



Unit 14

Communication Skills

Learning Outcomes

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

- ✓ Discuss how to deal with situations assertively

Unit 14

Communication Skills

Types of Thinking

Divergent Thinking and Convergent Thinking

In brief, problem solving means coming up with a number of ideas for solving a problem or coming to resolution, and then selecting one of them and moving forward. While problem solving looks pretty simple on paper, in practice we know that it isn't.

In theory, we see a problem, generate a wide range of brilliant solutions, and then select the best possible one for the circumstances. Often, though, we are considering complex problems and circumstances. A facilitator can help the group to get beyond their normal experience with problem solving and to get more creative.

It can be hard for problem solvers to move from thinking about their own needs and desires to understanding other people's perspectives. Many challenging behaviors can surface in a problem solving session. Members may get frustrated, uncomfortable, or feel threatened. If the session is not well designed, people will be territorial, defensive, or push for closure before all issues have been discussed. People who are comfortable working in a group may try to influence the outcome by out-talking quieter members of the group.

At times, individual members of the group need to express their own points of view. At other times, they may want to narrow their differences and work toward closure. These two sets of processes are referred to as **divergent** thinking and **convergent** thinking.

Divergent Thinking

- Ñ Generating alternatives
- Ñ Open discussion
- Ñ Gathering diverse points of view
- Ñ Exploring the logic of a problem

Convergent Thinking

- Ñ Evaluating alternatives
- Ñ Summarizing key points
- Ñ Organizing ideas into categories
- Ñ Arriving at a general conclusion

Divergent Thinking

Working beyond the limitations of conventional wisdom has become absolutely essential today as we tackle diverse problems in economically and technologically driven environments. Questions like how these are not easy to answer:

- Ñ How do public schools protect themselves against violence?
- Ñ What does an organization need to do to support the needs of an increasingly diverse workforce?
- Ñ How can companies be more environmentally friendly?

Even smaller issues, like reconsidering a dress code, can lead to plenty of heated debate.

If we have to find new ways to think about problems, we also need to reward creativity. Very often we don't appreciate creativity for what it can bring us. Let's explore an opportunity for this group to exercise their creativity.

Convergent Thinking

Here is where you consider an entire list of ideas and put your convergent thinking skills into action. You evaluate alternatives, summarize key points, sort ideas into categories, and arrive at a general conclusion.

Grey Matters

We just get frustrated and impatient when people put forward ideas that, from our point of view, don't seem rooted in practicality. Or we want to treat complex issues like simple ones and come to a quick conclusion, without a whole lot of discussion. Sometimes, the leader of the team (not the facilitator) has made a decision ahead of time and wants to steer the group to it, instead of considering all the available options.

This middle period of confusion, frustration, debate, and exploration is what Sam Kaner and his colleagues refer to as the Groan Zone. This is that grey, frustrating, agonizing area between using our divergent skills (generating) and our convergent skills (refining).



Struggling to understand a wide range of foreign or opposing ideas isn't a pleasant experience. Group members get short-tempered, repetitious, insensitive, and defensive, and then they think there is something wrong with their group instead of acknowledging the reality of the grey area. As a facilitator, you can offer a lot of support by preparing a group for the grey area. Describe it as a time when they will perhaps experience some discomfort, but it is part of the process and an aspect of group dynamics.

Group dynamics can make or break the efforts of a group. It's important that the facilitator understand how misunderstanding, miscommunication, going off on tangents, and missing the points are all normal, expectable aspects of problem solving and decision making. The Grey Center is a direct consequence of the dynamics that exist within any group, and it needs to be encouraged in the sense that you want problems to be fully vetted so that they get understood. Working through the awkwardness is part of what leads to a collaborative decision and a sustainable agreement.

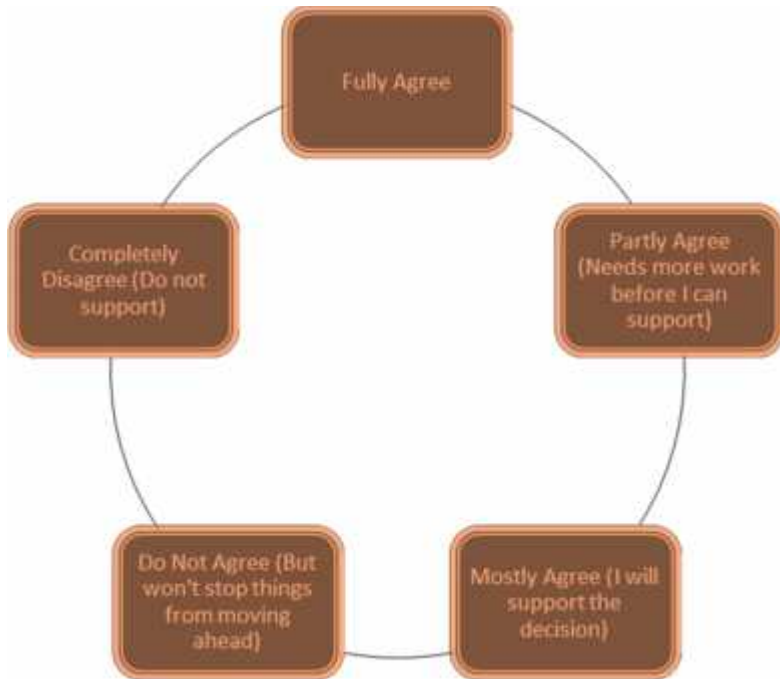
Handling Controversial Issues

Sometimes when we think about controversial subjects, our first response is to try to get away, or to make the time you are involved as short as possible. We have another way to look at agreements and disagreement, and that is to look at how strongly you feel about something instead of having to choose a firm position on one side or the other.

No Need for Black and White Thinking

The Degrees of Support can help a facilitator explain that consensus does not mean that everyone agrees to the same degree. The circular nature of the diagram (which reflects the symbol for degree, or °) demonstrates how we may increase or decrease the strength of our commitment to a decision in response to getting more information, considering a different perspective, and moving through the Grey Center (discussed earlier today).

Degrees of Support



Little in life is really that clear that it needs to be discussed in terms of an absolute yes or no. Like the diagram, we really consider things in terms of degrees. Making agreements or clearing out conflict allows us to do the same thing.

Communication Skills

My Shopping List

The two most basic elements of good communication are listening to others and asking questions. The physical process of **hearing**, where sound enters your eardrum and is registered in your brain, is not the same as listening. **Listening** is more of an attitude, a desire to understand what is being communicated, and it is an essential communication skill. Many of us don't listen very well, and we fake it a lot of the time. We pretend we are listening when we really aren't and that can create a whole lot of trouble with other people.

Once Partner A finishes describing their shopping description, summarize the three or four main criteria.

Then, make a recommendation for a suitable destination.

Can you recommend a few shopping items that reflect their discussion?

Active Listening

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.

- Ñ What are the speaker’s facial expressions, hand gestures, and posture telling us?
- Ñ Is their voice loud or shaky?

- Ñ Are they stressing certain points?
- Ñ 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:

- Ñ “Do you mean they were charging \$4.00 for just a cup of coffee?”
- Ñ “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

- Ñ **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.
- Ñ **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.
- Ñ 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.
- Ñ 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.
- Ñ 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.
- Ñ 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.

Asking Questions

We spend a lot of our lives asking and answering questions, but we aren't always aware of how we ask questions. 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.

Closed questions can be answered with a single word or two or 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 gathering more information. Where most people need more practice is asking the open question, those where the listener is given a chance to explain, to tell how they feel about an issue, or offer suggestions.

Open questions give us more information because:

- Ñ They encourage other people to talk
- Ñ We get opinions and ideas from others
- Ñ They can help us determine if people have interpreted what we said correctly
- Ñ They can help us arrive at consensus much more readily

Note: Be very careful about "why" questions. All too often these questions sound like accusations, and the listener immediately becomes defensive.

Relationship building is easier to build if 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. These are key skills for a facilitator.

Good questions can include:

- Ñ What is your opinion?
- Ñ How do you think we should solve the problem?
- Ñ What would you do in my shoes?
- Ñ Tell me more about...
- Ñ What do you think we can do about this?
- Ñ What would you like me to stop doing?
- Ñ Would it be helpful if I...?
- Ñ Supposing we were to...?
- Ñ Help me understand where you're coming from.
- Ñ Let's set a time when we can talk about the changes we're both prepared to make.
- Ñ I'm prepared to... Would that ease the situation?

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

Probing

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

- Ñ “Can you describe that more clearly?”
- Ñ “Would you give me a specific example of what you mean?”
- Ñ “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.

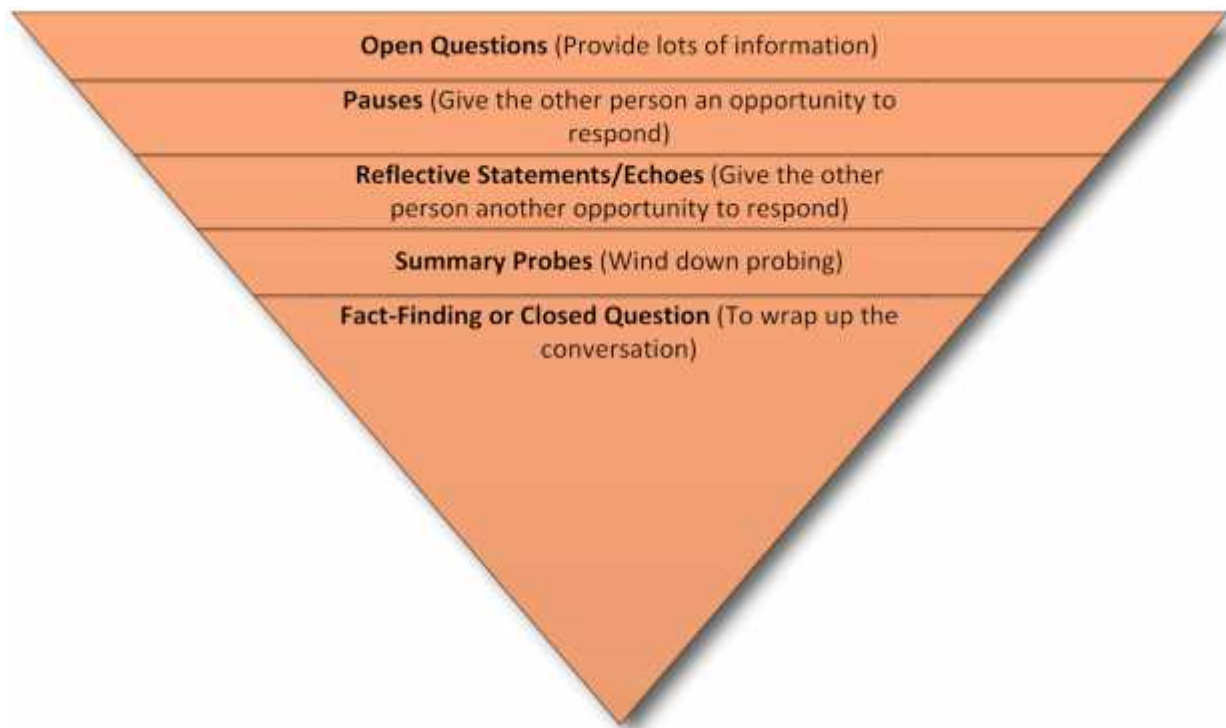
Reflective questions or statements focus on clarifying and summarizing without interrupting the flow of the conversation. They indicate your intent to understand the sender’s thoughts and feelings.

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 tried ignoring the scent of your colleague’s cologne, you have talked with him about how it affects your allergies, and you have tried shutting your door to keep the scent from your workspace. None of these has worked and now you are asking me to intervene. Have I got it right?”

These five probes can be arranged like a **funnel**:



Non-Verbal Messages

Remember that when we are delivering any message, our words are supplemented by our tone of voice and non-verbal body language. When our tone and body language are congruent with our message, we deliver powerful messages. When we are not congruent, people start to wonder what else is going on and what the hidden message is behind our words. We can easily lose track of the conversation.

Here are some things to keep in mind about body language:

- Ñ Your **eyes, eyebrows, and mouth** send out the signals that can make a world of difference.
- Ñ People who smile are happier than those who don't. **Smiling** releases a chemical in your brain that makes you feel good. It's a great way to establish a rapport with listeners.
- Ñ **Eye contact** helps you carry your message to each person in the audience. It builds trust.
- Ñ Learn to speak with your **hands**. Draw lines in the air, make a point, count on your fingers, and emphasize length and width.
- Ñ Work on appearing **sincere and comfortable**.
- Ñ Let your **hands** do what they want to do, as long as they don't get in your pockets, fiddle with an object, or make obscene gestures to your audience.
- Ñ Your **body posture** affects your emotions and how you feel determines your posture. If you are confident, happy and ready, your body will show it.

One of the most important things you can do with body language is learn to pick up cues from people that you are making them uncomfortable. Ask yourself if you are doing what you can to make the other person comfortable. Do you fidget, chew gum, click a pen, or check your watch frequently? Are there other things that you do? If so, what message do you think you are sending?

If your conversation partner is doing any of these things while you talk, what could be going on?

- Ñ Rocking
- Ñ Leg swinging
- Ñ Tapping

These are the first signals of tension and indicate that the person feels intruded upon or nervous. If it escalates, these signals are often followed by:

- Ñ Intermittent closing of the eyes
- Ñ Slight tucking of the chin into the chest
- Ñ Shoulder hunching

If you sensitize yourself to these simple cues, over time, people will have the experience of feeling more relaxed, at ease, and open with you (and to you).

Basically, learn to watch for signals, and then adjust your approach. Sometimes just taking one step back, or ceasing talking and getting the other person to talk to you instead, will be all it takes to ease the tension.

Listening For Common Ground

There are a number of practices we can learn and use as facilitators that can help us and the groups we are facilitating work more productively together. For example, when you were doing the exercise at the beginning of the morning you were finding ways that you and others in the room were similar. As human beings, we are often searching for some affinity with others. This seems to be instinctive for most people. We call this **listening for common ground**.

What are some ways we have tried to find some common ground today?

What are some ways you might try to find common ground with anyone you meet for the first time?

Items in Common with My Partner

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.