

Human Communication & Verbal Problem Solving

Created April 2016.
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Interpersonal and group communication is often complicated. To organize and operate any value-added business is at times an intense and at times highly stressful experience. Disagreements can arise among creators, partners, committee members, project managers and family members over how to solve problems facing the project or business or other interpersonal issues.

Solid communication skills can help anyone learn more, create more and contribute to solid organizational gains and problem solving discussions. Practice the suggestions below to improve your skill set and consider the various keys to effective communication. Simply reading these points will only take you so far. Test yourself against them. To keep yourself on track when things get heated, create a simple cheat-sheet of key points to take with you into key meetings, negotiations and other crucial conversations. Consciously work to practice them until they become an integral component of your personal and professional development.

Good relations among members of a value-added business are critical for success. Good communication skills are an important trust-building element that creates and nourishes key relationships. This is true regardless of whether you are a member of a committee developing the concept for a value-added project or a member of a team operating an established business. One tactic used by the most entrepreneurial and successful businesses is to constantly strive to improve communication skills within the operation and with clients, suppliers and others outside it. This doesn't just happen, all parties must develop communication etiquette, negotiation and meeting ground rules and stick to them; and each individual should strive to develop key verbal skills that clearly present ideas and data, and listening skills that create a welcome space for the free and non-biased exchange of ideas.

When we are under pressure, however, we easily become frustrated and may verbally attack the behavior of the other person. Usually this takes the 3-step progression of attack, counterattack, and withdraw. The other person feels hurt by our comments and counterattacks. This system of attack and counterattack continues until one party eventually withdraws from the conversation that has now spiraled into verbal confrontation.

This is, of course, a worthless path to the positive and meaningful resolution of any problem. Instead of counterattacking, the other person may hold in their feelings and the situation will not escalate. However, the other person will harbor these feelings and the emotions may be vented later. Working together to express viewpoints, instead of attacking and judging the other person's behavior, diffuses frustration, clarifies the real issues, and allows all to move toward meaningful outcomes. In any type of negotiation, strive to bring the perhaps adverse elements together as a team rather than drive it further apart with wedges that, in the big picture, amount to little more than petty snippets of ego validation.

Humans are judgmental and emotional, but judgement and emotion are very different qualities. Both temper all human communication. Judgmental statements are "I am right, you are wrong." Emotional

statements are “I am angry, I am afraid and I am worried.” Judgments are often the result of how we feel. It is often an expression of our feelings.

Judgments are much more likely to be heard as criticisms than feelings. If I say, “You are wrong,” one is likely to feel criticized and attacked. As soon as we feel criticized, we as humans are immediately consumed by the criticism. It is hard to hear anything else that is said; the conversation is seriously impaired or effectively terminated. The attacked person’s mind has already retreated to a defensive position, where intense inward focus is now on retribution, rebuttal and eventual salvation from some form of validation.

However, if I say, “I am angry,” one is far less likely to feel attacked. This is because expressions of emotion (how we feel) are true statements that foster human empathy. If I say that “you are wrong,” you will probably disagree. But if I say that “I am angry, disturbed or bothered by..” no one can or will argue; the conversation will proceed to an understanding of “why.”

Although the expression of our feelings seems to make us vulnerable, they really increase our safety and understanding. If we make a judgment and attack the other person, we are isolating them and inviting them to counterattack. However, if we share how we feel, we are exposing ourselves to the other person. This makes it easier for the other person to respond in kind. Both people feel safer.

Great leaders are respectful of all team members at all times and genuinely interested in their people. All human creatures have a need to feel important and be understood. One of the ways we feel important is if others are interested in us. So acknowledge the other person's interests and points of view, even if you dislike that point of view. Continue the discussion with an eye toward common resolution. If we expect others (and the rest of the team) to understand us, we must first understand the roles and perspective of all the players.

Listen to “understand and not just hear.” One key to good communication is the willingness to listen for meaning in what the other person says and not just “at the words.” Oftentimes, particularly in animated or heated conversations, humans get into a mode where they react to key words that catch their fancy, taking them far off track. For example, Person A may be talking about the new quarterback of the local high-school football team; Person B responds with something about a great quarterback of a professional team. Person C then chimes in with how that team’s division should do in the upcoming season. The conversation is now far afield from where it started with a discussion of the merits of the local high-school quarterback.

This is a common part of human discourse, but professional communicators, negotiators and mediators carefully watch for it and steer the conversation back to the crucial and critical issue under discussion. They watch facial expressions and body language and can tell when the other person’s mind wanders. While the person is talking, most amateurs are already thinking of their answer or response. Listen until the person is finished then decide what you are going to say.

Keep in mind that the most effective and persuasive verbal communication has three forms expressed at the same time. There is the nonverbal component: facial expression, movement, gestures and how you give attention to the other person. There is how you use voice communication: the tone with which the message is conveyed (confidence, desperation, anger or condescension). Finally, there is the quality of the “data component,” perhaps best described as quality-of-content: the actual meaning and accuracy

of your word usage and the quality (support for and provability) of the information supporting your arguments.

In any conversation, work for the common good and motivate your team:

- In business discussions it is highly amateurish to ridicule, punish or lecture. Listen, understand, identify common ground and alternatives, and work to support one another and then commit to unified action.
- Listen not only to what the other person is saying but also to what he/she may be “feeling.” An awareness of the emotional facets of any discussion is a key component to understanding and working within “the big picture.”
- Keep a sense of humor. Laugh at the goofy things that happen. Laugh off the little annoyances and laugh to diffuse ridicule. Smile at every opportunity. Seeing the humor in a situation can often defuse it and clear your mind for more effective problem solving.
- Motivate those around you. There are several ways to motivate people. Negative reinforcements like criticism or punishment create a defensive mindset across the group, hinder idea expression and usually create a desire for revenge. On the other hand, positive reinforcement is often simply viewed as receiving more income or some other reward; but the most profound and longest lasting positive reinforcements require little effort. Praise, trust, interest and recognition build the strongest teams and create life-long friendship based on mutual respect.

Improve problem solving with advanced listening skills:

- State your problem and interests. Acknowledge the others' problem and interests. Avoid name calling and answering a complaint with another complaint, or criticism with another criticism.
- Give your attention to the other person. When someone starts to talk to you, stop what you are doing and thinking. Face the person and devote your whole attention to what is being said and how he/she is saying it. Take notes of key points.
- Listen to the other parties and understand their interests. Ask “why,” “why not” and “what if” questions to help them develop their line of thought and clarity of intent.
- Silence is your friend, it demonstrates that you are willing to listen or to help move the other side into a position to listen more effectively to you.
- Check for accuracy. When the person is finished talking, paraphrase back to the person what he/she said to you. If you correctly heard them, and understand them, then respond to that statement or question.

- Be aware of the needs and motivations of the others. Each person has different needs that should be considered and respected. Although each of us has differing needs and motivations, all of us have a need for trust, responsibility, praise, security, sense of belonging and especially recognition.
- Offer advice, but NEVER give advice - Learn to offer insights, advice and expertise without being forceful. It is wrong to say “this is how you should handle it” or “this is what you should do.” It is better to say “what do you think about this way,” or “I suggest we...” And, oftentimes, it is inappropriate to even soft-pedal advice. You should offer it only if asked for. In the long run, this may be a conversation that is best to sit out; perhaps to revisit later with fresh ideas and a better overall perspective.

If things get “complicated” and it’s a heated discussion:

- Look for areas of agreement.
- Take a time out if the discussion deteriorates. If not germane to the present meeting’s goals, set a time for an additional discussion of the particular topic.
- Freely offer an apology when appropriate. This is an interpersonal negotiation tool and never weakens your position if it is based on data and logic.
- Stick to the present topic and keep the discussion in the present and the future. The past has already been lived. If a past event is highly relative, then take time to cover it, but set ground rules, have one individual present a synopsis, but at all costs avoid blame or condemnation.
- Consider “mutual restating” until the party who continues to feel misunderstood feels appropriately understood (--or runs out of wind).
- State requests for change in behavioral or actionable terms. Don’t demand changes in attitude or emotion in a certain-to-fail effort to create change or advance an agenda.
- Consistently express verbal and body messages. If negative feelings must be expressed, show confidence in the process, relax, use good eye contact and show interest in common resolution of the issue.

Time to move forward from the impasse:

- Repeat for clarification.
- Accept that the other person’s words are true for him/her. Respect their feelings.
- Find a point of agreement.
- State or restate your own opinion.

- Acknowledge the other person's statements and state, "I will give it serious consideration before I take further action."

When they present their case:

- Listen carefully and repeat what you heard.
- Ask to fully understand.
- Ask, don't tell - demonstrate equality - Do this by asking for advice or asking the person to contribute something to the resolution of the problem or impasse. This tells the other person that he/she is respected as a peer or equal. Telling often implies a superior/subordinate relationship, such as boss vs. employee.
- Say thank you and state that you will consider their comments before taking further action.
- Seriously reflect on what you heard before taking further action; perhaps follow up with a personal note to reinforce that you considered and valued their input.
- Never be judgmental, expression of emotion develops empathy. One ends a conversation, the other moves it forward.

When you present your case:

- Keep an open mind and do not criticize, pass judgment or preach. It is extremely important to learn to make objective evaluations about ideas, people and situations. You are making a value judgment when you attach your values, beliefs or needs to any appraisal.
- Develop comfortable relations. Tension and stress are normal in any relationship. However, the level of tension and stress can be reduced in businesses that develop teamwork and trust through open, honest and respectful communication.
- Separate the behavior from the person. Be specific and factual about behaviors. Avoid value judgments and demands for a change in attitude or emotion.
- If appropriate, describe how you feel and how this affects you.
- Be sensitive and respectful. Present your observation as a gift then leave it and move on.

Final Thoughts:

Communicating ideas brings our minds together. Communicating emotions brings us together as individuals. It is assumed that we should share ideas but keep our feelings to ourselves. For example, this is a very important facet of rural-community culture. However, emotions are very powerful, cannot

be ignored, and can easily get out-of-hand or be misinterpreted. That said, feelings are often far more important motivators than ideas or data when influencing behavior and decision-making.

In crucial conversations, carefully listen and repeat what you heard, ask to fully understand, keep an open mind, and never criticize, pass judgment or preach. It is extremely important to learn to make objective evaluations about ideas, people and situations based on real actionable data, not innuendo or gut feelings.

Strive to develop trust and create feelings of equity. People share a sense of equality if all parties are informed, trust exists and work is based on cooperation. For business ventures to succeed, all the parties must feel that they are equals. If one party feels left out or feels like a subordinate, success becomes less likely.

Trust is the product of open and honest communications. Solid communication channels create trust, the most overlooked and essential ingredient for outstanding team development. If trust exists among business associates, teamwork and cooperation fall in to place, making it far less difficult to achieve your business objectives.