

Keys to More Effective Communication

I specialize in communications because over 70% of our time is spent communicating with others, and that's the one interaction every person must do. Everyone must communicate their needs and ideas. Every organization must communicate its products and services. Unfortunately, many people have trouble in this area. Some just don't have the professional impact they need to get ahead in today's corporate world. I believe that how we communicate is just as important as what we say because people judge us, our companies, our products, our services, and our professionalism by the way we write, act, dress, talk, and manage our responsibilities. In short, how well we communicate with others.

Successful people know how to communicate for results. They know how to say what they mean and get what they want without hurting the people they deal with. You deal daily with peers, outside groups, customers, employees, and managers, and you must have a good communication style.

When I ask people how well they communicate, their answers usually fall into one of three categories. First, and most prevalent, is the person who responds, "I communicate perfectly. I spell everything out so there's nothing left to doubt."

Another will react with surprise and ask me, "What do you mean 'how well?' I don't think about communicating, I just do it."

The third type will reflect on the question thoughtfully before saying something like, "How can one ever know how well they get their ideas across to another person? All I can tell you is I work more hours trying to communicate than I can count, and it still doesn't work some of the time." Each answer, in its own way, is correct.

Communicating today is both a discipline and a liberation. Our language is flexible; one size fits all. It's a language in which ravel and unravel mean the same thing; flammable and inflammable mean the same thing; fat chance, slim chance, no chance at all mean the same thing. Communication is both a science and a feeling; it's often a cinch, and often an impossibility.

The smell of a woman's perfume, the taste of semisweet chocolate, the sight of a blind person's cane, the feel of the feverish brow of a sick child, the sound of the background music of a horror movie—all these move us to action or reaction.

These are all examples of effective communication, and none of them involve words.

Communication is full of risks; despite whatever precautions and plans we make, we can never really be sure of our success. No communication ever travels from sender to receiver in the same shape intended by the sender. And, no matter how hard you try, the message will never be what you say—the message is always what they hear. But if you have a system to go by, you can at least reduce the risk and improve your chance of being effective.

For communication to occur, there must be a two-way interchange of feelings, ideas, values; clarification of signals; and a fine-tuning of skills.

Adjust the Climate

Whenever people get together to communicate with one another, two factors are always present. First, there is some sort of content to be covered--instructions, news, gossip, ideas, reports, evaluations, etc.

All of us are familiar with the content of communication, because it's the most obvious factor, and because we deal with it every day. The second factor that is always present when people get together to communicate is the atmosphere or feeling that accompanies what you say. This is known as the communication climate.

Physical climate affects us in many ways. When it's cold, we wear warm clothes. When it's raining, we wear protective clothes. And it's not uncommon for weather conditions to affect our mood. Communication climates also affect us. They can be either positive or negative. When the communication climate is positive, it's easier for us to communicate, solve problems, reach decisions, express thoughts and feelings. In short, it makes working and dealing with other people more pleasant and productive. We've all been in restaurants, stores, offices, and homes where we felt comfortable and at ease. We usually want to go back to those places. We've also been in homes, offices, and shops where the climate has been negative. In those instances, we were uncomfortable, uneasy, and less open. We usually don't enjoy attempting to communicate or do business in a negative climate. Are you making the climate negative for those you work with?

Choose Your Channel

Like a radio, human transmitters and receivers have channels. A communication channel is the medium through which information passes from sender to receiver: lecture, written messages, telephone conversations, face-to-face dialogue, and group meetings.

The choice of a channel may affect the quality of the communication and, in turn, the degree to which the receiver will respond to it. Therefore, you must decide which channel will be most effective in accomplishing your purpose.

Written communication should be used when communicating complex facts and figures or information, such as engineering, legal or financial data, since communication breakdowns often result when complex material is presented orally. Written communication is also the best channel when communicating with large numbers of people, when transmitting large amounts of data, or when you need a record of the communication.

The telephone is appropriate when communicating simple facts to a few people. The phone also has more impact and sense of urgency than written communication, but not as much as a meeting. To insure that messages are understood on the phone, you may want to ask for feedback and check to make sure the communication link is complete.

Face-to-face communication has more urgency than meetings. It also has the advantage of speed, allows considerable two-way communication to take place, and usually elicits a quick response. It's usually best to use face-to-face dialogue when the interaction is personal—when giving praise, counseling, or taking disciplinary action.

Meetings are appropriate when there is a need for verbal interaction among members of a group. Studies have revealed that supervisors spend more than half of their potential productive time in meetings, discussions, and conferences. For this reason, it's important to decide in advance whether a meeting will actually achieve the desired result.

Eliminate Static

Another helpful skill is elimination of communication “static” or barriers. If there's too much static, or noise, there's a garbled message. The problem is that each of us has different barriers, and we don't usually know what kind of noise

the other person is hearing. Sometimes we guess, and sometimes we guess wrong. The major barrier to communication is our natural tendency to judge, evaluate, approve, or disapprove the other person's statements.

Suppose the person next to you at lunch today says, "I really like what Kay duPont has to say." What will you say? Your reply will probably be either approval or disapproval of the attitude expressed. You'll either say, "I do too!" or you'll say, "I think she's terrible." In other words, your first reaction will be to evaluate it from your point of view, and approve or disapprove what the other person said. Although the tendency to make evaluations is common in almost all conversation, it is very much heightened in those situations where feelings and emotions are involved.

Tune In

One of the best ways to "tune in" to the other person is to find out how they process and store the information they receive. Studies of Neurolinguistic Programming (NLP) have proved that there are three sensory process types: Visual, Auditory, and Kinesthetic.

Some people are visually oriented. They remember and imagine things by what they look like. They store pictures. Some people are auditory—they store sounds. Some people are kinesthetic—they store touch sensations.

How can you figure out a person's processing system? By listening. People tend to broadcast how they process information, how they file their data. Visually oriented people say things like: "Here's what it looks like to me. Do you see what I mean? Do you get the picture? I need a clearer vision of that. That's not coming in clear to me." All visually oriented terms.

Auditory people remember and imagine things by what they sound like. They say: "Here's what it sounds like to me. That rings a bell. Do you hear what I mean? We need to have more harmony in this office. We're not in tune on this."

Kinesthetic people remember and imagine things by the feel of them. They say: "Here's what it feels like to me. Do you grasp what I'm saying? That was a rough problem. That was a heavy burden. That was a weighty issue."

People don't always use the same sensory words, of course, but we do tend to use one sensory process about 70% of the time. If you want me to understand how

you feel or see what you mean or get in tune with your ideas, you need to talk to me in words I'll relate to—either visual, auditory, or kinesthetic. If you talk to me in flowers, and I hear in pastry, we can't communicate. This is a very sophisticated form of communicating, and can be very effective.

Know Your Nonverbals

Body movement, eye contact, posture, and clothing are also very important elements. In fact, studies prove that 93% of your message is nonverbal and symbolic. Employees learn to cue on the boss' moods, spouses learn to react to each other's movements, children instinctively watch for signs from their parents.

Studies have also taught us that sometimes our tongues say one thing, our bodies say another thing, and our symbols—like clothing and hairstyles—say still a third thing. When this occurs, the normal person will believe what they see, not what they hear. So you need to be constantly aware of the image you portray. Is it one of assertive confidence ... someone who is willing to listen and solve problems? Or is it of someone who is unfriendly and uncaring? Do your clothes and posture reflect a person of high quality or one of sloppy habits?

Over 2 centuries ago, Ben Franklin said, "Power is with the person who can communicate well." It's truer today than it has ever been. And the power exists within you ... all it takes is awareness and practice.



Franklin