

HOW WE COMMUNICATE - “ARE YOU TALKING TO ME?”

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Talk is cheap, or is it? We all do it every day, sometimes into the night, but do we really think about what it’s all about?

Communication is a very involved behavior that we tend to do automatically. We learn to talk at a relatively young age by imitating those around us, not just their words, but what those words mean to them, their patterns of speech, body language, etc. We then begin to acquire our own styles and quirks as we go through life accumulating experiences. Because of this, we may take it for granted that others understand what we mean and that we understand what they mean. Misunderstandings arise every day as a result of this.

Probably one of the most important things to remember about communicating with anyone is: who determines the meaning of any message? Is it the sender or the receiver? As the sender, what you may intend to be heard, may not be what the receiver hears. Words mean different things to different people and assuming the message is heard as intended can get you in trouble. Ultimately, it is the receiver who interprets the message and may then act on it. The sender needs to be aware of this and take steps to be sure things were heard as intended and to clarify as needed.

Over the next few paragraphs we’ll explore four steps to communication, where problems arise, and strategies to prevent miscommunication and be sure your message is heard.

As we said last week, communication can be a tricky thing and there are four steps that we can take to help us be as effective communicators as possible. They are:



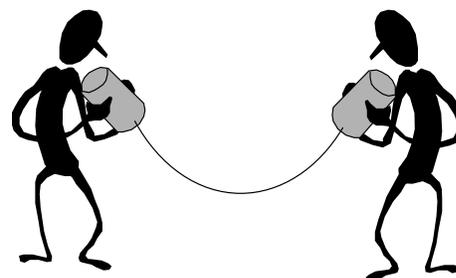
1. Formulate -What do you want to say and how.
2. Send - Give out the information either verbally or in writing.
3. Check - How was the message received and was it received accurately.
4. Adjust - Based on the reception, do you need to revise the message to get your point across accurately?

Let’s look at the first two steps in some detail.

First, formulating your message needs to take into account several things. First, with whom are you trying to communicate? For instance, you’d use a different approach and/or language for someone new to this country than you would for someone whose family has been here for generations. Also, their state of mind might be important, if they are angry or distressed. It’s important in this step to remember that language is a very personal thing. Words mean different things to different people. Joseph Salter said “Words are the Pavlovian bells of experience”. We all attach words to our own experience and they are unique. We tend to assume others know what we mean, that they see it from our perspective, but we know what happens when we assume anything! So, be careful to be as clear as possible with your message.

Second, sending the message can be done either verbally or in written form. In this case, timing can be very important. If you want conditions to be optimal for the receiver to hear it, pay attention to other distractions they may have, their mood. We all can remember trying to time it just right when asking a parent for permission to stay out late, have a party, go to a party, etc. or telling our partner we’ve overdrawn the bank account.

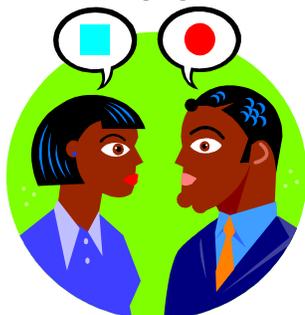
We've talked about the first two steps in effectively communicating as formulating the message and then sending that message. As important as it is to be sure our half of the process is clear, it's even more important to check whether it's been received as intended. Remember that it is the receiver who determines the meaning of the message. In light of that, here are some suggestions on how to check that out.



First, if possible, observe the other person's body language. Are there clues that tell you there may be a misunderstanding? For instance, if you come home and, looking forward to a comfort food meal of meatloaf and potatoes you ask, "Are we having meatloaf again?" and the response is a scowl and crossed arms, you might conclude that the message was received as a complaint. Eye contact, facial expressions, breathing patterns, and body stance are all clues to help evaluate the response.

Second, the verbal response on the part of the receiver can give lots of information. They may ask questions, get defensive, and answer a question you didn't intend to ask, or start talking about something completely unrelated to what you were trying to get across.

This is the time when it's important to be a good listener. Keeping your eye contact positive, leaning forward, acknowledging what's been said, nodding, not interrupting with questions but waiting until they are finished talking are all good ways to keep the lines of communication open.



Well, so far we've talked about the first three steps in effective communication; formulating the message, sending it, and checking to see how it was received. The final step is to adjust things to be sure the intent of the original message is received.

Adjusting the message is something we do every day in lots of different circumstances and we do it automatically. It can be as simple as when we are ordering in a restaurant and we ask for a steak to be well done. If the wait staff looks stricken, we may need to clarify that we don't want it totally charred. When telling your teenager they need to be in the house by 11 after a party, if they begin to jump for joy and hug you, you may need to clarify that that means PM, not AM the next day.

In business it is the same. Have you ever gone to look at cars and been approached by a sales person who immediately begins to counter all your rationalizations for not buying a new car until you find yourself with a new car? This is the art of adjusting your message.

It involves all three of the previous steps and then reformulating the original message until it becomes clear that the receiver has heard you in the way that you intended. The process may go back and forth several times as you probably have experienced many times. Working in a group or as a team, with a common goal, sharing ideas often requires this part of the process more than the average as you try to be sure several individuals really understand your idea or point of view.

This is where being clear about what specific words mean to us and others is important and not making assumptions is key. Asking clarifying questions or for feedback can make adjusting the message much more effective.

Effective communication and following this whole process through may take effort and can feel uncomfortable at times, but the pay off is less conflict and misunderstandings and that can be priceless.

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