

Communication

Communication occurs when a sender expresses an emotion or a feeling, creates an idea, or senses the need to communicate. The communication process is triggered when the sender makes a conscious or an unconscious decision to share the message with another person—the receiver.

Every communicative act is based on something that conveys meaning, and that conveyance is the message. The message may be either verbal (spoken or written) or nonverbal (body language, physical appearance, or vocal tone). Messages may also come from the context—or place and time—of the communication. For instance, if you choose to make a critical comment to someone, the place and the time you choose to make that comment will make a big impact on how it will be received.

Every message is sent and received through one of our five senses—it is seen, heard, touched, tasted, or smelled. The sensory media through which messages are sent and received are communication channels. In a work setting, messages may be seen through body movement, letters, memos, newsletters, bulletin board notices, signs, emails, and so on. Messages that are heard come through conversations, interviews, presentations, telephones, radios, and other audio media. Sight and sound are the two most frequent communication channels used in our society.

When the receiver gets the message (through seeing, hearing, feeling, touching, or smelling), he or she will usually give feedback (return message) unconsciously or consciously. Thus, the communications process is on-going.

The worst assumption a sender of a message can make is that the message will be received as intended. So many things can go wrong during the communications process that we should always assume that something will go wrong and take steps to prevent that occurrence. Barriers to good communications are always present. For instance, the language itself can be a barrier—unclear wording, slang, jargon, the tone. Another barrier is the failure of the sender to realize that his or her body language might contradict the spoken message. The channel used to convey the message might be wrong. For instance, you would not use the telephone to relay a lot of statistical information; you would need to write that message on paper. Poor listening skills can constitute a barrier also.

Nonverbal Communications

People telegraph their intentions and feelings, whether they are aware of it or not. They become unintentional senders. In other words, whatever goes on inside shows outside. The messages we convey to others go far beyond the words we speak. Probably over half of the meaning that others attach to our spoken message come not from the words of the messages themselves but from the tone of voice and from our body language. This nonverbal impact comes

particularly from the face, eyes, body, clothing, gestures, and touch. We have to be careful not to assume that just because a person displays one nonverbal signal that we are interpreting that signal correctly. We must look at the whole cluster of signals to see if they support our reading of that person. For instance, a person who crosses his arms might be expressing defiance, but he might also just be feeling cold. We would need to check out his facial expressions and other nonverbal signs to determine the correct reading.

Most of us depend on our reading of others' facial expressions to judge how they feel about us or a particular situation. We depend on the face as the most trustworthy indicator of emotions such as happiness, surprise, fear, anger, joy, sadness, disgust, contempt, interest, concern, and embarrassment. We also look at the face for insight into a person's character (for example, an "open, honest face," a "strong chin," or "beady eyes"). A man who has a moustache, beard, or long hair might suggest conformity or nonconformity, depending on the time and the context. The grooming of hair says much about a person's meticulousness. Narrowed lips or juttied-out chin might mean a person is angry or defiant.

The eyes convey much meaning. Eye contact—or a lack of it—might tell us something about a person's confidence, friendliness, honesty, or desire to dominate. The pupils themselves can signify interest or disinterest, among other things. Pupils dilate when a person is interested or excited; they grow smaller when a person is bored or uninterested. The brow area and the narrowing of the eyes tell a receiver much also. Frowns, scowls, and raised eyebrows might indicate displeasure or intensity. Narrowed eyes can suggest anger, irritation, or doubt.

The body is another rich source of nonverbal confirmation or denial of our verbal message. We draw conclusions about people before we ever exchange words based on their sex, posture, height, weight, and skin color. For instance, people often stereotype others by thinking that tall people make good leaders, overweight people are jolly, and women are too emotional. We notice how the senders of messages hold their bodies. We consider crossed arms to be a sign of defensiveness, defiance, or withdrawal. Hands on hips say that a person is goal oriented or ready and able to take something on. Leaning back in a chair with hands clasped behind the head can be interpreted as a sign of superiority, smugness, or authority. A slouched posture can be read to mean humiliation, defeat, or submission. Using our arms, bodies, and legs to block in others or things can be a sign of territorial feelings. Turning your shoulder or body slightly away from someone can be a sign of rejection of that person.

Our appearance can disclose several pieces of information about us. Someone who dresses immaculately is likely to be a careful person who attends to detail. Someone who prefers "old-fashioned" dress might be very conservative in his or her opinions and values. A person wearing excessive jewelry is possibly displaying signs of a materialistic nature. Our clothing during working hours can tell others what we do for a living. For instance, a blue-collar worker's clothes

are designed to help or protect him or her in doing the job. The white-collar worker usually wears more formal clothes considered appropriate for business but having little to do with protection.

Our most common form of social physical contact—the handshake—is often relied upon as a source of data about another person. The handshake is an indication of welcome, liking, acceptance, and greeting. Therefore, it is considered extremely rude not to accept an offered hand. The way you shake hands is another source of data about you. A bone-crushing grip can be seen as a desire to dominate and a limp grasp as a sign of insecurity or a negative outlook on life. A mechanical pumping up and down of another's hand in a series of convulsive jerks suggests mental rigidity, strong will, and inflexibility. Other than the handshake, we have to be very careful with touching others in the workplace because of harassment issues.

People who are better readers of nonverbal messages tend to do the following things:

- They look at the totality of cues rather than isolated ones (remember the crossed arms?).
- They take context (time and place) of the message into account.
- They attempt to compensate for their own biases and prejudices.

Oral Communications

People who are successful communicators take full responsibility for success in the communication process. These people take responsibility for being certain that you understand what they are saying. They recognize that barriers to good communications exist so they speak in simple, grammatical, and understandable terms. They also give examples, ask for feedback, put what they said previously in different words, and make it easy for you to gain the true intent of their communications. However, this in no way frees the listener from responsibility from the process. Without proper listening, communication does not occur.

Listening Skills

Effective listening is active participation in a conversation. It is an activity which helps the speaker become understood. The listener must actually hear and not assume what is said. A passive listener is attentive but does nothing to assist the speaker. Active listeners sit or stand alertly, maintain eye contact with the speaker, concentrate on the speaker's words, make verbal responses, and summarize parts of what has been said when clarity is needed.

Because there is a difference in how fast one can speak and how fast others can listen, a time lag exists in conversations. Good listeners do not daydream during this lag; they use the time to organize what is being said and to relate to the message. The listener must guard against distractions to the message. The speaker's mannerisms, accent, dress or grooming, language style, or delivery

can be distracting if the listener does not learn to tune them out. Also, listeners need to learn to avoid letting first impressions of a speaker color their ability to hear the message.

We cannot learn anything from others if we try to do all the talking. Therefore, let speakers finish out their own sentences. Don't interrupt them to interject your own thoughts. We need to pay attention to the tone of the words and the nonverbal cues of the speaker. Sometimes, these things undermine the actual meanings of the words themselves. For instance, someone might be telling you that he or she is not upset, but the tone or the body language might tell you otherwise.

Overall, effective listening can be expressed as follows. You should concentrate so that competing external and internal distractions are eliminated. You should probe and reflect by asking questions to seek clarification and greater understanding. You might ask "Is this what you mean?" or "Could you repeat that?" or "Are you saying that...?" Finally, you should summarize (paraphrase) and feed back to the speaker what you think you have heard. When the speaker agrees that your understanding is indeed accurate, then effective listening and effective communication have taken place.

Telephone Skills

What does telephone usage have to do with our work ethic skills? A lot, if you consider that too often we tend to forget that the person on the other end of the line is a human being. When we cannot see the person, it is easier to be rude to him or her. Anger, irritation, and frustration can be suggested by our tone of voice. Ignoring our calls and our messages suggests that we are unconcerned about our clients and customers. When we transfer callers without trying to address their concerns, we are showing a disinterested, apathetic attitude. These are just a few of the negative ways that our lack of telephone etiquette can impact our work ethics.

When we speak on the phone at work, we should always have a smile in our voice. It might sound silly, but this is easy to achieve if we actually do smile when we answer the phone. Our voices should be clear and distinct. We should show that we have a service attitude by offering to give assistance however and whenever we can. We should not transfer calls blindly without making sure that the receiving party can take care of the caller's problem.

We must also be discreet when using the phone. Think through any requests for information and give out only information that is really needed by the caller. For instance, If someone calls asking for your supervisor, you would not say, "Mr. Jones is playing golf this afternoon." That would be giving unnecessary information. You would say, "Mr. Jones will be in the office tomorrow morning. May I help you or have him return your call?"

We should avoid slang in telephone conversations. Instead of saying “yeah,” say “certainly.” Instead of saying “bye-bye,” say “goodbye.” Doesn’t it sound better to say “I beg your pardon. Would you please repeat that?” than to say “Huh?”

When taking telephone messages for others, don’t be in such a hurry that you do not get all necessary information. Incomplete messages are frustrating. In fact, it is a good idea to repeat the message to the caller so that you can be certain that it is accurate.

If you have to put callers on hold to gather information to handle their call, always ask their permission to do so. Or you might offer to call them back if you think they will have to wait some time before you can get back with them. As a rule, nothing irritates a caller more than to be left on hold. When you return to the phone, apologize for having the caller wait for you.

Sometimes the caller is unhappy or angry about a situation. When this is the case, be very careful. A good tactic is to let the caller vent. When he or she is finished, you will hear a noticeable sigh at which point you can express your understanding of and concern for the situation. If you let the caller vent, he or she will then be ready to listen to you and to be reasonable as you try to get to the root of the problem. However, when the venting is nasty and involves foul language, it is permissible to warn the caller that if he/she does not refrain from using such language, you will hang up. If the ugliness does not cease, you do not have to listen.

In summary, when taking calls at work, you should remember to treat the callers as you would want to be treated yourself. Also, treat them as if they were standing in front of you. Remember this: To any caller on the other end of that telephone line, you are your company. The responsibility of being your company’s sole ambassador during that phone conversation should help you remember to use correct telephone techniques.

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