

Communicating in the Workplace

Administrative Accounting and Bookkeeping Program

Handout 1B: Overcoming Barriers to Effective Communications

Attitude

As we saw in the previous reading, communicating with another human is a complex, multistep process. Fortunately, there are practical steps you can take to become a better communicator. These begin with attitude:

- Recognize that communicating well is a skill: becoming conscious of how much effort and skill it takes to communicate effectively is the necessary first step toward putting in the effort to learn and develop true expertise. Very few of us are as good at communicating as we think.
- Be Audience Oriented: the next most important thing you can do is become more audience oriented. That is, when you're communicating with a person or group, put yourself in their shoes. What prior knowledge do they bring? What are their needs, and what are they looking to gain from the conversation? Are they receptive to your message, or smarting from a bad previous experience you need to address? Having the empathy to understand your audience's perspective makes a huge difference in your ability to craft a message they'll find meaningful and persuasive.

Physical Barriers


When you understand the complexity of the communication process, the importance of removing or, at least, minimizing physical barriers becomes obvious. When you have the right attitude (as above) that you take control of the things you can control. That begins with:

- Choose an appropriate channel: Different communication channels are better suited to different types of messages:
- Face-to-face is best for any sort of discussion that involves back and forth messages to work through a problem or reach a conclusion when a decision needs to be made;

- Email is best for relatively formal messages for which there needs to be a written record (unfortunately, its ease of use leads it to be over-used for routine messages; more on that later!);
- Telephone is best for brief messages such as to confirm or check details; and
- Text similarly is best for quick confirmation messages.
- Group presentation for messages to a part or all of your staff that need particular emphasis.
- Reducing physical barriers to communication: if something is getting in the way of your successfully getting your message across, don't just stand there—take action: move closer if the room is too noisy; speak slowly and use clear, simple language when speaking with a receiver from a different language, and so on.

Active Listening

After audience focus, the next most important thing you can do to strengthen your communications skills, ironically, is to listen. Remember that in the communication cycle diagrammed in Unit 1, even the original sender is listening to feedback from the receiver. And very few of us are as good at listening as we think.

 *An Anecdote: I consider myself an effective and articulate communicator but, when deep in a 'spirited' conversation with a good friend recently, I had a humbling experience. He suddenly stopped in mid-sentence and said: "You're not listening to me. You're just looking at me so you can see when my lips stop moving, and you can make your own point". It was true! (And, for someone who teaches communications, deeply embarrassing.) Be honest with yourself; how often, when the other person is speaking, are you really thinking about your next statement rather than listening to them?*

The opposite of this is "active listening". And the key word here is active. When the other person is speaking, you give them your full focus and attention. Rather than preparing your response, you are using any mental overhead to process and summarize what they are saying—essentially putting it into your words and context. Here are a few tips to be a more active listener:

- Stop talking!
- Be patient and let the speaker finish; don't interrupt.
- Resist distractions and control your surroundings if anything is interfering with your ability to hear and understand the other person.
- Establish a receptive mindset and keep an open mind.
- Capitalize on lag time to listen for main points and summarize them for yourself (only when you rephrase someone else's idea into your words do you truly understand it).
- Judge ideas, not appearances.
- Take selective notes if appropriate (only the important points).
- Provide feedback (ask questions and give opinions to prompt the next round of the feedback loop).
- Look for areas of interest with the speaker.
- Judge content, not delivery, and avoid premature judgments.
- Listen for ideas and identify the speaker's evidence.
- Be aware of emotions and notice body language as a clue to emotions.
- Keep your mind open; try to access the speaker's world, not your own.

Active listening takes work. There are three Myths about listening:

- That listening is a natural activity.
- That hearing and listening are the same thing.
- That you are speaking to a mass audience.

These are not true. The three truths of listening are:

- Listening is learned.
- Telling is not communicating.
- You speak to one individual at a time, even in large audiences.

Nonverbal Cues

Your eyes, face, and body send silent messages while you're talking. To really be effective, you need to pay attention to these nonverbal cues. They can be as important as your words.

- Eye contact: western cultures tend to value eye contact, but too much of it can appear aggressive.

- Facial expression: do you look attentive or bored?
- Posture and gestures: do you look alert and active, as though this conversation is important to you, or sleepy and disinterested? It's astonishing how many leaders think it's okay to slouch back in their chair when talking to their reports.
- Time: as a leader, one of the most significant things you can give your reports is time. If someone is struggling, and you allocate sufficient time with them to really deal with it, that sends a powerful (nonverbal) message.
- Territory: their office or yours? Where you hold a conversation can have a profound effect on how it goes. As a leader, you can change the tone (and often communicate more effectively) by meeting your reports in their offices rather than yours. You can also make a conversation less formal (and more fluent) by meeting in neutral places, such as the cafeteria, for coffee or lunch.

Cultural Effects on Communication

Communicating with someone from a different culture can present challenges. Cultural values can be compared along five key dimensions:

- Low vs. high context (depends little on context of situation to convey meaning).
- Individualism vs. collectivism (Canada is more collectivist than the United States, less collective than South America or Southern Europe).
- Formality (less emphasis on tradition).
- Communication style (straightforward, polite).
- Time orientation (Time is Money – Time is to be Savoured).

Empathy

Empathy, is the ability to put yourselves in another person's shoes and see a situation from their standpoint. It's a powerful quality that can help you become a better active listener, interpret other people's nonverbal cues better, and even understand different cultural or personal attitudes.

The new medical television show, *The Pitt*, has a great example of empathy in Episode 7 of its first season. A troubled patient is brought into the emergency room and becomes completely disruptive and unresponsive when examined by a doctor. Despite being a more junior resident, and less experienced, Dr Mel (whose sister is autistic) realizes the patient is probably on the spectrum. She immediately closes the door, to reduce the noise from the bustle outside, and

dims the lights, calming the patient and enabling him to focus. He's then successfully communicates his symptoms to her.



Most examples in your day-to-day conversations won't be this dramatic, but empathy remains an incredibly powerful communication tool. How often do you deal with someone, for example, who'll go on and on about some trivial issue or unimportant detail? The natural thing to do is resent how much time they're wasting. However, if they are so focused on some, seemingly unimportant detail, it must be important to them. Instead of resenting the lost time, it might be more helpful to ask yourself instead why this is so important to them.

Mirroring

Finally, mirroring is a communication technique rooted in empathy. It consists of subtly reflecting aspects of the other person's behaviour, tone, or speech patterns back at them to build rapport and understanding. It shows that you're tuned in to their emotional and social cues.

To practice body language mirroring, gently match the other person's posture, gestures, or facial expressions. For example:

- If they lean forward slightly while speaking, do the same a moment later.
- If they use their hands while talking, you can mirror that energy (without copying exactly).

With vocal mirroring, you adjust your tone, pace, and volume to align with theirs:

- A calm, soft-spoken person might feel more at ease if you lower your voice and slow your speech.
- Someone who speaks more energetically might respond better to a livelier tone.

With verbal mirroring, you reflect key words or phrases back to show understanding. As with active listening, repeating someone's point back to them, *but in your words*, is a great way to show that you're paying attention in addition to demonstrating your understanding.

Finis: Key Takeaways

- Communication is a multistep process that takes effort and skill.
- Audience orientation and active listening are two of the most powerful attitudes that make for a better communicator.
- Use straightforward language.
- Speak slowly and enunciate clearly.
- Encourage feedback.
- Check frequently for comprehension by asking questions.
- Observe eye movements.
- Accept blame.
- Listen without interrupting.
- Remember to smile.
- Follow up in writing.
- Avoid ethnocentrism and stereotyping.
- Practice empathy by trying to understand where your counterpart is coming from, even when it doesn't seem logical.