that the experience they receive at one operating location will be similar to other operating locations for the same business. Therefore, the customer service you provide can have a ripple effect across the entire company.

There are specific actions and behaviors that you can use to help provide great customer service.

- **Use the customer's name.** Whenever you have contact with a customer, make sure you get the person's name; write it down in order to remember it, and use it when addressing the individual.
- **Be pleasant.** When meeting with a customer in person, proactively address the customer and welcome the man or woman. Offer an energetic and genuine greeting, make eye contact, and wear a smile or pleasant expression.
- **Be trustworthy.** Whenever you agree to do something for a customer, follow through and deliver. Honesty, integrity, and keeping promises are the foundations of customer service. Being able to do this even under difficult circumstances is even more important.
- **Be responsible.** If a customer has a problem and you are contacted about it, you should own the problem until it is resolved. Don't just pass it off onto someone else and forget about it.
- **Be grateful.** Always thank your customers for their business, offer a pleasant goodbye, and invite them to contact you again in the future.

Interviews

One form of communication that is very common in business is the interview. Whether you are interviewing for a job or interviewing someone else, it's important to understand the proper way to conduct an interview. As your business grows and as your role in the business changes, you will likely be involved in conducting interviews of prospective candidates for new positions.

Interviews are a form of communication used for getting the story behind some-one's résumé. If you are the interviewer, you can pursue in-depth information around a topic. For example, you could use an interview as a follow-up to certain answers given on an application. Usually, open-ended questions

are asked during interviews. If you are the person being interviewed, knowing the fundamentals of interviewing will only increase your chances of success.

Basic to the interview process is developing and asking good questions. But before you design your interview questions, you need to make sure you have a clear purpose for gathering the information. This helps you focus on the answers given and select follow-up questions.

Here are the basic steps for preparing for and conducting an interview. Knowing the process and being clear on your objectives will help you develop those questions.

Getting Started

Select a setting for the interview that won't be distracting. Try to find a quiet, private place where the interviewee will feel comfortable.

When you will meet the interviewee, you will explain the purpose of the interview and any issues surrounding confidentiality. You will let the person know who will get access to information and how the answers will be analyzed.

Then, you will explain the format of the interview and how it will be conducted. If you want the person to ask questions, let him or her know that questions are welcome, or else ask the person to hold any questions until the end of the interview. You can also invite questions at the start of the interview.

Types of Interviews

There are two basic styles of interviews, with varying degrees of application. The informal, conversational interview has no predetermined questions. The interview remains as open and adaptable as possible, depending on the interviewee. The formal, guided approach has a set group of questions; this ensures that the same general information is collected from each interviewee. There's still a degree of freedom for the interviewer, but there's more focus on obtaining specific information in each interview.

A hybrid approach is to use a set of open-ended questions that are asked of all interviewees. With an open-ended interview, the respondents are free to decide how they want to answer. A fixed-response interview involves asking all interviewees the same questions via a questionnaire, with the same set of multiple-choice answers. This approach results in faster interviews that are easier to analyze and compare.

Types of Interview Questions

There are six categories of interview questions commonly asked. Any of these questions can focus on the past, the future, or present. The categories are the following:

1. Behavior—what a person has done in his or her life or what he or she is currently doing
2. Opinions and Values—what a person thinks about a particular topic
3. Feelings—how someone feels about a particular topic or situation

4. Knowledge—what a person knows about work-related topics
5. Sensory—what a person has experienced in life
6. Background—standard questions such as education, work history, and hobbies

Question Sequence and Wording

Try to get the interviewee involved in the interview as soon as possible. Don't start out by giving a long speech. Before asking about things such as feelings and opinions, however, start by asking about some facts. Using this approach, you can get the person involved in the interview before having to talk about personal matters.

Avoid long lists of fact-based questions. Instead, sprinkle them throughout the interview. Ask questions about the present before you explore the past or future. It is usually easier to talk about what is happening right now than to ask someone to recall past events or project him or herself into an imaginary future. Your last question should allow the interviewee a chance to provide any other information that he or she would like to add, as well as provide his or her impressions of how the interview went. Ask your questions one at a time, and be sure they are clear and easily understood.

For example, avoid using company- or industry-specific terms or acronyms.

For best results, make your questions open-ended. A person should be able to answer them in his or her own, unique way, rather than giving simple yes or no responses. Also, be sure your questions are neutral, so that they avoid expressing an opinion that might sway a person's answers. For example, asking "You wouldn't want to work in a loud, crowded office, would you?" assumes you'll be seeking a negative response.

Finally, avoid asking, "Why?" Questions that ask why something happened or why something was done imply a cause-and-effect relationship that may be more complex than a single answer can explain. Why questions also put interviewees on the defensive, as they feel they have to justify their responses.

Conducting the Interview

No one can remember everything that is covered during an interview, so you either need to take notes or use a recording device. Make sure you discuss the use of a recorder with the interviewee ahead of time and explain its purpose. Check the status of the recorder from time to time to make sure it is still functioning.

As you move through the interview, focusing on one question at a time, don't show strong emotional reactions to the person's responses. Act as if you've heard these same answers before. Be matter-of-fact.

Provide encouragement by nodding your head and providing "uhhuhs." If you are taking notes, be careful when you break away from the person to write something down. This breakway signals that you were surprised or pleased with an answer, which may influence the answers for future questions.

When you move from one topic to another, provide transitions. For example, say something like “We’ve been talking about your past work history. Now let’s talk about where you want to go in your career.”

Keep control of the interview. If the interviewee strays over into another topic and takes a long time to answer a question, the time may run out before you’ve completed everything on your list. Refocus the person on the topic with additional targeted questions.

After the Interview

When the interview is completed, thank the person for attending the interview and say your good-byes. Then, check the recorder and turn it off. If it is a digital recorder, transfer the file to your computer.

If you’ve written notes during the interview, check the notes and make sure they make sense to you. If you need to clarify something or rewrite anything that may be difficult to read later, do it now. Write down any observations you made during the interview, as well. How did the person come across? Was the person confident or nervous? Were there any surprises?

In many cases, a job candidate will interview with different people in a business or department before being hired. The interview you conduct may be only one of many. Be prepared to share your observations in the form of a report or as part of a future meeting with other members of the hiring team.

Further Reading:

- ✓ Benjamin, Susan F. *Perfect Phrases for Dealing with Difficult Situations at Work*. McGraw-Hill, 2008.
- ✓ Blanchard, Ken, and Sheldon Bowles. *High Five! The Magic of Working Together*. William Morrow, 2000.
- ✓ 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).