



## UNIT II: Interpersonal Leadership Skills

# Module 2: Communications Basics

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 flexibly, skillfully, and responsibly, but without sacrificing their own needs and integrity.

## What is Communication?

Communication = The exchange of ideas or feelings from one person to another.

Talking does NOT = communication!

*We hear only half of what is said to us,  
understand only half of that,  
believe only half of that,  
and remember only half of that.*

The communication process is complex. We send from 100 to 300 messages a day. These include:

- The message we intend to send.
- The message we actually send.
- The message as the hearer interprets it.
- The response of the hearer based on what he or she heard.
- Our reaction to the exchange of words, meaning and interpretation.

Why do people talk to each other? When we talk, it is because we have an idea or feeling that we want to share with someone. We talk in order to:

- Get acquainted.
- Build relationships.
- Express emotions to others.
- Share information.
- Persuade others to understand our personal views.

In order to have communication, both speaking and listening are required.<sup>1</sup>

## Types of Communication

Communication can be classified in many different ways. People in leadership roles have many opportunities to communicate with others.

### Intrapersonal Communication

When individuals talk to themselves, communication takes place within the brain. It includes their thoughts, experiences and perceptions during a communication event. Behavior that we see on all other levels of communication begins on an

intrapersonal level. On this level, the individual forms personal rules and patterns of communication.

## **Interpersonal Communication**

Communication between individuals is the pattern for all succeeding levels of verbal communication. At this level, each person is aware of sending messages to other persons. Interpersonal communication is sometimes referred to as *dyadic communication*, or communication between two individuals.

## **Small Group Communication**

This is sometimes included in the interpersonal level — the most obvious difference is the number of persons involved in the process. The small group may be a family of three talking at supper, five students working on a class project, or a meeting of an organization with just a few members.

## **Intercultural Communication**

This occurs when the source of the message is from one culture and the receiver is from another — such as when a Frenchman asks directions from an American in New York. The major difference between intercultural and the previous levels is that the communication process is affected by differing, and sometimes, conflicting rules which define acceptable communication between individuals and between groups.

## **Public Communication or Public Speaking**

The speaker sends messages to an audience, which is not identified as individuals. Unlike the previous levels, the speaker is doing most, if not all, of the talking.

## **Mass Media Communication**

Although mass media communication is public communication, not all public communication is mass media. At this level, there is “mass” distribution of a message to a large group of receivers. It is delivered through an impersonal means rather than directly from speaker to audience. These impersonal pathways include television, radio, motion pictures, newspapers, magazines, books, billboards, etc.

## **Nonverbal Communication (Body Language)**

Nonverbal communication is integral to all of the preceding levels — communication is a combination of verbal and nonverbal components.

In nonverbal communication, people send messages to each other without talking. They communicate through facial expressions, head positions, arm and hand movements, body posture, and positioning of legs and feet. How people use “space” also transmits a message. Another example would be carrying or displaying objects that “say” something about themselves.

By being aware of nonverbal communication, one can interpret the signals of others, or send signals that will promote the productive resolution of a dispute.

Awareness of nonverbal communication helps people:

- Project an image of confidence and knowledge.
- Demonstrate power or influence.
- Express sincerity, interest and cooperativeness.
- Create trust.
- Recognize personal tension in self and others.

- Identify discrepancies between what people are saying and what they are actually thinking.
- Change behavior and environment to encourage productive discussion.

Three cautions should be mentioned about nonverbal communication. *First*, an awareness of nonverbal communication is not a panacea for conflict resolution. Recognition and use of nonverbal skills is only one more tool to aid conflict managers or disputants in understanding conflicts. *Second*, awareness does not necessarily mean that something can be done about unwanted nonverbal communication. A lot of nonverbal communication is unconscious. And *third*, the meaning of nonverbal communication depends on both the sender's and the receiver's culture — their race, ethnicity, class, status, sex and individual differences. Some common interpretations of nonverbal behavior cross cultural boundaries, but others do not.<sup>1,2</sup>

## Visual vs. Verbal Activities

Information is shared in two ways — visually and verbally — and it appears that a combination of the two forms is generally most effective.

The use of graphics, or concrete examples, has a number of additional advantages. Concrete examples (graphics) provide a focus of attention for an audience. When people focus on a visual presentation, they share a definite point of reference. Too often, work groups get caught up in abstract word play, losing sight of the real issue. Charts, maps, even simple lists of information can help keep discussion focused.

Visuals also help the facilitator or discussion leader prepare for a meeting. The simple exercise of preparing a series of charts, diagrams, or maps forces you to organize information and anticipate the course of the group's deliberation. When the meeting planner shows up prepared and ready to begin, group members will know what to expect.

## Active Listening and Feedback

Good communication requires more than acceptance of feeling or empathy for another person. A listener must also have an accurate understanding of the content or substantive message of a speaker. Accurate feedback of the content may eliminate unnecessary communication conflicts caused by misinformation or misperception. The process of rephrasing a statement can make an item more manageable in size or scope or acceptable in terms of its tone or value.

*I-Messages:* Most of the messages we send to people about their behavior are “you” messages — messages that are directed at the person. These have a high probability of putting people down, making them feel guilty, and making them resistant to change. An “I-Message” allows a person who is affected by another's behavior to express the impact it is having on him or her. This leaves the responsibility for modifying the behavior with the person who demonstrated the behavior.

“I-Messages” build relationships and do not place the sender in the position of enforcing a new behavior. Many people have been taught to avoid “I” (as in I want or I would like), so it is often difficult to use this method.

### Four Parts of an “I-Message”

1. Specific behavior (“When you . . .”)
2. Resulting feeling (“It . . .”)
3. Effect (“I feel . . .”)
4. Resolution (“So, would you . . .”)

#### Example:

Part 1: “When you cut me off . . .”

Part 2: “It hurts my feelings . . .”

Part 3: “I feel as though you don’t value my opinion,”

Part 4: “So, would you please hear me out.”  
Since communication is the exchange of ideas or feelings from one person to another, it implies that the message has been heard.

## Effective Listening

People do more listening than any other form of communication. But most listen at an efficiency level of less than about 25 percent. Tests show that, immediately after listening to a 10-minute oral presentation, the average listener has heard, understood, properly evaluated, and retained only half of what was said. Within 48 hours, that comprehension rate dropped to one-quarter.

### People generally remember:

10 % of what they read

20 % of what they hear

30 % of what they see

50 % of what they hear and see

70 % of what they say and write

90 % of what they say as they do something

## Whose Responsibility: The Speaker or Listener?

Who has the primary responsibility for effective verbal communications, the speaker or the listener? This question has been asked of thousands of people. Seventy-five percent of those who answer say the speaker; 25 percent say the listener.<sup>2</sup>

This attitude is mirrored in people’s behavior as listeners. Because they assume the speaker has the main responsibility, they listen passively instead of taking an active, responsible role.

Just think how much better we could communicate if the speaker and the listener each would take 51 percent of the responsibility. Although this adds up to 102 percent, which may not be good mathematics, it represents highly effective communications.

### **A Good Listener:**

- Works at listening.
- Helps speaker transmit thoughts.
- Listens to understand, not to refute.

## **Listening**

First, what do we mean by “listening”? It is more than just hearing — that is only the first part of listening. Three other parts are equally important:

1. *Interpretation* — Interpreting what was heard leads to understanding or misunderstanding. Your brain absorbs and comprehends what you hear.
2. *Evaluation* — Weigh the information and decide how you will use it.
3. *Reaction* — Based on what you heard and how you evaluated, you act on it.

Listening is our primary communication activity. Studies show that we spend 80 percent of our waking hours communicating. About 45 percent of that time is spent listening. Our listening habits are not the result of training, but rather the result of the lack of it.

### **Listening is our number one communications activity:**

- Through open ears, the mind can absorb an endless amount of new information and ideas.
- It has been said that there’s at least one thing learned from everyone we meet, provided one bothers to listen.
- A listener loose in a world of talkers has one unbeatable edge: the flow of new ideas through the ears to the mind never stops.
- Listening is not a 9 to 5 job.
- The brain works four times faster than most people speak. We often wander into distraction.<sup>1,3</sup>

## **Listening Principles to Remember**

People tend to agree with other people they like, not so much because of their ideas but because of the fact that they like them. People also tend to like other people who listen to them. A key factor in listening is the ability to deliberately over-estimate the value and importance of the other person’s point of view.

## **Points for Good Listening**

Is it any wonder things get garbled along the way? Communication at best is a messy process. Good communication requires at least two basic skills: listening and giving feedback.

Good listening takes a lot of serious practice. One way to practice is to try to concentrate for one minute out of every hour on one specific sound or on what any one person is saying. Many of us at the start will only be able to concentrate for a few seconds. Keep practicing until you can hold complete concentration for at least one minute. This will be harder than you think, but it can improve your listening proficiency.

Practicing improved concentration methods may not make you a perfect listener, but it can make you a good listener. The pay-off is in better understanding, increased efficiency and closer friendships.

**Good listening requires that you concentrate on the speaker.**

- What is the speaker trying to say?
- What point is the person trying to make?
- Are the facts accurate, unbiased and complete?
- Is the source reliable?
- Listen for ideas.
- Think while you listen. Learn to eliminate distractions by concentrating on the ideas the speaker is presenting rather than pretending to listen.

As a person is speaking, think about relationships between facts and you will find that the person may be using several facts to develop one or two main ideas.

If you take notes, write down just enough to let you recall the ideas. Avoid taking everything down word for word, or you may miss the ideas that are presented.

Control your responses. Listen without judging. Try not to argue with the speaker's words in your mind. Avoid dismissing the speakers' ideas in advance, or judging the speaker's appearance. You can judge later after you have heard the information the speaker is giving.

Listen carefully to topics that are hard for you to follow.

Ask questions. If you can't interrupt, make a note to ask when the speaker is finished.

**List things that get in the way when you listen to someone else:**

- Words or phrases that prejudice you against the speaker
- Factors in the other person's appearance that may bias you
- Emotions (fear of asking silly questions, feeling guilty because you think you should already know something, etc.) that prevent you from learning.

## Active Listening

The purposes of active listening are to:

1. Help you check your understanding of what the person says and feels.
2. Generate further dialogue.
3. Help you improve your empathetic listening.
4. Build rapport.
5. Show that you understand and care.

Active listening is not just refraining from talking, but actively trying to understand the other person's total communication.

- Listen for both content and feelings.
- Respond to the feelings expressed.
- Accept both positive and negative expressions and feelings.
- Listen between the lines (for the nonverbal communication).
- Use the reflection technique.
- Use the pauses effectively.
- Summarize from time-to-time to indicate progress, to highlight major points, and to wrap up important sections of the interview.

**Maintain careful attention to both content and feeling.** Content refers to the meaning of a word. Feeling refers to the emotional state of the person. Feelings may include anger, frustration, fear, joy, sadness, domination and affection.

- Try to anticipate what the speaker is getting at.
- Do not form conclusions or begin to construct your reply until you first understand the speaker's position.
- Listen between the lines, try to pick up both the content and how the speaker feels about his or her position.
- Pause and consider what you heard before replying.
- Assume you probably don't understand completely and ask for feedback on what you think you heard.

**Reflect.** Re-state in your own words what you understand the other person to have just said. Include both content and feeling.

**Repeat.** Do not judge, question, argue or evaluate. At this stage, simply repeat your understanding and encourage the other to continue talking.

## **Behavior and Attitudes of the Good Listener**

- Tries to see the world, the situation, the problem as the speaker sees them.
- Places understanding foremost.
- Shows interest in the speaker.
- Accepts the speaker as he or she is.
- Respects the speaker's opinion and attitude.
- Willing to take time to listen, and determined to listen attentively.
- Controls his or her emotions.
- Is open-minded, receptive, but analytical.
- Has a wide range of interests, and is curious about things.
- Is convinced of own responsibilities to the speaker and undertakes this responsibility.
- Stands ready to listen patiently.

## **Using Feedback**

Feedback allows a listener to tell the speaker whether the message was understood. If it is done with care and consideration, it is an important tool for good communication. Feedback lets you describe your reaction instead of evaluating the other person's performance. It is very helpful to be specific and address a behavior the listener can change.

## **Listening Undergoes Distortion**

In listening, when you pass a message along through two or more persons, it often undergoes distortion each time it is repeated. Three different tendencies occur when the message is heard:

- Leveling: Tendency to drop some details out of information you hear.
- Sharpening: Tendency to make some details sound more important, and give them more emphasis than they had as you heard them.
- Projection: Tendency to add data out of your own viewpoint or mental outlook to what you have heard from someone else. How can you, as a listener, avoid such distortion?

## Suggestions for Limiting Distortions

- Repeat what you hear to the satisfaction of the person who just told it to you. You might say, “Let’s see if I’ve got this right.”
- Put the key elements of an important message in writing.
- Don’t assume that somebody is giving you a message exactly the way he or she heard it from someone else.
- If it’s important, verify it with the speaker’s source or the original source.
- Have your organization routinely check important information at each step as it is passed along through the chain of people.

Feedback allows the listener to relate information back to the speaker about the content or feelings conveyed. The person receiving the feedback is made aware of how his or her behavior affects himself or herself and others in the group.<sup>1</sup> This also serves as a check for understanding. Some examples of this are:

- The way I understand you is . . .
- Is this how you feel . . .?
- You sound as though . . .
- I get the feeling that . . .
- It sounds as if . . .

## Ways to Give Feedback

**Descriptive:** Descriptive rather than evaluative. Describing one’s own reaction leaves the individual free to use it or not use it as he or she sees fit. Avoiding evaluative language reduces the need for the individual to react defensively. The main purpose is to understand the speaker, not to belittle, mimic, or antagonize.

**Specific:** Be specific rather than general. To be told that one is “dominating,” will probably not be as effective as saying, “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.”

**Consider Needs:** Take 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.

**Realistic Request:** Direct feedback toward behavior which the receiver can do something about. Frustration is only increased when a person is reminded of some shortcoming over which those observing him or her can answer.

**Solicited:** Feedback should be solicited, rather than imposed. Feedback is most useful when the receiver has somehow formulated the kind of questions which those observing him or her can answer.

**Well-Timed:** Consider timing. In general, feedback is most useful at the earliest opportunity after the given behavior (depending on the person’s readiness to hear it, support available from others, etc.).



**Clear:** Check to insure clear communication. One way of doing this is to have the receiver try to rephrase the feedback he or she has received to see if it corresponds to what the sender had in mind.

**Check for:** When feedback is given in a training group, both the giver and receiver have the opportunity to check with others in the group on the accuracy of the feedback. Is this one person's impression or an impression shared by others?

Feedback is a way of giving help; it is a corrective mechanism for individuals who want to learn how well their behavior matches their intentions.<sup>1,4</sup>

## **Influencing Others**

Persuasion is simply the means of getting others to think and act the way you want them to. You persuade people by convincing them that your ideas, beliefs, opinions and feelings should be accepted. Persuasion often involves appealing to listeners' feelings and/or interests and ideas. Persuasion begins from an information base. Your most important boundary is your ethical responsibility. Effective persuasive communication is ethical communication. Persuasion is likely to succeed when the following conditions are met:

### **S-M-C-R MODEL**

- The Source:** The source of the persuasion shows conviction about her or his subject, is trustworthy, credible, and competent — an expert or authority in the area of concern.
- The Message:** The message is believable, reasonable, practical, probable, and supported by evidence and facts, as well as opinion.
- The Channel:** The way the message is delivered — by one-on-one conversation by the speaker, to a group or through mass media or written methods, affects the way it is received and understood.
- The Receiver:** The receivers (audience) are not presently ego-involved with the issue and have a personal stake in the outcome. The goal should not be too far from the focus of the receivers' beliefs. The period of time must be sufficient for a carefully considered program or "campaign" to bring about later effects.<sup>3</sup>

If you want to change a person's attitude, you must first change her or his behavior to parallel the desired attitude. Working for changes in attitude, in hope of getting the desired behavior, is more often than not met with frustration and failure. More information on persuasive strategies is provided in the module *Influencing Policy Decisions*.

## **Communication Difficulties**

Individual differences are a major cause of misunderstandings in communication. People want different things to satisfy their needs because of the interests (things wanted or enjoyed), values (things important or believed in), and attitudes (thoughts or feelings about ideas, people, things) they have acquired.

To avoid communication misunderstandings, try to accept and understand individual differences. Examine your own reactions to people and situations so you can imagine how it would be to be someone else. Practice empathy.

There are many ways individuals can misunderstand each other. For example, a person may be preoccupied and not able to listen to what others have to say. Or, a person can be so interested in communicating his/her own message and formulating a response that he/she listens to others only to find an opening to communicate his/her own message. Sometimes individuals listen in order to evaluate and make judgements about the speaker. The speaker may then become defensive and end the interaction. A lack of trust may also be a cause of communication distortion. In a group or between two people, misunderstandings can cause a reduction in the information that is shared and an uncertainty concerning the information being communicated. It takes continued effort and attention to maintain effective communication.<sup>4</sup>

There may be cultural, language or semantic differences. Sometimes we are blocked by our failure to understand clearly the words or terms used. There are the different connotations and meanings accorded words in various sections of the country, and by different racial, occupational and other groups. Even within a single organization, these factors often blur understanding between occupational and professional groups.

Four responses or roles that often cause difficulty in communications, as well as in relationships and task activities, are the:

## **Placater**

The Placater always talks in an ingratiating way, trying to please, apologizing, never disagreeing, no matter what.

- WITH WORDS the placater always agrees. For example: “Whatever you want is okay. I am just here to make you happy.”
- WITH BODY the placater indicates a sense of helplessness.
- WHILE ON THE INSIDE the placater feels: “I feel like nothing: without him or her, I am dead. I am worthless.”

## **Blamer**

The Blamer is a fault-finder, a dictator, a boss and always acts superior.

- WITH WORDS the blamer always disagrees, and says (or seems to say): “You never do anything right. What is the matter with you?” Or, “If it weren’t for you, everything would be all right.”
- WITH BODY the blamer indicates: “I am the boss around here.”
- WHILE INSIDE the feeling is: “I am lonely and unsuccessful.”

## **Computer**

The Computer is very correct, very reasonable with no semblance of any feeling showing. He or she is calm, cool and collected, and is almost totally disinterested and tries to sound intellectual. The computer uses big words.

- WITH WORDS the computer is ultra-reasonable. For example: “If one were to observe carefully, one might notice the workworn hands of someone present here.”

- WITH BODY the computer is stoic like a machine and seems to be saying: “I’m calm, cool and collected.”
- WHILE ON THE INSIDE the computer may really be saying: “I feel vulnerable.”

## Distracter

The Distracter never makes a direct response to anything. Anything he or she says is totally irrelevant to what anyone else is saying or doing.

- WITH WORDS the distracter makes no sense and is totally irrelevant.
- WITH BODY the distracter is angular and off somewhere else.
- WHILE ON THE INSIDE the distracter may be saying: “Nobody cares. There is no place for me.”

Mutual trust and respect are the foundation for effective communications. When both of these exist, goals can be developed to which all individuals and groups are committed. Communication systems and procedures based on shared goals and developed cooperatively are those most supported, most adhered to, and consequently most efficient.

## Write Like a Pro (Written Communications)

Crisp correct writing is essential to successful leadership communication. When a letter, report, or program flyer includes an error, readers are likely to remember the error rather than the message.

## Better Letters

When you can’t be present in person, make sure the letter that represents you will make the best impression possible:

- Date your letter correctly.
- Use the correct address with zip+four. Mailing lists should be updated on a regular basis, at least once a year. (Zip+four information is available at [http://www.usps.gov/ncsc/lookups/lookup\\_zip+4.html](http://www.usps.gov/ncsc/lookups/lookup_zip+4.html).)
- If you don’t know the person to whom the letter is addressed, don’t guess. A phone call may be all you need to obtain the correct information. If you can’t determine to whom a letter should be addressed, use a job title rather than a generic Dear Sir.

### Example:

Dear Project Director:

- Formal salutations require care: Pat Jones could be a man or a woman. To be safe, use Dear Pat Jones, rather than Mr. or Ms.
- Use block style (not indented); separate paragraphs by one line.
- Group thoughts or topics in paragraphs, but consider limiting paragraphs to no more than 11 lines. Longer paragraphs lose the reader.
- Get a letter off to a good start: Start with a positive.

### Example:

Thank you for agreeing to chair the county committee to evaluate services for the developmentally disabled.

- Close a letter with a specific request for action, a summary of ideas within the letter, or a statement of satisfaction or appreciation.
- When action is needed, be specific about deadlines.
- Close the letter in a professional manner.

**Examples:**

Sincerely or Cordially.

- Sign your name legibly over your title. The title may not be important to you, but is important to the recipient, he or she will know how to respond.
- Proofread your letter, and proofread it again. Professional writers read from the bottom up; if not anticipating the end of the sentence, they are more likely to catch errors.<sup>5</sup>

## Tips From the Professional

Although there are occasions when, no matter how hard we try, we miss a mistake or wish that we had chosen another phrase or expression, these tips from professional writers can help you sharpen your communications skills:<sup>5</sup>

- Never overlook the importance of proofreading. Remember that the person who typed the document is least likely to find errors.
- Spell checks are not perfect; remain alert, with special attention to names and words that sound alike but do not have the same meaning: stationary (one place); stationery (as in envelope).
- Try never to say “never.”
- Avoid beginning a letter or program announcement with a question. The reader can answer the question with a “No” and stop reading the message.
- **Choose your words carefully:**
  - a. *Should* implies that someone ought to. *Will* says you are going to do it.
  - b. *Can* implies ability; *may* gives permission.
  - c. *Accept* means to agree with; *except* means to exclude.
  - d. A *capital* is a letter or a city in which government offices are grouped; a *capitol* is the building in which governing occurs.
  - e. That or which? That introduces a clause that is necessary to the meaning of the sentence. Example: The rain that caused the flooding has stopped.
  - f. Which introduces a clause that is not necessary to the meaning of the sentence. Example: The new car, which is red, is ready for the fast lane.
  - g. *Affect* is a verb that means to change or influence; *effect* is a verb that makes it happen.
  - h. Effect also can be used as a noun that describes the result
- Do not begin a sentence with “However” or “Nevertheless.”
- When a number is the first word in a sentence, spell it out. Ten members attended.

- Use numerals in tables and when referring to 10 or more of anything. When referring to the numbers 1 to 9, spell them out.
- Use a comma to define quantities: 1,000 not 1000.
- Use *more than* 1,000 entries rather than *over* 1,000 entries. “Over” describes position, not a quantity. The handouts are on the table over by the window.
- Percent means per hundred. A percentage describes a portion relative to the whole.
- When a sentence ends with an abbreviation, two periods are not necessary: The meeting will begin at 9:00 a.m.
- Skip slang and local expressions.
- Be specific to get the job done. Instead of: Please return the permission slip ASAP, try: Please return the permission slip by Friday, November 15, at 4 p.m.
- Be kind. If you have a complaint, try phrasing it as a concern stated as an “I” message.

## Summary

Communication is simply an exchange of information—both giving and receiving. Talking, listening, reading, and understanding face and body movement are communication skills you use every day. But, communication also includes what you do and how you do it. Are you aware of the many ways you communicate each day?

Most people think of speaking before groups as an important leadership activity. There are many other communication skills that are just as important in your leadership roles.

Capable facilitators are excellent listeners, careful observers of nonverbal communication, skilled at conversing informally in small groups and on the telephone, able to obtain feedback from others, and skilled at writing. Learning activities in communicating will help you further expand these skills.

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