

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Conveying Your Message

THE BIG PICTURE

What does the word “communication” bring to mind? Many people will think of the spoken word. People who are hearing impaired, however, might think of sign language. People with a visual impairment might think of how the words feel (Braille) as well as how they sound.

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“Wise men talk because they have something to say; fools, because they have to say something”

— PLATO

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WHAT IS COMMUNICATION?

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines communication as, “a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs and behavior.”



It is also defined in the plural form as, “a technique for expressing ideas effectively (as in speech); the technology of the transmission of information.”

Communication can have many meanings depending on how it is used and in what context. Understanding various methods of communication and how they influence you is important.

Consider the ways effective communication can influence your life, including:

- Your level of stress
- Your relationships with others
- The level of satisfaction with your life
- Your productivity
- Your ability to meet your goals and achieve your dreams
- Your ability to solve problems

How do we communicate?

We communicate in three major ways.

1. Spoken communication consists of two important components.

Verbal: What you say.

Paraverbal: How you say it – tone, speed, pitch, and volume.

2. **Nonverbal communication:** The gestures and body language that accompany your words.
3. **Written communication:** Communication via fax, email, or written word.

Other factors in communication

There are other things to consider when you communicate:

Method: The method in which the communicator shares his or her message is important because it can have an effect on the message itself. Communication methods include in-person, telephone, email, fax, radio, public presentation, television broadcast, and more.

Mass: The number of people receiving the message.

Audience: The person or people receiving the message affect the message, too. Their understanding of the topic and the way in which they receive the message can affect how it is interpreted and understood.

THE ART OF CONVEYING YOUR MESSAGE

Communication is something that we have been practicing since birth. We quickly learn that to get what we need or want, we must communicate. A cry might signal that a baby is wet, hungry, uncomfortable, frustrated or just wants to be held. As we age, we begin to incorporate other forms of communication to convey our message.

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“Be sincere; be brief; be seated.”

— FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT
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Spoken communication

We start to develop language skills at a very young age. When a baby first says “mama” or “dada” this usually elicits a favorable response. As more words are learned, each achievement is met with enthusiasm and positive reinforcement to learn more words. As we grow and develop we continue to increase our vocabulary.

Using the words that we know to convey a message is one major portion of communication.

PARAVERBAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Have you ever heard the saying, “It’s not what you say, it’s how you say it”? It’s true! Try saying these three sentences out loud, placing the emphasis on the underlined word.

“I didn’t say you were wrong.”
(Implying it wasn’t me)

“I didn’t say you were wrong.” (Implying I communicated it in another way)

“I didn’t say you were wrong.”
(Implying I said something else)



Consider the three parts of paraverbal communication; which is the message told through the pitch, tone, and speed of our words when we communicate.

THE POWER OF PITCH

Pitch can be most simply defined as the key of your voice. A high pitch is often interpreted as anxious or upset. A low pitch sounds more serious and authoritative. People will pick up on the pitch of your voice and react to it. As well, variation in the pitch of your voice is important to keep the other party interested.

If you naturally speak in a very high-pitched or low-pitched voice, work on varying your pitch to encompass all ranges of your vocal cords.

THE TRUTH ABOUT TONE

Did your mother ever say to you, “I don’t like that tone!” She was referring to the combination of various pitches to create a mood.

Here are some tips on creating a positive, authoritative tone:

- Try lowering the pitch of your voice a bit.
- Smile! This will warm up your voice.
- Sit up straight and listen.
- Monitor your inner monologue. Negative thinking will seep into the tone of your voice.

THE STRENGTH OF SPEED

The pace at which you speak also has a tremendous effect on your communication ability. From a practical perspective, someone who speaks quickly may be harder to understand than someone who speaks at a moderate pace. Conversely, someone who speaks very slowly will probably lose the audience’s interest before getting very far.

Speed also has an effect on the tone and emotional quality of your message. A hurried pace can make the listener feel anxious and rushed. A slow pace can make the listener

feel as though your message is not important. A moderate pace will seem natural, and will help the listener focus on your message.

One easy way to check your pitch, tone, and speed is to record yourself speaking. Think of how you would feel listening to your own voice. Work on speaking the way you would like to be spoken to.

Nonverbal communication

When you are communicating, your body is sending a message that is as powerful as your words.

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“The most important thing
in communication is to hear
what isn’t being said.”

— PETER DRUCKER

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**UNDERSTANDING
SILENT MESSAGES**

In 1971, psychologist Albert Mehrabian published a famous study called “Silent Messages.” In it, he made several conclusions about the way the spoken word is received. Although this study has been misquoted often throughout the years, its basic conclusion is that 7 percent of our message is verbal, 38 percent is paraverbal, and 55 percent is body language.

Now, we know this is not true in all situations. If someone is speaking to you in a foreign language, you will likely not understand a full 93 percent of what they are saying. Or, if you are reading a written letter, you are probably getting more than 7 percent of the sender’s message.

What this study does tell us is that body language is a vital part of our communication with others. With this in mind, let’s look at the messages that our body can send.

ALL ABOUT BODY LANGUAGE

Body language is a very broad term that simply means the way in which our body speaks to others. We have included an overview of three major categories below.

**THE WAY THAT WE ARE
STANDING OR SITTING**

Think for a moment about different types of posture and the messages that they relay.

- Sitting hunched over typically indicates stress or discomfort.
- Leaning back when standing or sitting indicates a casual and relaxed demeanor.
- Standing ramrod straight typically indicates stiffness and anxiety.

**THE POSITION OF OUR ARMS,
LEGS, FEET, AND HANDS**

- Crossed arms and legs often indicate a closed mind.
- Fidgeting is usually a sign of boredom or nervousness.

FACIAL EXPRESSIONS

- Smiles and frowns speak a million words.
- A raised eyebrow can mean inquisitiveness, curiosity, or disbelief.
- Chewing one’s lips can indicate thinking, or it can be a sign of boredom, anxiety, or nervousness.

Written communication

Written communication can occur in various forms and circumstances. Developing skills for writing letters, taking notes, and sending email or texts will be important to your future success. Keep your written communication clear and concise.

CONSTRUCTING MESSAGES LIKE A STAR

Now that we have explored all the quasiverbal elements of communication, let's look at the actual message you are sending. You can ensure any message is clear, complete, correct, and concise, with the STAR acronym.

When preparing any message, consider the following things:

S = SITUATION

First, state what the situation is. Try to make this no longer than one sentence. If you are having trouble, find the where, who, and when. This will provide a base for the message so it can be clear and concise.

Example: "On Tuesday, I attended the PTA meeting at my son's school."

T = TASK

Next, briefly state what your task was. Again, this should be no longer than one sentence. Use "what" to frame your sentence, and add the "why" if appropriate.

Example: "I was asked to present the profit figures from our latest fundraising effort."

A = ACTION

Now, state what you did to resolve the problem in one sentence. Use "how" to frame this part of the statement. The action in the answer will provide a solid description and state the precise actions that will resolve any issues.

Example: "I pulled out my laptop, fired up PowerPoint, and presented my slide show."

R = RESULT

Last, state what the result was. Again, a precise, short description of the results that come about from your previous steps will help you finish on a strong, definite note.

Example: "Everyone was impressed with our great results!"

This format can be compressed for quick conversations or expanded for lengthy presentations. Try framing statements with STAR, and see how much more confident you feel when communicating.



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“Many attempts to
communicate are nullified
by saying too much.”
— ROBERT GREENLEAF
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**BARRIERS TO SUCCESSFUL
COMMUNICATION**

On the surface, communication seems simple. I talk; you listen. You send me an email; I read it. A broadcast network makes a TV show; we watch it.

Like most things in life, however, communication is far more complicated than it seems. Let’s look at some of the most common barriers and how to reduce their impact on communication.

An overview of common barriers

Many things can impede communication. Common things that people list as barriers include:

- I can’t explain the message to the other person in words that they understand.
- I can’t show the other person what I mean.
- I don’t have enough time to communicate effectively.
- The person I am trying to communicate with doesn’t have the same background as me and is missing the bigger picture of my message.

These barriers typically break down into three categories: language, culture, and location.

Language

Of course, one of the biggest barriers to written and spoken communication is language. This can appear in three main forms:

1. The people communicating speak different languages.

2. The language being used is not the first language for one or more people involved in the communication.
3. The people communicating speak the same language, but are from different regions and therefore have different dialects and/or unique subtleties.

There are a few ways to reduce the impact of these barriers.

First, identify that the barrier exists. Work together to determine ways to minimize the barriers. Use pictures, which can communicate across languages. If you are going to be communicating with this person on a long-term basis, try to find a common language. You also might consider hiring a translator.

Culture

There also can be times when people speak the same language, but are from different cultures, where different words or gestures can mean different things. If you have the opportunity to prepare, find out as much as you can about the other person’s culture and background, and how it differs from yours. Try to identify possible areas of misunderstanding and how to prevent or resolve those problems.

If you don’t have time to prepare and then find yourself in an awkward situation, use the cultural differences to your advantage. Ask about the differences that you notice, and encourage questions about your culture. Ensure that your questions are curious, not judgmental, resentful, or otherwise negative.

Location

The last barrier is location, definable by time and by place. These barriers often occur when people are in different time zones, or different places.

How can you get over the challenges of time and place? First, identify that there is a difference, then try these tips to reduce its impact.



- Make small talk about the weather in your respective regions. This will help you get a picture of the person's physical environment.
- Try to set up phone calls and meetings at a time that is convenient for you both.
- If appropriate, email can be an “anytime, anywhere” bridge. Using email allows for flexibility in sending and receiving the message and allows each party to act according to their own schedule. Clearly, this is not always practical (for example, if the problem is urgent, or if it is a complicated issue that requires extensive explanation), but this option should be considered.

Hasty communication also can create uncomfortable situations. The pressure of time can cause either party to make assumptions and leaps of faith. Always make sure you communicate as clearly as possible, and ask for a recap if you are not certain that your message was received as intended.

Summary

Using communication effectively will help you in many situations. Always consider the elements of spoken communication and body language as you prepare your message. And if you believe that what you were saying was misinterpreted, reevaluate the paraverbal and nonverbal components of your message and try again. While we are all born with some communication skills, communicating effectively is a skill set that you must develop to enhance all of your relationships.

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