

How To Be A More Effective Communicator

by Keith Reznick

Most people take their inter-personal communication skills for granted – until there is a break down in communication. Poor communication skills make accomplishing both personal and professional tasks and building relationships more difficult to accomplish. Poor communicators collect information and use it to make decisions or take action. Effective communicators start by collecting information and then, through continued dialogue, develop understanding and ultimately, gain insight which they use to make better decisions and to guide their actions. More effective communicators express their ideas clearly, learn from the people with whom they interact, are generally able to resolve conflicts more efficiently and, more often than not, build better relationships, both personally and professionally. Thankfully, like all skills, with the right attitude and practice, our ability to communicate more effectively can continuously be improved.

Probing, listening and responding are the cornerstones of successful communications both on and off the show floor. As Margit Weisgal and Dr. Dennis Pitta conveyed in their article *Is Anybody Out There Listening?* in the premier issue of *About Face*: 1) communicating effectively is not easy to do; 2) few people receive communication skills training; and 3) dozens of studies have been conducted linking effective communicator skills with business success.

You will be a more effective communicator when your probing, listening and responding skills work in harmony with one another. Asking an appropriate mix of open and closed questions will enable you (and the person with whom you're interacting) to develop or improve understanding and gain insight. Focused and objective listening will ensure that you have heard and understood one another. Responding skills will guide the conversation and then bring it to closure. In this article we'll explore how to be a more effective communicator by fine-tuning your probing, listening and responding skills.

Transition from Information to Understanding to Insight

One way to become a more effective communicator is to establish goals for a conversation (whenever possible and appropriate). If you discuss and blend your goals with those of the person you're interacting with the conversation will be of more value to both of you. Getting on the same page as early as possible will provide clarity and direction and help you both communicate more efficiently and effectively.

Successful communication doesn't require defined goals. Establishing a goal or goals can be very helpful though, because they can provide focus, facilitate preparation, create expectations and maximize the value of the time allocated for the conversation.

The biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished.
- George Bernard Shaw

Communication goals fall into several categories including:

- ◆ Discovery goals – information we want to obtain
- ◆ Presentation goals – information we want to disseminate (about ourselves, our company, brand etc.)
- ◆ Relationship goals – developing, maintaining, improving or terminating relationships
- ◆ Influence goals – perceptions we want the other person to have or behavior we want the other person to take

Identify and Eliminate Communication Barriers

One of the biggest barriers to successful communication is that people process information many times faster than the rate at which we speak. Unfortunately, many other barriers exist that make effective communications more difficult. Perceptions brought into a conversation act as ‘filters’ that alter what the speaker says and/or how he says it as well as what the listener hears and retains. Other barriers include:

- ◆ Time – to prepare for and/or conduct a conversation; to meet a deadline
- ◆ Venue – comfortable; conducive to conversation; private
- ◆ Culture – religion; ethnic; political; international values; gestures; facial expressions
- ◆ Linguistic – slang; generational definitions; double entendre
- ◆ Relationship – male/female; competitive; superior/subordinate

To improve your communication effectiveness, eliminate the barriers that you’re aware of and try to anticipate the ones that might arise so that you can neutralize them if/when they occur.

*“You can tell a man is clever by his answers. You can tell a man is wise by his questions.”
 Naguib Mahfouz (1911-) Egyptian novelist, Nobel Prize Laureate*

Probing – The Art of Asking the Right Question at the Right Time

Understanding the two basic types of questions (open-ended and closed-ended) will help you to ask the right type of question (at the right time). Open-ended question can generally not be answered with a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ response and are used to request information, clarification or elaboration. Open probes convey your interest in the other person.

‘What’ questions are often used to collect factual information, develop or improve understanding and gain insight. ‘Why’ and ‘How’ questions are often used to develop an understanding of someone’s feelings, perceptions and opinions. Examples of broad-based, open-ended questions include:

- ◆ “What changes have you seen in...?”
- ◆ “Why did you make that change?”
- ◆ “How do you plan to keep that part of your business growing?”

Closed probes will generally elicit ‘yes’ or ‘no’ responses and are often used to confirm understanding or bring a topic (or the conversation) to closure. Closed-ended questions usually start with either verbs (i.e. can; will; did; have; etc.) or contractions (i.e. weren’t; won’t; haven’t; etc.)

Throughout a conversation use an appropriate mix of open and closed probes – excessive use of closed probes can lead to a feeling of interrogation or manipulation. Examples of closed probes include:

- ◆ “My understanding is that you’d like the exhibit to be completely set up by noon so that you can do a walk-through with your exhibit staff before lunch. Is that your plan?”
- ◆ “Won’t you be taking action on that within the next...?”

Effective probing flows from what was previously said and: 1) confirms that you’ve heard and understood what was said (whether you agree or disagree); 2) you’re interested in learning more; and 3) you’d like the person to continue.

Listening

Listening is the most powerful of all communication skills. It is also the most difficult to truly master for all of the reasons that Margit and Dennis pointed out in their article. Understanding the three types of listening will help you develop the *focus* that Margit and Dennis suggested.

- ◆ Constructive listening targets factual information.
- ◆ Active listening targets feelings. Active listening is often referred to as nonjudgmental listening because the listener does not pass judgment on the speaker’s feelings, but instead tries to understand and accurately restate the feelings of the speaker.

By separating the two, and listening specifically for facts and specifically for feelings, you improve the probability that the ‘filters’ of your perceptions and needs won’t get in the way of you hearing what’s actually been said (as compared to hearing what you want or need to hear).

The third type of listening is non verbal listening (‘listening’ with your eyes). Nonverbal listening collects information conveyed by the speaker’s gestures, expressions, posture, eye contact and physical appearance. A classic study done by Dr. Albert Mehrabian at UCLA found that:

- ◆ 7% of meaning is in the words that are spoken.
- ◆ 38% of meaning is paralinguistic (the way that the words are said).
- ◆ 55% of meaning is in facial expression.

Listening nonverbally provides both parties with important cues and clues that should be processed and evaluated in conjunction with the information being provided. Listening constructively, actively and nonverbally will enable you to become a more effective communicator.

One of the most important components of good listening is pausing. Pausing conveys that you are processing the information the speaker has just provides while enabling the speaker to collect her thoughts before she continues.

Responding

A neutral response, indicating that you have heard and understood the other person, is referred to as an acknowledging response. You are indicating verbally that you understand the person, and that you want him to continue. You are not agreeing with what's been said; you are just acknowledging that you have heard and understand it, and want the person to continue. When you acknowledge, don't inadvertently convey agreement by nodding your head. You will send a mixed message, and the person will probably think that you are agreeing. Examples of acknowledging are:

- ◆ "I see."
- ◆ "I understand."
- ◆ "Thank you for sharing that."

A positive response, indicating that you have heard, understand, and agree with the person, is often referred to as a supporting response. Verbally, you are indicating that you have absorbed the information the speaker has provided, you agree, and you want him to continue. When you are supporting, you are conveying agreement verbally, as well as nonverbally. Send a consistent message. Make eye contact, indicate that you have heard, understood, and agree and that you want the person to continue. Supporting will help the person develop confidence in, and commitment to, his opinions and perspective. Examples of supporting are:

- ◆ "You are absolutely correct."
- ◆ "I agree with you."
- ◆ "We are in sync about that."

Communication Do's

- ◆ Empathize – put yourself in the other person's shoes.
- ◆ Give the person time to absorb, process and understand what you've said.
- ◆ Have patience and let the other person speak or complete a thought.
- ◆ Understand both facts and feelings (logic and emotion).
- ◆ Ask questions if you don't understand.
- ◆ Anticipate questions and prepare your responses.
- ◆ Convey confidence and conviction.
- ◆ Align your verbal and nonverbal messages.
- ◆ Show respect verbally and non-verbally.
- ◆ Listen with your eyes as well as your ears.
- ◆ Ask 'why' questions when you want to 'drill down' further.
- ◆ Be a team player.
- ◆ An error of commission is far more acceptable than an error of omission.
- ◆ Be professional at all times.



Communication Don'ts

- ◆ Don't respond until you fully understand the question or comment.
- ◆ Don't stop listening because you're eager to ask the next question or convey your opinion.
- ◆ Don't trust assumptions, estimates or perceptions.
- ◆ Don't exhaust yourself by repeating the same information.
- ◆ Don't communicate with your ego.
- ◆ Don't use inappropriate language.
- ◆ Don't have a bad attitude or convey negative 'war stories.'
- ◆ Don't badmouth other people.
- ◆ Don't 'fake it' if you don't know the answer.
- ◆ Don't make excuses.
- ◆ Don't use expressions like "Can I be honest with you now?"

One final tip: don't try to do too many of these things at the same time – you'll probably get frustrated, give up and not do any of them. Select and work on one idea at a time until it becomes a part of the way you communicate. Then, one by one, incorporate the other ideas that you find relevant to improve your communication skills.

About the Author

Keith Reznick's company, Creative Training Solutions, designs, develops and delivers live and online training programs. Since 1989 he and his associates have conducted more than 2,000 workshops and trained more than 40,000 people how to:

- ◆ Be more effective communicators; and
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