



Communication skills

Effective communication is simple, isn't it? You speak and I listen; when you have finished speaking I take a moment or two to consider my reply and then I speak and you listen...and so on. Except I've thought of something to say *before* you've finished, so I'm either going to interrupt you or hold my thought and ignore the rest of your message. As soon as I get the chance I'm going to say my piece – but wait a minute – what was *that* you just said? How about *this* for an idea then? Hey – look at so and so over there – look at how he's standing – arms folded, shoulders hunched – who's he talking to? She doesn't look very happy either! I wonder what *their* problem is?

...I'm sorry, what was that you said?

Getting a fair hearing and putting over what we want to say accurately and concisely isn't as easy as perhaps we'd like it to be. And we need to be able to communicate effectively using different channels: face to face, over the phone, in writing, with managers, colleagues, staff, customers, suppliers, and the rest.

Two-way communication

Two-way communication works much better than one-way communication. In general, two-way communication takes twice as long, makes people more confident that they have understood and is more accurate than one-way communication. Two-way communication works best when you:

- ask questions;
- listen actively;
- watch for signals; and,
- talk the same language.

Asking questions

If you want to know what someone thinks or feels, then the best way to find out is to ask them. You can influence the tone of a discussion by asking well thought out and effective questions.

- Open questions: fact-finders beginning who? what? where? when? how? why? And encouraging people to talk, inviting information and opening up discussion.
- Probing questions: encouraging people to give more detail.
- Hypothetical questions: useful in establishing how someone else might approach a problem or situation.
- Closed questions: direct and are used to establish specific pieces of information; generally produce yes/no answers, or times, dates and so on.
- Multiple questions: demand several pieces of information in one breath. These confuse and should be avoided.
- Leading questions: impose your opinion on others, in an attempt to influence their response. These should be avoided.
- Loaded questions: not really questions, but expressions of disapproval. Should be avoided.
- Undermining questions: generally chip away at the person's credibility and confidence. Unless you are intentionally seeking to embarrass or deflate someone, do not use these.

- Tolerating silences: not a question, but a handy technique to employ after asking one, particularly if the question you've posed is a bit tricky. It gives people thinking time and pressurises for an answer – people generally don't like silence.
- Statement-question technique: make a statement and then follow it up with a question, which helps you to control the conversation.

Listening actively

Listening is a complex process with three main phases:

- receive – gather all the signals being sent to you, both verbal and non-verbal;
- comprehend – try to understand what you've sensed and consider what it means; and,
- respond – ask questions and reflect back your understanding.

Many people consider themselves to be good listeners, but even if you pay close attention, research shows that only some 15-30 per cent of what is said is actually absorbed.

Consequently we need a way of ensuring that what we have heard is what has been said to us. Active listening consists of two separate activities:

- encouraging the other person to talk; and,
- rephrasing what the other person has said.

These activities are achieved by using a number of techniques, each designed to either stimulate conversation or confirm understanding:

- Encouraging the speaker – by nodding and looking interested or by the use of listening noises, such as "I see", "yes" etc.
- Reflection of feeling: especially useful if you are speaking with someone who is in an emotional state.
- Restatement of meaning: this listening skill is key – it is the one which helps you to be sure you have heard and understood.
- Repeat back information: use when you have to get something right in order to be sure that the specific details you have taken down are correct.
- Summarising: provides an update and agreement for both parties on what has been discussed and, if necessary, change the direction of the conversation.

Taking notes at any point during a conversation (formal discussions, such as interviews or meetings) also indicates that you are listening, as long as the notes are brief and you don't look away from the speaker for too long.

Watch for signals

When we take in information via the five senses, we absorb 75 per cent via the sense of sight. It comes as no surprise to find, then, that extensive research has proven convincingly that 60 to 80 per cent of face to face communication is non-verbal, or body language.

Body language has been described as the language we all speak but which very few understand. It tells you more about what people really mean than words ever would and nobody can help speaking this non-verbal language.

With practice you can learn to interpret other people's body language. The advantages of knowing if someone is bored, lying, nervous or whatever is obvious – words may lie but the body seldom does. Watch for:

- Posture and, particularly, shoulders and head
- Eye contact and the eyes in general
- Smiling

- Shaking hands, or other touching greetings and farewells
- Territory
- Talk the same language: despite the low percentage of the message taken in by hearing, words are important: using language which the other person finds difficult to understand will stop them listening.
- Paint a picture: since sight is the most important sense, it helps to give a visual image in conversation - to talk in word pictures.

Considerations for the telephone

You can use voice tone to assist telephone communication in the following ways:

- smile – the act of smiling realigns the muscles in the face and affects tone; you can hear a smile;
- be enthusiastic – enthusiasm is catching and breeds enthusiasm in the listener;
- sit up straight in your chair – not uncomfortably so, but don't slouch – that affects your voice and you sound apathetic;
- take a breath before you speak – you'll be able to project your voice with confidence; and,
- believe what you are saying – and the listener will too.

Incidentally, if you want to sound more authoritative or to take control of a call, stand up – it works!

In conclusion

Remember that:

- people place greater reliance on what they see than on what they hear – painting word pictures can help;
- the tone of your voice conveys a strong message;
- complex words and jargon may be confusing and will make people suspicious of you;
- negative words and understatements make you sound less confident; and,
- positive, simple words come across more clearly and will make people more confident in what you say.

Writing right

Time is a valuable commodity and writing can be time consuming and difficult; it is not a skill which comes easily to everyone. However, there are times when it is the best method of communication.

Advantages of supplying written information include:

- there is time to prepare – complex subjects may be carefully considered;
- you can present your ideas in the most suitable format;
- your reader can absorb information at a time which suits him;
- a permanent record is provided;
- the reader gets a clear message; and,
- your comments may be used as a reference.

Disadvantages of writing include:

- it can be hard to get the right "tone";
- you can't observe the recipient's reactions;
- you can't guarantee that your document will get the appropriate amount of consideration; and,
- writing is one-way communication, and is slow.

The most common mistakes of writing include:

- failure to think of the reader;
- failure to plan the order of content;
- inclusion of too much information;
- inclusion of inaccurate or ambiguous statements;
- use of complex words, slang or jargon; and,
- bad presentation.

Rules of writing

No matter what type of document you are creating, there are a number of potential danger areas.

- Take care to ensure that spelling is correct, that the grammar is good and that the punctuation is accurate;
- Be consistent with your layout;
- Use language which the reader might reasonably be expected to understand;
- avoid inappropriate simile or mixed metaphor;
- avoid sarcasm;
- be succinct and concise: do not give more information than is required

Writing letters

When you write letters, you should keep it SNAPPY. Every letter should have:

- Signature: wherever possible sign it personally rather than having it “pp’d”;
- Neat appearance: typed if possible;
- Address: address your letters to a named person;
- Politeness: it goes without saying.
- Personal tone: if it sounds like a circular, it’ll soon hit the bin
- Your reference: so that you can quickly trace it if necessary. If you are replying to a letter which was referenced by the sender, be sure to quote that, too.

The general format of the content of a letter, like a story, is that it should have a beginning, a middle and an end. Use the ABC of letter writing:

- Attention: Start with a clear first sentence, introduce the subject and gain the reader’s attention.
- Body: where you present your information logically – it is essential that this part of the letter should flow.
- Conclusion: must be drawn, perhaps action to be taken, the refusal of a request, an apology ...whatever is appropriate.

Conclusion

Communication is a wide-ranging and fascinating subject. Pick one or two of the points mentioned in this brief introduction and observe for a while – perhaps how long eye contact is maintained during conversation or how a series of closed questions can seem like an interrogation – learn from that and move on.

People who communicate effectively are more successful in achieving their goals. They express themselves directly and without hostility, thus building good working relationships and creating goodwill and a feeling of well-being between themselves and others. With practice, we can all behave assertively and communicate effectively, but we have to want to learn and be prepared to change.