

How to Communicate Effectively

Effective communication skills are essential in determining our ability to have rewarding relations with others and to achieve satisfaction in life. The quality of our relationships with friends, spouses, children, and colleagues are all dependent upon sound communication skills. In fact, it is often our failure to communicate effectively that leads to personal disappointment and the breakdown of important relationships. Unfortunately, we often leave the success of important relationships to chance – until communication fails and the relationships begin to deteriorate. By then, however, it may already be too late. This brief guide outlines important characteristics of effective communication and offers practical suggestions for improving these skills. It will not solve all of your communication problems and it is certainly no substitute for professional help. However, it will give you some important basic ideas and suggestions.

Listen Effectively

The first step in developing skilled communication is effective listening. Relating to others is impossible unless you can “fully hear” what they are saying. To begin, try squarely facing and making eye contact with the person with whom you want to communicate. Next, let him or her talk freely while you simply try to comprehend what is being said. Listen for both the feelings and the content of what the person is saying. If you are not sure you have heard everything or understand what is meant, it is often helpful to paraphrase what has been said and then allow the other person to clarify any misunderstanding of the message. Try not to let your own feelings interfere at this point or you might miss something important.

Respond Descriptively

Be careful not to respond to an important message with an **evaluative** statement. Our culture has programmed us to think largely in evaluative terms – we like something or we don’t; we feel things are either “right or wrong.” Effective communication is not designed to determine winners or losers. In communicating, the goal is to learn all we can about someone else’s thoughts and feelings and let that person better know the same things about us. This process is quite different from that of negotiation in which individuals may view each other as adversaries. Hence, **descriptive** statements about the other person’s communication and your reaction to what is said will be most helpful. **Evaluative** statements are not helpful and tend to elicit defensiveness.

Use Your Feelings

Feelings are important in communicating. Often it takes practice to be able to identify them (and use them constructively), but there is hardly any interpersonal issue about which we do not have some feelings. When you communicate your feelings it is important to be specific and to take responsibility for them. Sometimes this is referred to as an “I” message. For example, “I feel angry because you just left without me, and I really wanted to go along.” Note that the statement is descriptive and includes a statement of feelings. It allows the receiver of the communication to respond without feeling accused or threatened. Contrast that with possible reactions to a statement such as, “How could you leave me there like that!” or, “You are selfish and inconsiderate,” or, “Everyone says you don’t care about me.” In short, express your feelings, negative or positive, as clearly as possible and be responsible for what you say.

Assess Needs

Effective communication considers the needs of all involved. If you are giving someone feedback about your reactions to an event, be sure that you are addressing something over which he or she has control. If you do not consider the other person’s needs and ability to deal with your communication, your efforts could be destructive.

Make Timely Responses

Effective communications are delivered at a time when the issue to be discussed is most important, usually as soon as possible after the behavior which requires discussion has occurred. It can be destructive to save old or unresolved concerns for discussion at a later time or to use them as a weapon (“remember when you...”). On the other hand, it is important to decide if the other

person is ready to handle your communication immediately. Sometimes, it is best to delay sensitive communications until an appropriate setting can be found for the discussion. Avoid discussing emotional issues until you are in a place where there is privacy and you can talk freely.

Communication Basics Checklist

Effective communication skills are not easily obtained. They require practice and feedback from another person to be sure that communication is occurring. However, as you develop better skills in communicating, they can help you learn more about yourself from others and can greatly enrich the quality of your relationships. The short checklist that follows may be useful in assessing your need for help in developing better skills and your progress in enhancing your ability to communicate.

I physically attend to others.

I listen carefully before talking.

I speak in descriptive terms.

I discuss positive feelings.

I discuss negative feelings.

I own my feelings (“I” messages).

I speak clearly and specifically.

I use good timing.

I consider other’s needs.

I encourage others to communicate with me.

Using Words to Communicate Effectively

by Manfred Davidmann

SUMMARY

Shows how to communicate more effectively, covering aspects of thinking, writing, speaking and listening as well as formal and informal communications.

Consists of guidelines found useful by university students and practising middle and senior managers.

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COMMUNICATING WITH WORDS

Communication is the transmission of meaning to others.

Important is that 'meaning' is transferred. In other words, it is important the other persons understand what we want them to understand, that they understand the intended meaning.

More precisely, purposeful communication is the transmission of intended meaning to others.

Implied is

1. that the sender of the communication has clear knowledge and understanding of the meaning he wishes to convey, and
2. that the receiver interprets the message in such a manner that he receives the intended meaning.

Hence for effective communication the sender must determine the purpose of the communication and use words which have the same meaning for sender and receiver.

MEANING OF WORDS

The scientific study of meaning is called Semantics.

WORDS AND LABELS

Words are labels. Labels are arbitrary.

Most common cause of misunderstanding arises from assuming that the word (a label) is the object. Two people can then be arguing about a concept, referring to it by using the same word, arguing because this word means something different to each of them.

So to be meaningful, words must establish the same thought (reference) in both the sender and receiver of a communication.

Words vary considerably as regards their value for communication. They differ in their level of abstraction. The greater the level of abstraction, the less meaning do they have.

LEVELS OF ABSTRACTION

1. Objects

Objects represent a relatively low level of abstraction as they can be seen and touched and their characteristics detailed accurately.

Here words are labels for objects such as table or chair.

2. **Events**

In addition to objects, both action and time are implied, and so these are more complex.

Examples are: Accident, sale, party.

3. **Generalisations**

Words are also used as labels for groups and collections of objects or events. These generalisations are more abstract and less precise.

Examples of such labels are: Furniture, machine tools, employees, parents.

Employees, for example, can be full-time, part-time, shift working, office working, home working, male, female, young, old, single, married, unskilled, skilled, professional, and more.

4. **Value Judgements or Ideology**

Value judgements and ideology are at the highest level of abstraction and words used as labels for them are quite useless for effective communication until the meaning of the word used is clearly defined in detail.

Examples of such labels are: Beautiful, valuable, necessary, luxury, lazy, free enterprise, truth.

Such words can be strung together and mixed with generalisations to provide good-sounding speeches and statements of the kind politicians like to use, to provide speeches and statements with no real meaning attached to the words used. Listeners or readers use their own idea of what the words mean and so their understanding of what is being said differs widely from person to person.

I listed the word 'truth' as an example of a label for a meaningless abstraction. Surely 'truth' ought to be more than a meaningless value judgement, so let us look at this in more detail.

Consider two media reports of a current event. Each reports the same event, each apparently telling the truth, each report giving its viewers different impressions of what actually happened.

How come? Can there be more than one truth?

Such reports may tell only part of what happened, may report only what seems relevant to the reporter, may then be selecting what seems to support the particular viewpoint of those who prepared the report.

Compare these 'truths' with that demanded from a witness in a court of law: 'The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.'

Which means that what is required in a court of law is the truth with nothing taken away and nothing added.

If we agree on this as a definition, then the word 'truth' has become more meaningful.

FORMAL AND INFORMAL COMMUNICATIONS

A distinction needs to be made between formal and informal communications. Formal communication implies that a record is kept, that what has been said or written can be attributed to its originator.

On the whole, written communications are formal. But statements may be qualified by phrases such as 'preliminary thoughts are ...'.

Oral (spoken) communication consists of direct or transmitted speech between two or more people. Oral communications are more likely to be misinterpreted than written ones, were regarded as informal but are now often recorded and treated as formal. Missing from such recordings is the body language consisting of facial expressions and gestures.

Consider an informal chat by telephone getting comments on matters of joint concern before producing a final report. Important is the possibility of a two-way flow of information, of immediate feedback, of a frank unreserved exchange of information, opinions and ideas.

The informal nature of such exploratory conversations is often ignored. People's preliminary thoughts can then be quoted against them as if they had been fully considered.

Although an answering (recording) machine ought to bleep at regular intervals while recording, conversations can be recorded in different ways by one person without the other being aware of this.

Hence one needs to make sure the other person is aware of the informal nature of the conversation. In other words, that the other person knows the conversation is not to be recorded and that the information is to be regarded as confidential until the matter has been fully considered.

There are, however, many formal oral communications, such as selection, grievance or appraisal interviews, or when negotiating. Characteristic is that a record is kept by those participating.

Rumours are hearsay. One person tells the next who tells another, and so on. But there are personal barriers as people tend to keep back, elaborate or enhance information in accordance with their likes and dislikes. Hence information tends to change in emphasis and content as it is passed from person to person. This makes rumours so unreliable a source of information.

IMPROVING COMMUNICATION

1. Clarify your own ideas before attempting to communicate them.
2. Be clear about the purpose of the communication. For example, its purpose could be to inform others, to obtain information or to initiate action.
3. See if the other person can repeat what you have said, in his or her own words.

Effective communication, however, depends also on attentive listening.

EFFECTIVE LISTENING

Do not jump to conclusions before hearing what the other person has to say, and do not interrupt.

Interrupting prevents effective and meaningful communication, can prevent the speaker from making a valid point. Think how you would feel if you were interrupted just before making your key point.

It is up to the sender (originator) of the communication to use words which have the same meaning also for the receiver, for the listener. To ensure that you have understood the communication (message) correctly, you can repeat it in your own words to the other person.

For example, after being told how to get to a particular street one can ask "You mean, take the second street on the left?". Answers like "Yes, it is" or "Take the third on the left" confirm or improve our understanding of what we had been told.

And so, for effective listening:

1. Avoid jumping to conclusions, avoid making value judgements such as good or bad, desirable or undesirable, true or false, while the speaker is talking.
2. Listen to the full story.
3. Restate the other person's position in your own words.

LETTERS AND REPORTS

1. Avoid slogans, catchwords (buzz-words), jargon.

Use words or phrases which you could use naturally in conversation. Exception are technical terms and abbreviations which your reader will understand.

2. Use simple words and few of them.
3. Keep paragraphs and sentences short.
4. In-house e-mail is fast. Copies are readily distributed to all those interested and reach their destination almost immediately.

Fast method for causing chaos as mistakes spread rapidly. Effects snowball as others act quickly using the mistaken information.

Better to prepare draft replies but only post the replies after some hours, which allows considering, validating, completing and improving the draft.

TRAPS TO AVOID

1. Avoid being blinded by words or phrases which sound good, expert, impressive, plausible or likely. Ask for a definition or explanation to be given in clear, simple, meaningful language.

2. Avoid being misled by illogical arguments, misleading publicity or propaganda.

When propaganda is logical, and seen to be logical, it is difficult to argue against, to counter. Such propaganda is usually misleading because it is the premise, the first argument or underlying assumption, which misleads.

In other words, a logical argument can be based on false assumptions or misleading information.