



Fact Sheet

Communication



It's 7:00 p.m. You have just arrived at a meeting of the program committee for your local church fellowship. Your co-chair is there, empty handed.

"I thought you were going to bring copies of the proposed program!"

"No — you were supposed to make copies of the annotated list in your notebook."

"I thought you were going to do that with your list."

The mood of cooperation is broken. Even though you make it through the meeting, the hopes you had of moving forward toward a successful evening's work is gone — all because of communication problems.

Busy people talk with each other in a variety of ways, by phone, fax, or answering machine, written messages at work or at home, greeting cards, and more and more by e-mail.

Face-to-face conversation is becoming more rare in this day of electronic devices. Without the personal touch, even members of a close-knit association can forget how to relate to one another.

The ability to effectively communicate with other people is an important life skill. Through communication, people reach some understanding of each other, learn to like each other, influence one another, build trust, and learn more about themselves and how people perceive them.

People who communicate effectively know how to interact with others with flexibility, skill and responsibility. They are aware of how others affect them, and recognize the impact of their behavior on others. Good communication skills are strengthened with patience, practice and a positive attitude.

Why is Communication so Important?

Effective communication is crucial in managing work, family, and community life. By discussing our feelings with each other, we have the opportunity to sort out confusing situations. When we share our feelings sincerely, we come to realize that everyone has emotions, and that each member of the group may experience them in his or her own way. By sharing our feelings, we can recognize the similarities among members of our organizations, as well as their differences. We can also better realize that even objective facts can be interpreted differently.

Barriers to Communication

Failures in communication happen when the receiver understands the message differently than the sender intended. Being aware of some of the barriers to communication can help you become a better listener.

Behaviors which make communication difficult include:

- Listening with "half an ear." Often we are busy doing other things and only give part of our attention to what is being said.

- Acting as judge and jury instead of listening to the whole story. We become so intent on making a quick decision about the action that we do not hear the complete story.
- Tuning out ideas that we do not agree with. We do not allow ourselves to listen because we “know” we will not agree.
- Jumping to conclusions. We may have a preconceived idea of what someone is going to say, so we do not actually listen to what he or she is really saying.
- Not listening “between the lines.”

We should also try to understand the attitudes, needs and motives that lie behind the words. Not being aware of nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, gestures and body movements can keep us from understanding the importance (or full meaning) of what is being communicated.

How to Communicate More Effectively

There are some specific skills which can be learned to help you communicate more effectively with the people around you. As a receiver, one can learn to listen accurately, and reflect back to the sender the message that is heard. As a sender, one can improve skills in sending clear, accurate messages.

Feedback

As a listener, it is important to make sure that the message you are receiving has the same meaning as the speaker intended. To do this, you can use a technique called feedback.

Feedback is nothing more than repeating a message that was heard. In turn, the other party to the conversation can say whether or not you heard right. Responsive feedback can lead to clarification, understanding, and solutions. Failing to give feedback leads to misunderstandings and sometimes to bad feelings and frustration.

Open Responses

You can enhance your communication even further by understanding the difference between closed and open responses. A closed response indicates that a person either has not heard or understood, or chooses to ignore the other person’s conversation. In other words, it cuts off communication.

An open response indicates that you have heard the person and you are interested in what they have to say. Open responses encourage the person to continue talking. A statement as simple as, “tell me more,” lets the speaker know that you really want to hear what he or she has to say.

“I” Messages

Another technique to help improve communication is the use of “I” messages. An “I” message can help you relate what you are feeling to another person without blaming the person for the problem. “I” messages are one way of providing feedback to the speaker.

There are three steps to constructing “I” messages:

1. State the behavior: “When you . . .

2. State your feelings: “I feel . . .

3. State the consequences of the behavior: “Because . . .

Consider the example of a committee chair who is continually arguing with his or her board secretary over how to answer letters. Instead of saying, “You make me angry when you don’t send me copies of the letters you’ve sent out!” the chair might try saying, “When people call me about the letters the committee has authorized, I feel hampered if I don’t have a copy in my hand to refer to. The buck stops with me, because I am committee chair, so I must be better prepared to answer any calls we get.”

The chair gets the point across without directly blaming the situation on the secretary. Using, “When...,” “I feel...,” and “Because...,” statements will help people learn to communicate more effectively.

Tips for Improving Communication

Here are some specific suggestions for you to practice if you sincerely want to improve your listening skills. As with speaking, singing, bowling, golfing, etc., to read about it in advance may help you, but it is the actual practice that will perfect your skill.

- Listen as though the success of your personal life depends upon what every good friend or family member of any age, has to say. Remember, it may!
- Be available and approachable for any close friend, family member, or committee member to share his or her feelings, needs, and interests. “After a while,” “In a few minutes,” or “When I have time,” may be too late. Many treasures of life are lost quickly if not shared at the moment.
- Have patience to hear the whole story in its uncondensed version. It is essential, among other things, to building continuous bridges among people of varied generations and different interests and expertise. Even though the plot, conclusion or problems can often be anticipated with accuracy, let the individual give his or her punchline.
- Stop talking. You cannot listen when you talk.
- Do not jump to conclusions. When you do, you tune yourself out from the rest of what the speaker has to say. You will begin thinking to yourself, “Hurry up and finish. I’ve got your point,” or “Yes, yes. I know what you mean.”
- Listen to what is not said. Sometimes you can learn just as much by determining what the other person leaves out or avoids saying as you can by listening to what he or she actually says.
- Listen to how something is said. We frequently concentrate so hard on the words that we miss the importance of the emotional reactions and attitudes related to what is said.
- Know when to leave the individual within his or her own silences and when to interrupt. A person may need times of silence in order to collect his or her thoughts for continuing the communication.
- Respect the opinions and rights of others. Build on their self-esteem and avoid techniques that damage self-concept.

- Help others find their own answers and make their own decisions whenever possible. Do not be the giver of all current wisdom, or the one to hand out easy solutions.
- Accept with an open mind what others have to say. You do not need to agree, but it is important to give others the courtesy of respecting their right to say what they believe.
- Use warm, friendly tones of voice. Politeness is as important within a community group as it is within a family.
- Share the responsibility for communication. Only part of the responsibility for effective communication rests with the speaker. You, as the listener, have an equal responsibility. Try to understand, and if you do not, ask for clarifications.

Conclusion

Effective communication is crucial in managing work, family and community life. As senders, we need to transmit clear, accurate messages. As receivers, we need to listen accurately and reflect the message we heard back to the sender.

Adapted from:

Communication Skills. Kansas Family Community Leadership Resource Notebook Manhattan, Kansas: Kansas State University Cooperative Extension Service and Kansas Association for Family and Community Education, 1993.

Family Talk Balancing Work and Family Series. Columbus, Ohio: The Ohio State University Cooperative Extension Service.