

004

Better Communication



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Listening for Improvement

There are so many different aspects of communication, I couldn't hope to cover them in a single article so I'm going to look at a few specific areas of communication in how it affects our lives and our ability to learn and improve. This first one I was inspired by [Jennifer at Principles for Peace](#) with her article on listening. I definitely agree with many of her points and I like the background she gives about why so many struggle with listening. I have my own recommendations (definitely some similarities here) that I wanted to write for this first article on communication.



Patient Listening is Humble Listening

I've written a series about [learning to be more humble](#) and being humble definitely helps with listening also. It is important to ignore yourself, forget about what you have to say and start paying attention to the other person. Give them time to speak and don't interrupt by adding your opinion unless you're asked to. Be patient with your responses by purposefully waiting after each of their sentences or comments before you respond. Count to 5 slowly in your mind before you speak to ensure the other person has said everything they wanted to say. Often, they just need a second or two to organize their thoughts and have more to say. If you interrupt them and scar them with your own opinion, you really are not listening. Be patient, and give them time to share everything they want to share.

Use Your Imagination and Curiosity

I like to focus my articles and activities on what can be learned. Listening is no exception and good listening is practiced by showing interest and having some real curiosity about the person and what they are sharing. Put yourself into their shoes and imagine what they are feeling and thinking from the words and body language they are sharing. Think of how you are seen in response to that and use your imagination and curiosity to think on the subject *with* them.

Reflect and Paraphrase

Having those inquisitive thoughts will lead you to questions. Be careful not to jump the gun and ask those questions immediately. The first questions that usually come to mind are simple ones and they often only require yes or no answers. Avoid asking these types of questions. Take a moment and reflect on what has been shared and think of questions that require more elaboration

on. Asking how and why questions that require more explanation. These will ensure you get more valuable information and will show you have more interest as you dig deeper into the conversation.

Use paraphrasing to repeat the speaker but in your own words and paraphrase what they have said with what you interpret that to mean by asking about what they means or how it makes them feel or what you thought they were saying. This will ensure you are interpreting their message accurately and gives the speaker a chance to correct or elaborate on anything misunderstood.

Listen Entirely

Studies show that there is a lot of non-verbal communication from person to person and its estimated that of all communication, up to 75% is non-verbal. This means that there is a lot more to listening then the words themselves. There are many other things to other than just their words:

- tone of voice
- speed
- body posture
- eye movement
- facial expressions
- hand and body gestures

All these other components require that you pay full attention and listen entirely, not just with your ears to hear what they are saying, but with everything to fully understand all the signals in the communication. To do this, you need to put your eyes on the other person, but also open your own body up to them by facing them. You should always turn your shoulders to the person that is talking and have an open body posture towards them. Don't fold your legs or cross your arms or even lean back in your chair. These are all signs of disengaging or disagreement. Face them directly, lean towards them and make eye contact. Give them your full undivided attention.

Now, when it comes to attention, it's important to remove any or at least ignore any distractions when listening as well. If you are really going to listen, you should step away from what you are doing to pay full attention. In the workplace this means turning your chair away from your desk or computer to face the person. If you have a desk that you sit behind, pull your chair to the side and come around your desk. You don't want to have any barriers or large space between you. If your phone rings, someone else approaches, or any other distraction is nearby, simply ignore it. Keep your attention on the person speaking. Ignoring a phone call or another person for moment (even if it's your boss) is a powerful message that you are truly focused on listening to that person and goes a long way in credibility by building trust.

Using Questions Regularly

Looking at ways to improve your communication is very valuable and something everyone can afford to do. My last article I discussed how to [improve your communication skills by listening better](#) , and now I'll explore how to use regular questions to better communicate with others.



Stay Engaged

Asking questions is a simple way to stay engaged when communicating with someone. It shows interest and encourages the other person to keep communicating. If you don't show any interest in continuing a conversation, it often ends without making any ground. Asking questions helps you to keep that person going into more detail or to branch the discussion into related areas. It's important to keep the questions on topic and don't use them to steer the conversation in your own way.

Always ask open ended questions to keep the conversation moving forward. These are questions that require some explanation to answer, such as "Why do you think that is important?" Closed questions tend to end topics quickly since it gives little to no room for a party to elaborate on their response, they are simply yes/no type of questions. Keeping yourself and the other party engaged is an important way to have better communication, and asking questions is a powerful tool to ensure that happens.

Ensure Understanding

Communication is not just someone telling things to someone else. It is about how that communication is received and understood. You can use questions to ensure that you understand as well that the other person understands what you have to say. Questions can help you to clarify the content of communication and they provide a tool that you can use to ensure there is understanding from the other party as well. Ask someone to elaborate on a statement, or ask about what they think of something or perhaps even ask if they can explain what they think you are saying (or vice versa), these are all great ways to ensure that there is complete understanding. Mind you, you still have to learn to ask the right questions and to ask at the appropriate time in a conversation but these comes with practice and even a beginner with this will gain from it in communicating better.

Keep an Open Mind

Questions help communication because they keep you open minded since you use them to learn more about others' ideas and comments, instead of presenting your own in place of them. Using questions is very effective even if you don't agree with that person so that you are looking to see things from their perspective and consider more than your initial reaction. When you are asking questions, you come across that you are interested in learning about the other person and not just yourself. It's an easy way to hold back your own advice and comments in a conversation if you first look at asking more questions with an open mind about what is really being communicated.

Lead The Other Person

While it's important to keep an open mind, there are times when you want to really get your own point or argument across in a conversation. This can be done as well with questioning. If you use your questions with a word or focus on a particular outcome, you can often lead the other party your way with them still feeling like it was their decision to do so. This is obviously a powerful communication tool for a leader as there are times you already have a certain direction you would like a conversation to go, but don't want to tell or force the other person to go your way. If you use questions that lead them to what you want, you can communicate your direction and keep the other person highly engaged and interested. Sometimes a simple phrased question like, "Are you planning on writing a brief report then on that issue and getting everyone involved?" is a lot more powerful than, "What are you going to do next?".

So, you obviously have to balance this with keeping an open mind and using open ended questions when appropriate but you can definitely control how your questions impact a conversation just by the way you ask them.

Reflect

A final area I find critical in regards to questions in communication is actually reflecting on the questions from others. You should never interrupt or even respond too quickly to a question. Take an extra moment and reflect on that question. What are they really asking? Why are they asking it? What are they likely wanting from you in response? All these can be part of a momentary reflection in your mind before actually responding. Take a minute, show some facial expression to indicate that you are thinking on their question and then respond after reflecting on it. This helps to build rapport with others as they take you seriously and know then that you do in fact care about your response and that you put at least a moment of thought into it, and not just a reactive or instinctive answer. Watch for others reflecting on your questions and see what impact that has on you? You can do the same with your responses, it just takes a bit of reflection time.

What other communication techniques do questions give you?

Control Your Speaking

As I continue to look at communication skills and cover various areas of it, speaking is definitely an important one. I am certainly not a skilled public speaker or presenter and while that is a common skill for communication, this article is about controlling your speaking for every day communication and not focused on large group public speaking. I'll leave that to the experts.



Speak at the Right Pace

It is important to speak at a controlled pace so that your audience can easily understand you. Speaking too quickly makes you sound uneasy, nervous, or even unsure of yourself. Speaking too slowly will make you seem unconfident, or simply not convincing. You want to ensure you can get your point across clearly without your audience having to struggle to understand you.

It is very useful to record yourself or practice speaking at the right pace with a friend listening so that you can tell and listen to your own pace. I can see it's like

Breathe

Your breathing rate can relate to your speaking rate, but more importantly, you should have a calm tone, consistent rate and a normal comfortable breathing pattern. It's OK to pause your speech in order to take a breath and get your thoughts in order. Silence is a powerful message when communicating, it allows the other person time to think and reflect on what you said. Saying "Um" or "ah" frequently when you speak can be distracting and never helps you get your message across. So, remember that silence is OK and remember to breathe.

Engage Your Audience

My third tip to improve your communication is to always look for ways to engage the audience, whether it is one person or a group. Some of the ways you can do this are:

- asking them questions
- surveying with hands up or signalling them to respond
- lead them to finish your sentences
- have them repeat what you have said
- read something out loud with them

There are many ways you can actively engage your audience and an active audience is always more attentive. Use this to make your audience more engaged with the conversation which allows you to better communicate with them.

Use Gestures and Movement

Speaking of keeping your audience's attention, gestures are a great way to do this. Not only your hand gestures as you speak but your entire body's animation and movement. You may not be in front of a large audience or you might just be sitting behind a meeting table at work. It doesn't matter where, adding some natural movement and gestures to your message livens it up and makes what you have to say easier to remember and engage with for others. Presentations really require special attention here as some additional movement is critical when displaying pre-developed content as it doesn't have a whole lot of movement and expression.

Facial expressions I lump here into gestures as well as your expression with your mouth and eyes are key to showing interest, noteworthy points and your own engagement in a conversation.

Get to The Point

While I know that I personally have a severe lack of patience and appreciate knowing what someone is talking about, I still do appreciate a good story behind a point that someone is trying to make. It's important to not lead on your audience too long before making your point and it is often best to simply state it first and then explain any reasoning or findings that brought you to that particular message. Whether someone is patient or not, you don't want to lose the attention of your audience before you've made your point as it's nearly impossible to get it back once lost.

Staying on point also means keeping your message simple. Stay on one topic and don't jump around your main points attempting to cover too much material.

Don't Use the Word But

There are a number of words that are never helpful in communication and "but" is one of them that is in the top 10 list and a personal pet peeve of mine. That word is used to essentially negate everything before it so knowing that, you might as well not have said anything before it and left the "but" out altogether. A terrible mistake in communicating with others and unfortunately a habit of many people when debating a subject is to agree with someone's point and then negate that using the word "but" and stating their own opinion to replace the original idea. Don't do that, it does nothing but harm when communicating with others. This is a really tough one to control and something worth paying attention to if you have a habit of using this word. Work to simply eliminate using it by just forming two separate sentences instead. Or you can use the word "and" instead of "but" which show agreement plus your own point of view instead of something to replace it.

This is a subtle element of improving your communication with speak and it is also a very important one!

Speak With Passion

I've saved the best for last here, at least as far as I'm concerned. Speaking with passion is not easy and the scary part is that a lot of people aren't passionate about anything to even know what that might mean. What it means to me is that you speak with an enthusiasm and conviction towards the subject that an audience can see that what you have to say is absolutely true and dear to you, that you believe in what you say and that you want to successful communicate. Speaking with passion will be visible in difference ways for each person and is often seen by:

- high amounts of movement and expression
- massive pitch and volume swings
- vivid details and imaginative descriptions of the subject matter
- visible or audible emotion
- total engagement with all parties completely unaware of distractions

There are much more detail to get into on each of these communication topics and I'd love to hear from you on techniques you use or find useful or what other areas of communication you have the most interest in learning more about?

Writing with Impact

Generous Writing

With the world of text messaging, email and internet everything, there is still a high quantity of communication systems that use text. They are doing it in a more segmented, small content system however. The good thing is that there is lots of medium to write in and many opportunities in our lives and jobs to use writing to communicate. And better than that, there are people who are willing and wanting to read what you have to communicate. There are many places where writing can be used and generally in business, there is room for more writing. Whether its for status updates, issue reports, instructions, directions, requests or simply email messages there is value in being generous with your writing.



I don't mean to be generous by writing longer messages or more wordy content, instead be generous with what you write about and how often you write. Writing a follow up message or thank you note even after a discussion can be a huge plus with your communication as it reinforces what you had to say and puts a reminder out to your audience which helps to clarify your message and the repetition helps it be remembered.

Style

Develop and watch for your own style in your writing. Consistency with how you write and your approach to putting your ideas to text can lead not only to having a style of your own in your writing, but it also builds on your personality and reputation if you are consistent in how you write. This is especially true in business as written messages and instructions can be a critical part of your perceived personality so don't take your writing style for granted. Be careful of your tone, clarity and any emotional content you include.

Put some style into your formatting and use white space, lists, and headings to organize your content and keep the attention of your readers. Pictures can definitely help with this as well but are not always necessary. A few others specifics of style which can improve your communication are to avoid slang, jargon, abbreviations, and symbols. These all help keep clarity. Spend some time to refine your style and be careful to keep it consistent as it will have impact with how well you can communicate your written text.

Outline and Plan Your Writing

It's never a bad idea to plan your writing, whether it's an email message or a long instruction manual, you should always outline what you want to write and plan it out before beginning to write your content. For example, I always put down my headings for an article before starting to write the paragraph content to ensure I cover the topics I want to and that I can fit things into some structure that is prepared before I begin to write. Putting just a couple of minutes in up front will help you focus your writing on what you intend to cover and will help to keep off topic components out of your writing.

Careful of Negative Emotions

Emotional text is very difficult to clearly write and so main recommendation when it comes to writing anything that has some emotional attachment to it, is DON'T! Just don't write it. Unless you are a very careful and practiced author, most people cause far more problems in their writing than they solve when they include any emotional content. This includes writing about how someone made you feel, your feelings (not just opinions) on a subject or feedback to someone about how something made you feel. If you find yourself writing under any kind of strong emotional state (especially negative emotions like fear or anger or jealousy), do yourself a favor and just stop writing. You are better off communicating by phone or in person for these subjects and best left not recorded in text.

Now, emotions can play an important role in getting your message across if used to deliver a passionate heartfelt text. This is where emotions in text can be useful, just keep in mind they are hard to express. Think of how a novel author can write for several paragraphs to describe the feelings and thoughts of a character in a story. It can take the same level of detail and attention to express your own emotions accurately with no room for interpretation so make sure you include enough detail to minimize any room for question.

Proofing

While some will argue that it's a waste of time to spend much time proofing work for minor errors, there is much more to proofing your written work than just the obvious problems that can be overlooked. Other reasons are more important and the most would be to ensure that what you've written makes sense and is worded in a way that delivers the intended message. Eliminating simple spelling and grammatical errors is also important as any mistakes will slow down and distract your reader from what you are wanted to communicate.

Take care and time to ensure what you've written is said well and change any content that is not clear when you proof the work. Good writing should never need to be reread to be understood and it should make your point without complex and difficult language. Take the time to make it concise and to the point while proofing, looking to eliminate unnecessary wording and sentences.

I hope these tips will help you to have more impact with your writing and to be a better communicator. If you missed any of my previous articles in this better communication series, you can check them all out below. I'd love to hear any comments about this article or others in this series.

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