

SECTION-III

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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Introduction to Communication Skills

Why you need to get your message across?

Effective communication is all about conveying your messages to other people clearly and unambiguously. It's also about receiving information that others are sending to you, with as little distortion as possible.

Doing this involves effort from both the sender of the message and the receiver. And it's a process that can be full of error, with messages muddled by the sender, or misinterpreted by the recipient. When this isn't detected, it can cause tremendous confusion, wasted effort and missed opportunity.

In fact, communication is only successful when both the sender and the receiver understand the same information as a result of the communication.

By successfully getting your message across, you convey your thoughts and ideas effectively. When not successful, the thoughts and ideas that you actually send do not necessarily reflect what you think, causing a communications breakdown and creating roadblocks that stand in the way of your goals – both personally and professionally.

In a recent survey of recruiters from companies with more than 50,000 employees, communication skills were cited as the single more important decisive factor in choosing managers. The survey points out that communication skills, including written and oral presentations, as well as an ability to work with others, are the main factor contributing to job success.

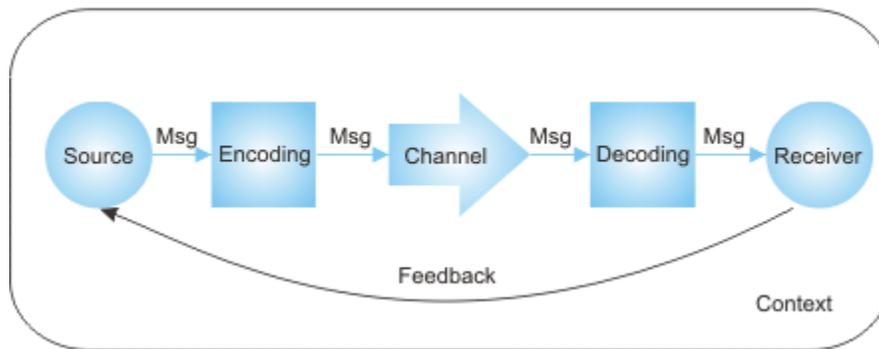
In spite of the increasing importance placed on communication skills, many individuals continue to struggle, unable to communicate their thoughts and ideas effectively – whether in verbal or written format. This inability makes it nearly impossible for them to compete effectively in the workplace, and stands in the way of career progression.

Being able to communicate effectively is therefore essential if you want to build a successful career. To do this, you must understand what your message is, what audience you are sending it to, and how it will be perceived. You must also weigh-in the circumstances surrounding your communications, such as situational and cultural context.

Communications Skills – The Importance of Removing Barriers

Problems with communication can pop-up at every stage of the communication process (which consists of the **sender**, **encoding**, the **channel**, **decoding**, the **receiver**, **feedback** and the **context** – see the diagram below). At each stage, there is the potential for misunderstanding and confusion.

The Communications Process



To be an effective communicator and to get your point across without misunderstanding and confusion, your goal should be to lessen the frequency of problems at each stage of this process, with clear, concise, accurate, well-planned communications. We follow the process through below:

Source:

As the source of the message, you need to be clear about why you're communicating, and what you want to communicate. You also need to be confident that the information you're communicating is useful and accurate.

Message:

The message is the information that you want to communicate.

Encoding

This is the process of transferring the information you want to communicate into a form that can be sent and correctly decoded at the other end. Your success in encoding depends partly on your ability to convey information clearly and simply, but also on your ability to anticipate and eliminate sources of confusion (for example, cultural issues, mistaken assumptions, and missing information.) A key part of this is knowing your audience: Failure to understand who you are communicating with will result in delivering messages that are misunderstood.

Channel:

Messages are conveyed through channels, with verbal channels including face-to-face meetings, telephone and videoconferencing; and written channels including letters, emails, memos and reports.

Different channels have different strengths and weaknesses. For example, it's not particularly effective to give a long list of directions verbally, while you'll quickly cause problems if you give someone negative feedback using email.

Decoding:

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Just as successful encoding is a skill, so is successful decoding (involving, for example, taking the time to read a message carefully, or listen actively to it.) Just as confusion can arise from errors in encoding, it can also arise from decoding errors. This is particularly the case if the decoder doesn't have enough knowledge to understand the message.

Receiver:

Your message is delivered to individual members of your audience. No doubt, you have in mind the actions or reactions you hope your message will get from this audience. Keep in mind, though, that each of these individuals enters into the communication process with ideas and feelings that will undoubtedly influence their understanding of your message, and their response. To be a successful communicator, you should consider these before delivering your message, and act appropriately.

Feedback:

Your audience will provide you with feedback, as verbal and nonverbal reactions to your communicated message. Pay close attention to this feedback, as it is the only thing that can give you confidence that your audience has understood your message. If you find that there has been a misunderstanding, at least you have the opportunity to send the message a second time.

Context:

The situation in which your message is delivered is the context. This may include the surrounding environment or broader culture (corporate culture, international cultures, and so on).

Removing Barriers at All These Stages:

To deliver your messages effectively, you must commit to breaking down the barriers that exist within each of these stages of the communication process.

Let's begin with the message itself. If your message is too lengthy, disorganized, or contains errors, you can expect the message to be misunderstood and misinterpreted. Use of poor verbal and body language can also confuse the message.

Barriers in context tend to stem from senders offering too much information too fast. When in doubt here, less is oftentimes more. It is best to be mindful of the demands on other people's time, especially in today's ultra-busy society.

Once you understand this, you need to work to understand your audience's culture, making sure you can converse and deliver your message to people of different backgrounds and cultures within your own organization, in your country and even abroad.

First Impression is the Last Impression

It takes just a quick glance, maybe three seconds, for someone to evaluate you when you meet for the first time. In this short time, the other person forms an opinion about you based on your appearance, your body language, your behaviour, your mannerisms, and how you are dressed.

With every new encounter, you are evaluated and yet another person's impression of you is formed. These first impression can be nearly impossible to reverse or undo, making those first encounters extremely important, for they set the tone for all the relationships that follows.

So, whether they are in your career or social life, it's important to know how to create a good first impression. This article provides some useful tips to help you do this.

Be on Time:

The person you are meeting for the first time is not interested in your "good excuse" for running late. Plan to arrive a few minutes early. And allow flexibility for possible delays in traffic or taking a wrong turn. Arriving early is much better than arriving late, hands down, and is the first step in creating a great first impression.

Be Yourself, Be at Ease:

If you are feeling uncomfortable and on edge, this can make the other person ill at ease and that's a sure way to create the wrong impression. If you are calm and confident, so the other person will feel more at ease, and so have a solid foundation for making that first impression a good one.

Present Yourself Appropriately:

Of course physical appearance matters. The person you are meeting for the first time does not know you and your appearance is usually the first clue he or she has to go on.

But it certainly does not mean you need to look like a model to create a strong and positive first impression

The key to a good impression is to present yourself appropriately.

They say a picture is worth a thousand words, and so the "picture" you first present says much about you to the person you are meeting. Is your appearance saying the right things to help create the right first impression?

Start with the way you dress. What is the appropriate dress for the meeting or occasion? In a business setting, what is the appropriate business dress? Suit, blazer, casual? And ask yourself what the person you'll be meeting is likely to wear.

For business and social meetings, appropriate dress also varies between countries and cultures, so it's something that you should pay particular attention to when in an unfamiliar setting or country. Make sure you know the traditions and norms.

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And what about your personal grooming? Clean and tidy appearance is appropriate for most business and social occasions. A good haircut or shave, clean and tidy clothes, neat and tidy make up. Make sure your grooming is appropriate and helps make you feel “the part”.

Appropriate dressing and grooming help make a good first impression and also help you feel “the part”, and so feel more calm and confident. Add all of this up and you are well on your way to creating a good first impression.

A Word about Individuality:

The good news is you can usually create a good impression without total conformity or losing your individuality. Yes, to make a good first impression you do need to “fit in” to some degree. But it all goes back to being appropriate for the situation. If in a business setting, wear appropriate business dress. If at a formal evening social event, wear appropriate evening attire. And express your individuality appropriately within that context.

A Winning Smile!

“Smile and the world smiles too.” So there’s nothing like a smile to create a good first impression. A warm and confident smile will put both you and the other person at ease. So smiling is a winner when it comes to great first impressions. But don't go overboard with this - people who take this too far can seem insincere or can be seen to be "lightweights".

Be Open and Confident:

When it comes to making the first impression, body language as well as appearance speaks much louder than words.

Use your body language to project appropriate confidence and self-assurance. Stand tall, smile (of course), make eye contact, greet with a firm handshake. All of this will help you project confidence and encourage both you and the other person feel better at ease.

Almost everyone gets a little nervous when meeting someone for the first time, which can lead to nervous habits or sweaty palms. By being aware of your nervous habits, you can try to keep them in check.

Small Talk Goes a Long Way:

Conversations are based on verbal give and take. It may help you to prepare questions you have for the person you are meeting for the first time beforehand. Or, take a few minutes to learn something about the person you meet for the first time before you get together. For instance, does he play cricket? Does she work with a local charitable foundation?

Is there anything that you know of that you have in common with the person you are meeting? If so, this can be a great way to open the conversation and to keep it flowing.

Be Positive:

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Your attitude shows through in everything you do. Project a positive attitude, even in the face of criticism or in the case of nervousness. Strive to learn from your meeting and to contribute appropriately, maintaining an upbeat manner and a smile.

Be Courteous and Attentive:

It goes without saying that good manners and polite, attentive and courteous behavior help make a good first impression. In fact, anything less can ruin the one chance you have at making that first impression. So be on your best behavior!

One modern manner worth mentioning is “turn off your mobile phone”. What first impression will you create if you are already speaking to someone other than the person you are meeting for the first time? Your new acquaintance deserves 100% of your attention. Anything less and you’ll create a less than good first impression.

Key Points:

You have just a few seconds to make a good first impression and it’s almost impossible ever to change it. So it’s worth giving each new encounter your best shot. Much of what you need to do to make a good impression is common sense. But with a little extra thought and preparation, you can sharpen your presentation style and make every first impression not just good but great.

Public Speaking Techniques

Ensure Your Words Are Always Understood:

Think of the last really memorable talk or presentation that you attended. Now, was that easy to do, or did you really have to rack your brains to remember one? Sadly, too many presentations are easy to forget. And that’s a big problem because the only reason the presenter gave the talk was to communicate something to you!

However, there are three basic things that you can do to ensure that your verbal messages are understood – and remembered – time and time again.

Although somewhat obvious and simple, these are:

- Understand the purpose of the presentation
- Keep the message clear and concise
- Be prepared
- Be strong when delivering the message

Understand what you want to achieve:

Before you start working on your talk or presentation, it’s vital that you really understand what you want to say, who you want to tell and why they might want to hear it. To do this, ask yourself: **Who? What? How? When? Where? Why?**

Who are you speaking to? What are their interests, assumptions and values? What do they share in common with others; how are they unique?

What do you wish to communicate? One way of answering this question is to ask yourself about the 'success criteria'. How do you know if and when you have successfully communicated what you have in mind?

How can you best convey your message? Language is important here, as are the nonverbal cues discussed earlier. Choose your words and your nonverbal cues with your audience in mind. Plan a beginning, middle and end. If time and place allow, consider and prepare audio-visual aids.

When? Timing is important here. Develop a sense of timing, so that your contributions are seen and heard as relevant to the issue or matter at hand. There is a time to speak and a time to be silent. 'It's better to be silent than sing a bad tune.'

Where? What is the physical context of the communication in mind? You may have time to visit the room, for example, and rearrange the furniture. Check for availability and visibility if you are using audio or visual aids.

Why? In order to convert hearers into listeners, you need to know why they should listen to you – and tell them if necessary. What disposes them to listen? That implies that you know yourself why you are seeking to communicate – the value or worth or interest of what you are going to say.

Keep it simple:

When it comes to wording your message, less is more. You're giving your audience headlines. They don't need to and are usually not expecting to become experts on the subject as a result of hearing your talk.

If you're using slides, limit the content of each one to a few bullet points, or one statement or a very simple diagram

Be prepared:

Preparation is underrated. In fact, it is one of the most important factors in determining your communication successes. When possible, set meeting times and speaking and presentation times well in advance, thus allowing yourself the time you need to prepare your communications, mindful of the entire communication process (source, encoding, channel, decoding, receiver, feedback and context). By paying close attention to each of these stages and preparing accordingly, you ensure your communications will be more effective and better understood.

Of course, not all communications can be scheduled. In this case, preparation may mean having a good, thorough understanding of the office goings-on, enabling you to communicate with the knowledge you need to be effective, both through verbal and written communications.

Unforgettable delivery:

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Your delivery of your speech or presentation will make or break it, no matter how well you've prepared and crafted your clear, concise message. Some useful tips for keeping your presentation strong include:

- Use examples to bring your points to life.
- Keep your body language up-beat.
- Don't talk too fast. Less is more here too. Pauses are effective.
- Use a variety of tones of voice.
- Use visual aids.

Writing Skills

Before You Write It Down, Know This:

Many people are frightened by writing. Even so, there are times when writing is the best way to communicate, and oftentimes the only way to get your message across.

Write With Necessary Caution:

When writing, be mindful of the fact that once something is in written form, it cannot be taken back. Communicating in this way is more concrete than verbal communications, with less room for error and even less room for mistakes. This presents written communicators with new challenges, including spelling, grammar, punctuation, even writing style and actual wording.

Thankfully, today's technology makes memo, letter and proposal writing much easier by providing reliable tools that check and even correct misspelled words and incorrect grammar use. Unfortunately, these tools are not fail proof and will require your support, making your knowledge in this area important.

The Importance of "Style":

Some of the most basic tips to remember when writing include:

- Avoid the use of slang words
- Try not to use abbreviations (unless appropriately defined)
- Steer away from the use of symbols (such as [&])
- Brackets are used to play down words or phrases
- Dashes are generally used for emphasis
- Great care should ALWAYS be taken to spell the names of people and companies correctly
- Numbers should be expressed as words when the number is less than 10 or is used to start a sentence (example: Ten years ago, my brother and I...). The number 10, or anything greater than 10, should be expressed as a figure (example: My brother has 13 Matchbox cars.)
- Quotation marks should be placed around any directly quoted speech or text and around titles of publications.
- Keep sentences short

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While the above tips cover the most common mistakes made when writing letters, memos and reports, they in no way cover everything you need to know to ensure your written communications are accurate and understood.

Letter Writing Hints:

When writing letters, it is best to address the letter to an individual. And, when beginning the letter with a personal name, be sure to end it with an appropriate closing, such as 'Sincerely yours'. If you cannot obtain an individual's name, consider ending it with a more generic (less personal) closing, such as 'With kindest regards'.

For normal business letters, your letter should start with an overall summary, showing in the first paragraph why the letter is relevant to the reader. It's not a good practice to make the reader go past the first paragraph to find out why the letter was sent to them.

The body of the letter needs to explain the reason for the correspondence, including any relevant background and current information. Make sure the information flows logically, ensuring you are making your points effectively.

The closing of the letter is the final impression you leave with the reader. End with an action point, such as 'I will call you later this week to discuss this further'.

The Importance of Careful Proofing:

Perhaps the most important thing to remember when writing a letter is to check it thoroughly when it is completed. Even when you think it is exactly what you want, read it one more time. This "unwritten" rule holds true for everything you write – memos, letters, proposals, and so on.

Use both the grammar and spell check on your computer, paying very, very close attention to every word highlighted. Do not place total faith on your computer here. Instead, you should have both a printed dictionary and thesaurus nearby to double-check everything your computers editing tools highlight, as these tools are certainly not always reliable, for a variety of reasons.

When checking your written communications, make sure the document is clear and concise. Is there anything in the written communication that could be misinterpreted? Does it raise unanswered questions or fail to make the point you need to get across?

Can you cut down on the number of words used? For instance, don't use 20 words when you can use 10. While you do not want to be brief or abrupt, you do not want to waste the reader's time with unnecessary words or phrases.

Is your written communication well organized? Does each idea proceed logically to the next? Make sure your written communications are easy to read and contain the necessary information, using facts where needed and avoiding information that is not relevant. Again, outline the course of action you expect, such as a return call or visit.

Close appropriately, making sure to include your contact information. While this may seem obvious, it is sometimes overlooked and can make your written communications look amateurish. This can diminish your chances of meeting your written communication's goals.

Communicating on the Web

How to communicate powerfully by email:

When you're trying to locate some information in an e-mail someone sent you a few weeks back, what helps you find it quickly? If the sender included the information you want in a long message covering lots of points, the chances are that it will take you time to find it. Worse, if the sender is someone you communicate with regularly, and he or she just pressed 'reply' to a previous message about a different point, the heading of the mail you need won't actually be related to the information you want.

There are a few simple rules to ensure that your emails are read in the first place and stay useful to the recipient.

Subject Lines are Headlines:

The headline in a newspaper does two things: It grabs your attention and informs you what the article is about so you can decide whether you want to read further. Email subject lines need to do the same thing. Use the subject line to inform the receiver of EXACTLY what the email is about in a few well-chosen words. You might include a call to action such as "Please respond by 7 November", and if your message is one of a regular series of mails, such as a weekly project report, include the date in the subject line too.

Because everyone gets emails they do not want (spam), appropriate use of the subject line increases the chances your email will be read and not deleted without so much as a glance.

Of course, just as it would be ridiculous to publish a newspaper without headlines, never leave the subject line blank.

Make One Point per Email:

The beauty of email, compared with letters, is that it doesn't cost any more to send several mails than it does to send one. So, if you need to communicate with someone about several matters, write a separate email on each subject. That way your correspondent can reply to each one in the appropriate time-frame. One topic might only require a short reply that he or she can make straight away. Another topic might require more research. By writing separate emails, you get clearer answers.

However, as with traditional business letters, the email should be clear and concise, with the purpose of the email detailed in the very first paragraph. Sentences should be kept short and to the point.

The body of the email should contain all pertinent information and should be direct and informative.

Specify the Response You Want:

Make sure to include any call to action you desire, such as a phone call or follow-up appointment. Then, make sure you include your contact information, including your name, title, and phone numbers. Do this even with internal messages: The easier you make it for someone else to respond, the more likely they are to do so.

Be a Good Correspondent:

If you regularly correspond using email, make sure to clean out your email inbox at least once each day. This is a simple act of courtesy and will also serve to encourage senders to return your emails in a timely manner.

If a lengthy response is required to an email, but you don't have the time to pull together the information required now, send a holding reply saying that you have received the message, and indicating when you will respond fully.

Always set your Out of Office agent when you are going to be away from your email for a day or more, whether on leave or because you're at meetings.

Internal Email:

Internal email should be checked regularly throughout the working day and returned in a much quicker manner as it often involves timely projects, immediate updates, meeting notes, and so on. Also, internal emails, just like other emails, should not be informal. Remember, these are written forms of communication that can be printed out and viewed by others than those originally intended for. Always use your spell checker, and avoid slang.

Win-Win Negotiations

Finding a fair compromise:

Do you feel that someone is continually taking advantage of you? Do you seem to have to fight your corner aggressively, or ally with others, to win the resources you need? Or do you struggle to get what you want from people whose help you need, but over whom you have little direct authority? If so, you may need to brush up your win-win negotiation skills.

Effective negotiation helps you to resolve situations where what you want conflicts with what someone else wants. The aim of win-win negotiation is to find a solution that is acceptable to both parties, and leaves both parties feeling that they've won, in some way, after the event.

There are different styles of negotiation, depending on circumstances.

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Where you do not expect to deal with people ever again and you do not need their goodwill, then it may be appropriate seeking to win a negotiation while the other person loses out. Many people go through this when they buy or sell a house – this is why house-buying can be such an unpleasant experience.

Similarly, where there is a great deal at stake in a negotiation, then it may be appropriate to prepare in detail and legitimate "gamesmanship" to gain advantage. Anyone who has been involved with large sales negotiations will be familiar with this.

Neither of these approaches is usually much good for resolving disputes with people with whom you have an ongoing relationship: If one person plays hardball, then this disadvantages the other person – this may, quite fairly, lead to insult later. Similarly, using tricks and manipulation during a negotiation can undermine trust and damage teamwork. While a manipulative person may not get caught out if negotiation is infrequent, this is not the case when people work together routinely. Here, honesty and openness are almost always the best policies.

Preparing for a successful negotiation:

Depending on the scale of the disagreement, some preparation may be appropriate for conducting a successful negotiation.

For small disagreements, excessive preparation can be counter-productive because it takes time that is better used elsewhere. It can also be seen as manipulative because, just as it strengthens your position, it can weaken the other person's position.

However, if you need to resolve a major disagreement, then make sure you prepare thoroughly. Think through the following points before you start negotiating:

- **Goals:** what do you want to get out of the negotiation? What do you think the other person wants?
- **Trades:** What do you and the other person have that you can trade? What do you each have that the other wants? What are you each comfortable giving away?
- **Alternatives:** if you don't reach agreement with the other person, what alternatives do you have? Are these good or bad? How much does it matter if you do not reach agreement? Does failure to reach an agreement cut you out of future opportunities? And what alternatives might the other person have?
- **Relationships:** what is the history of the relationship? Could or should this history impact the negotiation? Will there be any hidden issues that may influence the negotiation? How will you handle these?
- **Expected outcomes:** what outcome will people be expecting from this negotiation? What has the outcome been in the past, and what precedents have been set?
- **The consequences:** what are the consequences for you of winning or losing this negotiation? What are the consequences for the other person?
- **Power:** who has what power in the relationship? Who controls resources? Who stands to lose the most if agreement isn't reached? What power does the other person have to deliver what you hope for?
- **Possible solutions:** based on all of the considerations, what possible compromises might there be?

Style is critical:

For a negotiation to be 'win-win', both parties should feel positive about the negotiation once it's over. This helps people keep good working relationships afterwards. This governs the style of the negotiation –dramatics and displays of emotion are clearly inappropriate because they undermine the rational basis of the negotiation and because they bring a manipulative aspect to them.

Despite this, emotion can be an important subject of discussion because people's emotional needs must fairly be met. If emotion is not discussed where it needs to be, then the agreement reached can be unsatisfactory and temporary. Be as detached as possible when discussing your own emotions – perhaps discuss them as if they belong to someone else.

Negotiating successfully:

The negotiation itself is a careful exploration of your position and the other person's position, with the goal of finding a mutually acceptable compromise that gives you both as much of what you want as possible. People's positions are rarely as fundamentally opposed as they may initially appear - the other person may have very different goals from the ones you expect!

In an ideal situation, you will find that the other person wants what you are prepared to trade, and that you are prepared to give what the other person wants.

If this is not the case and one person must give way, then it is fair for this person to try to negotiate some form of compensation for doing so – the scale of this compensation will often depend on the many of the factors we discussed above. Ultimately, both sides should feel comfortable with the final solution if the agreement is to be considered win-win.

Only consider win-lose negotiation if you don't need to have an ongoing relationship with the other party as, having lost, they are unlikely to want to work with you again. Equally, you should expect that if they need to fulfill some part of a deal in which you have "won," they may be uncooperative and legalistic about the way they do this.

Listening Skills

Hear What People Are Really Saying:

Listening is one of the most important skills you can have. How well you listen has a major impact on your job effectiveness, and on the quality of your relationships with others.

We listen to obtain information.

We listen to understand.

We listen for enjoyment.

We listen to learn.

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Given all this listening we do, you would think we'd be good at it! In fact we're not. Depending on the study being quoted, we remember about 25-50% of what we hear. That means that when you talk to your boss, colleagues, customers or spouse for 10 minutes, they only really hear 2½-5 minutes of the conversation.

Turn it around and it reveals that when you are receiving directions or being presented with information, you aren't hearing the whole message either. You hope the important parts are captured in your 25- 50%, but what if they're not?

Clearly, listening is a skill that we can all benefit from improving. By becoming a better listener, you will improve your productivity, as well as your ability to influence, persuade, and negotiate. What's more, you'll avoid conflict and misunderstandings – all necessary for workplace success.)

The way to become a better listener is to practice "active listening". This is where you make a conscious effort to hear not only the words that another person is saying but, more importantly, to try and understand the total message being sent.

In order to do this you must pay attention to the other person very carefully.

You cannot allow yourself to become distracted by what else may be going on around you, or by forming counter arguments that you'll make when the other person stops speaking. Nor can you allow yourself to lose focus on what the other person is saying. All of these barriers contribute to a lack of listening and understanding.

To enhance your listening skills, you need to let the other person know that you are listening to what he or she is saying. To understand the importance of this, ask yourself if you've ever been engaged in a conversation when you wondered if the other person was listening to what you were saying. You wonder if your message is getting across, or if it's even worthwhile to continue speaking. It feels like talking to a brick wall and it's something you want to avoid.

Acknowledgement can be something as simple as a nod of the head or a simple "uh huh." You aren't necessarily agreeing with the person, you are simply indicating that you are listening. Using body language and other signs to acknowledge you are listening also reminds you to pay attention and not let your mind wander.

You should also try to respond to the speaker in a way that will both encourage him or her to continue speaking, so that you can get the information if you need. While nodding and "uh huhing" says you're interested, an occasional question or comment to recap what has been said communicates that you understand the message as well.

Becoming an Active Listener :

There are five key elements of active listening. They all help you ensure that you hear the other person, and that the other person knows you are hearing what they are saying.

1. Pay attention.

Give the speaker your undivided attention and acknowledge the message. Recognize that what is not said also speaks loudly.

- Look at the speaker directly.
- Put aside distracting thoughts.

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- Avoid being distracted by environmental factors.
- “Listen” to the speaker’s body language.
- Avoid side conversations when listening in a group setting.

2. **Show that you are listening.**

Use your own body language and gestures to convey your attention.

- Nod occasionally.
- Smile and use other facial expressions.
- Note your posture and make sure it is open and inviting.
- Encourage the speaker to continue with small verbal comments like yes, and uh huh.

3. **Provide feedback.**

Our personal filters, assumptions, judgments, and beliefs can distort what we hear. As a listener, your role is to understand what is being said. This may require you to reflect what is being said and ask questions.

- Reflect what has been said by paraphrasing. “What I’m hearing is...” and “Sounds like you are saying...” are great ways to reflect back.
- Ask questions to clarify certain points. “What do you mean when you say...” “Is this what you mean?”
- Summarize the speaker’s comments periodically.

4. **Defer judgment.**

Interrupting is a waste of time. It frustrates the speaker and limits full understanding of the message.

- Allow the speaker to finish.
- Don’t interrupt with counterarguments.

5. **Respond Appropriately.**

Active listening is a model for respect and understanding. You are gaining information and perspective. You add nothing by attacking the speaker or otherwise putting him or her down.

- Be candid, open, and honest in your response.
- Assert your opinions respectfully.
- Treat the other person as he or she would want to be treated.

Key Points:

It takes a lot of concentration and determination to be an active listener. Old habits are hard to break, and if your listening habits are as bad as many people’s are, then there’s a lot of habit-breaking to do!

Be deliberate with your listening and remind yourself constantly that your goal is to truly hear what the other person is saying. Set aside all other thoughts and behaviors and concentrate on the message. Ask question, reflect, and paraphrase to ensure you understand the message. If you don’t, then you’ll find that what someone says to you and what you hear can be amazingly different!

Start using active listening today to become a better communicator and improve your workplace productivity and relationships.