



Elements of Communication

Learning Outcomes

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

- ✓ Be genuine in your communications
- ✓ Understand the communication process
- ✓ Ask questions, probe for information, and use paraphrasing techniques
- ✓ Build relationships to create an authentic communication experience
- ✓ Identify common listening problems and solutions

The Communication Process

Often, what the listener is saying isn't what we hear. Messages go through a complicated system of filters and outside influences.



As active listeners, we need to understand these possible influences, and to account for them.

The Ladder of Inference

One common and dangerous trap is what Chris Argyris calls a **ladder of inference**: a common mental pathway of increasing abstraction that often leads to assumptions and misguided beliefs.

For example, let's say that you are giving a presentation to your company's senior management. One manager (we'll call him Stephen) is checking his BlackBerry, answering messages, and clearly disengaged from your work. At the end of your comprehensive presentation, his only comment is to ask you for more detailed information, in a report sent via e-mail.

You know that if you do prepare that information, it's unlikely that Stephen will read it. Plus, all the details are in your presentation. As you start brooding over this, you remind yourself that Stephen has never shown any respect for you and that he did not want to hire you for this team. Clearly, Stephen doesn't know what he is doing, and by the time you take your seat at the table, you are thinking about Stephen as a big jerk. You've also decided you are not going to create a special report for him; you'll just send him a summary of your presentation, because he won't read it anyways.

In those few seconds before you take your seat, you have climbed all the way up the ladder! You did start out with observable data (Stephen is at the presentation), and then added his behavior (distracted by his BlackBerry and answering messages). But then you added some meaning of your own: that Stephen doesn't respect you and didn't want to hire you. Finally, you label Stephen as a jerk.

This process tends to take place very quickly, and most people aren't even aware that they climb the rungs of this ladder in their head. The only visible parts for anyone else are the observable events at the bottom of the ladder and anything that you demonstrate at the top, where you've made your decision about what to do. The discussion going on inside your mind (which you probably can't or won't verbalize) and your journey up the rungs of the ladder are not visible to anyone else.

We can climb these ladders of inference very easily. The more I believe that Stephen does not support me, the more likely it is that I am going to notice his unsupportive behavior in the future. This becomes a reflexive loop, where my beliefs will influence the data I am going to select the next time I see Stephen.

There is naturally also a reflexive loop here for Stephen, where he will react to my antagonism. He is quite likely working on some rungs on his own ladder, and before long, we could find it impossible to work together.

So how do we try to step off of the ladder? To start, consider that what you witnessed in the meeting was Stephen dealing with something else. Perhaps he was bored or distracted, or perhaps he was checking his BlackBerry because of an emergency he had to deal with. Maybe he was interested in your presentation, but the fact that you didn't print a copy off for everyone led to his request for something that he could look back on and refer to.

As a professional, it might have been best for you to find out if there really is a problem that you and Stephen need to work out. What would happen if you asked him about the meeting? What if you asked him for some feedback on your work and the efforts that you are putting in to your projects? Would you hear his answer?

Reflection: Using Your Own Experiences as a Resource

You can learn a great deal by increasing your awareness and giving some thought to situations where you are on both ends of the communication spectrum (as a communicator and as a listener). Try writing out an exchange with a co-worker, a troubling event, or even the scenario with Stephen above. Then, set it aside for a week before you look at it. This will give you the time and distance needed to review it clearly.

Asking Questions

Active listening is a two-way communication process. Knowing what questions to ask, and how to ask them, is an essential skill for an active listener.

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**, where the listener is given a chance to explain, describe how they feel about an issue, or offer suggestions.

Open questions give us more information because:

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

Open questions typically begin with a variation of the five W's (who, what, when, where, why) or ask how. Good open questions include:

- "What is your opinion?"
- "How do you think we should solve the problem?"
- "What would you do in my shoes?"
- "Tell me more about..."

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

Some other good questions can include:

- What happened next?
- What do you think we can do about this?
- What would you like me to stop doing?
- What can I do to help you?
- Supposing we were to...?
- Can you help me understand where you're coming from?

Probing Techniques

Many people are better at presenting their own point of view than they are at drawing out information from others. **Probing techniques** can help you draw out information from the individual and help you understand their side of the conversation.

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, echoing, or mirroring question**. For example, let's say the person has just said, "What I really want is fairer vacation policies." You may respond by just reflecting back to them, "Fairer?" 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.

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. (We'll discuss paraphrasing more in the next session.)

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?"

Paraphrasing Techniques

What is Paraphrasing?

Paraphrasing techniques can help you ensure that you're getting the speaker's message accurately and completely. Paraphrasing can also help build the relationship, since it shows the sender that you are trying to understand what they are saying.

Paraphrasing is not:

- Repeating everything that the person says
- Acting like a parrot and repeating everything verbatim
- An opportunity to express judgment (by speaking in a sarcastic tone, for example)

To paraphrase well, you should:

- Paraphrase only when you need clarification or confirmation
- Put the statement in your own words, rather than using the speaker's words
- Use introductory statements like, "Do you mean..." or, "What I'm hearing is..."
- Refrain from making judgments, injecting your own thoughts, and offering your opinion

Echoing Techniques

Another excellent technique is echoing, also known as reflective or mirroring questions. (We discussed these types of questions briefly in the last session.) With this technique, you choose a word (or several words) from the person's statement and repeat it. You can also use stems like:

- Really?
- Is it/are they?
- About...?
- What did she do?

Building Relationships

Building Common Ground

Setting the Stage

It can be difficult to have a meaningful conversation without a sense of mutual trust, respect, and an understanding of the relationship between the speaker and the listener. Understanding what rapport is, and how to create it, is the first step to creating an authentic conversation.

About Rapport

Rapport has been defined as a sense of mutual understanding, respect, and friendliness. It is the presence of a co-operative relationship based on trust and honesty.

Rapport means showing someone that you understand and respect them as a human being and that you support them. This doesn't mean that you have to agree with everything that they say, but you can understand where they are coming from and why they believe in particular things.

It is important to understand when it is appropriate to create rapport and how deeply you want it to go. Let's say that you are a telephone customer service representative. You probably want to create a good rapport to help the customer solve their problem, but since your interaction will be short, you don't need to get to a deeply personal level. And, if you are negotiating, you might need to break rapport in order to make the best decision.

Finding Common Ground

Whether you are in a customer service role or a manager about to have a conversation with one of your staff, finding common ground helps to establish rapport. Some of us really struggle with small talk, but you will find that it is a helpful skill in finding common ground – something you share with the other person.

In the customer example, if they call to tell you that a product has broken and they are frustrated, simply saying, "I understand. I don't like it when things break either. It's really annoying. Let me see how I can help you," lets the person know that you get frustrated when things are broken. If you went to the same school, both love animals, or have the same favorite restaurant, these things help to establish common ground and provide a starting place for further conversations.

Using Humor

A funny anecdote or a joke can ease tensions, especially if the person is having difficulty expressing themselves. As well, shared laughter can go a long way towards building common ground. However, be sensitive when trying to lighten the mood. Never make fun of someone's problems or feelings. If you're second-guessing whether to tell a joke, you should probably keep it to yourself.

NLP Tips and Tricks

Neuro linguistic programming (NLP) concepts can help sensitize us to the speaker's state and build deeper relationships. NLP suggests that rather than simply making assumptions based on body language, we can use body language as cues to help us adjust our behavior to better connect with others and understand their thinking processes.

Let's look at some different states of mind and how we might recognize them.

Associated or Dissociated

Is the person you are communicating with involved in the conversation or somewhere else? Do they see themselves from an internal perspective or as if they were outside themselves?

People who are **associated** (tuned into things):

- Usually lean forward
- Are often animated, using gestures and imagery
- Might include more emotions in the conversation

People who are **dissociated** (tuned out of themselves or the conversation):

- Usually lean backwards
- Use fewer gestures and practical language
- Often have a more objective approach

Both of these states can be useful. If you are facilitating mediation between team staff members who are arguing, and where you must be neutral, a dissociated state might be useful. However, if you're actively listening to someone explain a problem, then an associated state will be more appropriate.

Towards or Away From

This state reflects whether we are looking towards what we want to achieve, or away from the goal and at a problem that we are facing. In the **Away From** state, we are often tense and negative, thinking of the challenges that we are facing. In a **Towards** state, people are typically more relaxed with positive body language.

Match/Mismatch

We all have a natural tendency towards antagonism or co-operation and friendliness. Those who naturally **match** the environment around them can also often easily create rapport. They might naturally fall into the same body language patterns as the person that they are communicating with. They almost always try to build up and support people.

People who try to find the differences in others usually fall into body language and speech patterns that are opposite of the person that they are communicating with. They might use expressions like:

- At odds with
- On the other hand
- Devil's advocate

This is referred to as a **mismatch** state.

Getting Over Listening Roadblocks

Problems and Solutions

On paper, active listening sounds quite simple. Give the speaker your undivided attention; use body language, cues, and questions to show that you are listening; and confirm understanding through additional questions, paraphrasing, echoing, and probing.

However, plenty of things can get in the way of active listening. Distractions, our mind wandering, the speaker getting off track, and our own judgments can interfere with the message that the speaker is sending and our active listening efforts.

Test your knowledge

For each problem, outline some solutions.

You get distracted during the conversation and start doing other things.

Your mind wanders and you realize you've missed everything that the other person has said.

You start judging the person and evaluating what they are saying.

You interrupt the speaker and offer your opinion or advice.

The speaker goes off on a tangent and you don't understand the point they are making.

Further Reading:

- ✓ *Nichols, Michael P. The Lost Art of Listening (2nd Edition). The Guilford Press, 2009.*
- ✓ *Petersen, James C. Why Don't We Listen Better? Communicating and Connecting Relationships. Petersen Publications, 2008.*
- ✓ *Stone, Douglas, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen. Difficult Conversations (10th Anniversary Edition). Penguin Books, 2010.*