

Communication Skills

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

Through communication people learn to understand others as individuals. People who communicate effectively know how to interact with others flexibly, skillfully, and responsibly without sacrificing their own needs and integrity. They are aware of how others affect them and the effect of their behavior on others. They can assume responsibility for their actions.

Why Is Communication So Important?

The process of verbal interaction is important in maintaining one's health and well-being. By discussing our experiences with each other, we provide opportunities for sorting out our often complex and confusing lives. When we share our experiences and feelings sincerely, we come to realize that all of us experience emotions, but that each of us experiences them in our own way. Thus, by sharing our experiences and the feelings that go along with them, we can recognize the similarities among human beings as well as the individual differences. Effective communication exists between two people when the person for whom a message is intended interprets the message in the same way that the person who sent the message intended it. Failures in communication happen when the receiver understands the meaning of a message differently from how it was intended. There are some specific skills that can be learned to facilitate effective communication. As a receiver, one can learn to listen accurately and also how to reflect back to the sender the message that is heard. As a sender, one can improve skills in sending clear, accurate, and specific messages.

People Communicate Verbally and Nonverbally

When people interact, they communicate through an exchange of messages. These messages are composed of verbal and nonverbal cues. In communication, not only what is said but how it is said is important. The sound of the voice, the facial expression, and the posture carry a message.

For example, if you are talking to a person whose face and fists are clenched but who insists he/she is very happy and carefree, you are apt to feel confused. People may try to hide feelings in verbal expressions which are more obvious than their nonverbal expressions. For real communication to occur, the verbal and nonverbal expressions must agree. In other words, what you say should agree with your facial expressions, posture, and voice tone – if a clear communication is your goal.

Sometimes Communication Fails

Many factors contribute to communication failures. For example, people may be preoccupied and not able to listen to what others have to say. Or people can be so interested in communicating their own messages and formulating a response that they listen to others only to find an opening to communicate their own messages. Sometimes individuals listen in order to evaluate and make judgments about the speaker. The speaker may then become defensive and end the interaction.

Finally, a lack of trust may be a cause of communication distortion. In a group or between two people, distrust can cause a reduction in the information that is shared and a suspicion concerning the information being communicated. When trust is high, there tends to be a greater level of understanding.

What You Can Do To Facilitate Effective Communication

Volunteers can foster effective communication with others by promoting trust and modeling communication skills. Adults can demonstrate listening skills in everyday interactions and by using some activities designed to increase communication skills of the group.



Communication

Clear communication is a management volunteer essential! Effective communication exists between two people when the receiver interprets the sender's messages in the same way the sender intended.

Active Listening

In active listening the receiver listens and observes both verbal and nonverbal clues of the sender's message. He or she then focuses on the feeling conveyed by the sender, and gives back to the sender in the receiver's words what he or she heard the sender say and do verbally and nonverbally.

Whenever you want others to understand your feelings, active listening is usually an appropriate technique. The example below will give you an idea of how the technique is used.

There are eight basic skills in making sure your ideas and feelings are effectively communicated.

1. Clearly "own" your own message by using personal pronouns such as I and my.
2. Make your messages complete and specific.
3. Make your verbal and nonverbal messages congruent with one another.
4. Be redundant.
5. Ask for feedback concerning the way your messages are being received.
6. Make the message appropriate to the receiver and frame of reference.
7. Describe your feelings by name, action, or figure of speech.
8. Describe other member's behavior without evaluating or interpreting.

Most messages we send to people about their behavior are "you" messages – messages that are directed at the other person and have a high probability of putting them down, making them feel guilty, making them feel their needs are not important, and generally making them resist change. "You" messages are usually **orders or commands** ("Get into the car!"), or **blaming or name-calling statements** ("You are never on time!"), or **statements that give solutions** ("You'd better reconsider that plan."), thereby removing the responsibility for behavior change from the other person. Perhaps the worst of all "you" messages is the **if...then threat** ("If you don't ... then I will...")

"I Messages," on the other hand, promote positive communication which helps to create healthy interpersonal relationships. The first step in sending "I Messages," on the other hand, promote positive communication which helps to create healthy interpersonal relationships. The first step in sending "I Messages" is to become **aware of your own feelings** in particular situations and to **own the problem** which is some unacceptable behavior. In other words, the behavior is unacceptable because you find it unacceptable! How does that make you feel? Worried, irritated, or uncomfortable?

When you admit to owning a problem, you are not blaming or judging others. You do not tell others what to do to change their behavior. Instead, you explain how you feel about the behavior and leave the responsibility for doing something about the behavior to the person who behaves unacceptably.



"I Messages" are not intended to perform communication miracles, but rather to lead to more positive and effective communications in interpersonal situations.

There are four parts to an "I Message":

1. stating the unacceptable behavior
2. expressing the feelings of the sender
3. expressing the effect of the behavior on the sender
4. stating the preferred behavior. The sentence formula is, "When you...the results are...; I think/feel...; therefore I would like/prefer..."

Practice an "I Message" for an existing communication need, using these four steps.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

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WHAT CAN WE DO TO IMPROVE OUR LISTENING SKILLS?

The University of Arizona Extension Service has suggestions!

Practice the following techniques and you will greatly increase your listening ability, and in turn have a tremendous motivating force on others.

- **Stop Talking:** Believe it or not, you just can't do a good listening job while you're talking. One of the most effective ways to get people to talk is for you to talk less.
- **Sit where you can see the person speaking,** and he/she can see you.
- **Listen for ideas,** rather than facts. When you listen for facts, you try to memorize them. You get behind in your listening and you lose track of the central idea.
- **Take brief notes.** Listen for ideas, rather than facts, and jot down just enough so you can recall those ideas. Also jot down any questions that come to mind.
- **Pay attention to non-verbal clues,** such as voice changes, facial expressions, gestures and body movements. Paying attention to non-verbal communication will improve your concentration, as well as your understanding of what is being said. Research shows that over half of the total impact of conversation is non-verbal.
- **Show that you are listening.** Sit up straight. Lean forward. Look alert. Make regular eye contact with the person speaking. Nod, smile, shake your head and say "mm-hm" in support of what was said that you like. In short, **react to the person speaking.** Let him or her know you are alive and interested in what he or she has to say.
- **Reflect.** Make sure that you and the person speaking are assigning the same meanings to the words being used. Summarize back to the speaker, in your own words, what you feel were the key points he or she made. Make sure what you heard is what the speaker meant. Ask questions. Such reflecting provides the person speaking with **feedback** to ensure that your understanding of the message is what he or she intended. It also increases your listening concentration and shows you are interested. **Tune in to the speaker's feelings** as well as the content of the message. React to what you see, as well as what you hear, i.e. "You seem to be upset." Whenever a person dominates a meeting, repeats things, raises his or her voice, or becomes emotional, it is a sure sign that the person feels he or she is not being listened to, understood, and respected. Show them that you are listening.
- **Remove distractions.** Shut the door, turn off the noisy fan, control your emotions, and be patient. Stop rehearsing what you are going to say next. Don't argue mentally with what is being said. You are trying to understand the other person's point of view, not reinforce your own prejudices. Don't jump to conclusions.
- **Don't judge.** Experience suggests that when an individual's views are listened to and accepted without judgment, he or she can more easily change them when confronted with contradictory information. Acceptance doesn't mean agreement.
- Periodically sit up straight and take a couple of deep breaths. If you get restless or sleepy, discreetly grab the bottom of your chair and tense your arms, shoulders and neck and hold it for 10 seconds, then quickly let go and relax. Do it again.

In conclusion, attentive listening can be a tremendous motivating force. It indicates to the person speaking that you value him or her and appreciate his or her ideas and suggestions, even though you may personally disagree with them. Such listening builds the person's self-esteem. Also, you'll find when you start listening to others, they start listening to you.

Active listening can: promote understanding and acceptance of others; facilitate problem solving; promote a relationship of warmth between the sender and receiver; and influence people to be more willing to listen to others.



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FEEDBACK

Feedback is reporting to an individual the kind of impressions he/she is making on you or reporting your reactions to him/her. Feedback is rarely effectively used in interpersonal communication. Our society puts a great deal of emphasis on the value of honesty. Children are taught in their homes and schools that it is bad to lie about their behavior. Stealing, lying, cheating, and other dishonest acts are denounced in every aspect of life. Yet all of us are guilty of a great deal of dishonesty in interpersonal relationships all of the time. Since children are often very aware of this, it makes the learning of the value of honesty very complex. We rarely express our honest feelings towards others at home or in school. Often this involves simply avoiding the expression of reactions which we feel would be detrimental to others or ourselves. Often it involves what we call "little white lies" when we tell people something positive or reassuring rather than being direct, honest, or critical.

People often feel threatened by the introduction of feedback exercises. The notion that people will be hurt by criticism is very prevalent. Yet think of how many people you know who have good intentions but irritate, embarrass, or behave in ways that diminish their effectiveness. The range of operating honestly in many areas in life is seriously hampered if we never have a chance to become aware of our impact on others. Most of us are quite capable of improving our styles of interpersonal communication and becoming much more effective as people – teens, parents, leaders, whatever – when we really become aware of our impact on others.

Feedback can be destructive, however, when it is given only to hurt or to express hostility without any goal of improving the communication between people. It may also be destructive when only derogatory or extremely critical statements are given without any balance of positive evaluation.

The following is a more extensive list of things to remember when giving useful feedback.

Feedback is useful when:

1. It is **descriptive** rather than **evaluative**. By describing one's own reaction, it leaves the individual free to use it as he/she sees fit. By avoiding evaluative language, it reduces the need for the individual to react defensively.
2. It is **specific** rather than **general**. To be told that one is "dominating" will probably not be as useful as to be told that "just now when we were deciding the issue you did not listen to what others said and I felt forced to accept your arguments or face attack from you."
3. It takes into account the **needs of both the receiver and the giver** of feedback. Feedback can be destructive when it serves only our own needs and fails to consider the needs of the person on the receiving end.
4. It is directed toward **behavior** which the **receiver can do something about**. Frustration is only increased when a person is reminded of some shortcoming over which he has no control.
5. It is **solicited, rather than imposed**. Feedback is most useful when the receiver himself has formulated the kind of question which those observing him can answer.
6. It is **well-timed**. In general, feedback is most useful at the earliest opportunity after the given behavior (depending, of course, on the person's readiness to hear it, support available from others, etc.)



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7. It is checked to ensure **clear communication**. One way of doing this is to have the receiver try to rephrase the feedback he has received to see if it corresponds to what the sender had in mind.
8. When feedback is given within a group, both giver and receiver have opportunity to check with others in the group the accuracy of the feedback – to determine if the statement is one person's impression or an impression shared by others.

Feedback, then, is a way of giving help; it is a corrective mechanism for the individual who wants to learn how well his/her behavior matches his/her intentions, and it is a means for establishing one's identity – for answering "Who Am I?"

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Managing Conflict

Managing people is, too often, managing conflict. Michigan's Extension 4-H Guide to Working with Low Income Volunteers describes strategies and tactics in conflict.

You can move a conflict in one of four directions: **avoidance, escalation, maintenance, de-escalation.**

All are useful at different times. The choice of which one(s) to use should be based on the desired outcome of the conflict. Below are some tactics (specific behaviors) that typically move conflicts in one of four directions.

Avoidance

- postponement
- using formal rules
- changing the physical environment
- tacit coordination (agreeing on votes before meeting)
- gunnysacking (saving up feelings until they become explosive)
- coercive (pulling rank)
- refusing to recognize the conflict
- fogging (agreeing with part of a criticism)
- linguistic manipulation ("There's no conflict, just a slight disagreement.")

Escalation – involvement in the conflict increases; issues are more sharply defined; number of issues increase; and parties often polarize.

- labeling (naming the other person or relationship)
- issue expansion (connecting many other issues to the ones in the conflict)
- coalition formation (to increase power)
- threats
- constricting the other (allowing only a certain time for a conflict; restricting access to an important person in a conflict)

Maintenance – neither reducing nor escalating the conflict

- Quid pro quo (getting something for something)
- agreement on relational rules (how to conduct the conflict)
- combine escalation and reduction tactics

De-escalation – reducing the conflict

- fractionate (breaking the issues into small, manageable units)
- ask for more information about the conflict
- metacommunication (discussing the relationship)
- response to all levels of the conflict (thoughts and feelings)
- establish outside criteria for managing the conflict (deciding how decisions will be made)

Five Conflict Management Styles

Competing is assertive and uncooperative – an individual pursues his/her own concerns at the other person's expense. This is a power-oriented mode in which one uses whatever power seems appropriate to win one's own position. This power can take the form of one's ability to argue, one's rank, or one's economic sanctions. Competing might mean "standing up for your rights," defending a position which you believe is correct, or simply trying to win.

Accommodating is unassertive and cooperative – the opposite of competing. When accommodating, an individual neglects his/her own concerns to satisfy the concerns of the other person. There is an element of self-sacrifice in this mode. Accommodating might



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take the form of selfless generosity or charity, obeying another person's order when one would prefer not to, or yielding to another's point of view.

Avoiding is unassertive and uncooperative – the individual does not immediately pursue his/her own concerns or those of the other person. He/she does not address the conflict. Avoiding might take the form of diplomatically sidestepping an issue until a better time or simply withdrawing from a threatening situation.

Collaborating is both assertive and cooperative – the opposite of avoiding. Collaborating involves an attempt to work with the other person to find some solution which fully satisfies the concerns of both persons. It means digging into an issue to identify the underlying concerns of the two individuals and to find an alternative which meets both sets of concerns. Collaboration between two persons might take the form of exploring a disagreement to learn from each other's insights, concluding to resolve some condition which would otherwise have them competing for resources, or confronting and trying to find a creative solution to an interpersonal problem.

Compromising is intermediate in both assertiveness and cooperativeness. The objective is to find some expedient, mutually acceptable solution which partially satisfies both parties. It falls on a middle ground between competing and accommodating. Likewise, it addresses an issue more directly than avoiding but does not explore it in as much depth as collaborating. Compromising might mean splitting the difference, exchanging concessions, or seeking a quick middle ground position.

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The Steps of Mutual Problem Solving

1. **Identify and define the problem** (conflict). Tell the other person clearly and concisely that there is a problem that must be solved. Clearly indicate that you would like the other person to join with you in finding a solution **acceptable to both of you**, a solution “we both can live with.” Select a time that is convenient for both of you. Tell the other person your feelings and needs, through “I-statements”. With no accusations, or blaming, or put-downs, **define the problem in terms of needs, not solutions**. Use **active listening** to help the other person express his needs. Use active listening to separate his or her needs from desired solutions. Go on the Step 2 when (and only when) both of you feel your unmet needs have been accurately described and clearly understood by the other. Put these needs in writing:

YOUR NEEDS	MY NEEDS

2. **Generate possible solutions**. Ask the other person to suggest how he feels the conflict could be productively resolved. Brainstorm. Don't evaluate, judge or belittle any of the solutions offered. Don't ask the other person to justify or defend his suggestions. Keep pressing for ideas.
3. Select a solution or solutions acceptable to both parties.
4. Ask for verbal and/or written agreement to the solution. Clearly describe your expectations in behavior for both parties.
5. Congratulate both parties on this progress.
6. Set a time period for reviewing progress.
7. If change is not observable by the designated review date, provide incentives to the solution or plot alternative solutions.

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