

How to Communicate a Message Effectively

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Effective communication is the cornerstone of any relationship whether personal or professional. Without it a meaningful connection is more difficult. So why is such a simple thing like talking such a complicated process?

Firstly, communication is more than just talking. It is a process that allows the exchange or passing of information by a sender to a receiver with meanings, thoughts and information being exchanged to produce mutual understanding and hopefully meaningful interaction. Secondly, by "message" I mean what are you trying to say. Unless the sender is clear in what they want to say, the message will get lost.

The process of transmitting this information from an individual to another (or group) is a very complex process with many sources of potential error. At least some of the "meaning" gets lost in the transmission of a message therefore there is potential for miscommunication, misunderstanding and potential conflict especially in the workplace.

In this article, we will look at two-way communication (where a message can be checked for understanding) as opposed to one-way communication which is when the communication is mainly for information purposes, for example, newspapers, traffic signals and so on.

Communication skills are vital in making sure your message is understood correctly whether that is at work or at home. Understanding and honing these skills are vital in effective communication and in turn allow a more valuable connection in the relationship.

Further, we look at six steps to support you (as the sender) to be clearer in the way you deliver what you need to say. Thinking about these steps before you speak will support you in having enhanced communication. The six steps are:

1. Purpose & Message
2. Vehicle for Communication
3. Delivering the message
4. Potential Barriers
5. Check for Understanding
6. Feedback

Purpose & Message

One of the reasons that messages can get misunderstood by the receiver is that the message is not clear or that there are mixed messages. When this occurs it is usually because the sender is not clear on what they want to say. Therefore, before you communicate a message, be clear about what you want to say and understand the reasons why you want/need to communicate the message. In many circumstances, this will be clear, however, in other instances it will not.

So taking a few moments to answer the "what" and "why" will allow you to be more specific and clearer in what you say. Obviously you will not do this in every instance but when the message is of importance, it is vital.

For example, in a work environment you may have to give some constructive feedback. The way you deliver it will be crucial to the way the receiver takes it. If you spend a few moments writing down what specifically you want to say, you will be more effective. The receiver may, therefore, potentially be less defensive so this increases the chances of a robust conversation.

Vehicle for Communication

How will the message be delivered? This is significant as the way the message is received will be affected if the wrong vehicle is chosen. For example, giving some challenging feedback to a work colleague is probably better given face to face than in an email. This allows opportunity for minimal misinterpretation. However, if you were seeking particular information, a conversation by phone or an email would be suitable.

Choosing the correct vehicle will allow the original message to be heard and understood in the context you intended. Otherwise it leaves too much to be presumed or assumed, meaning that the receiver will be confused and not understand what the message is what could lead to frustration and anger on the part of the receiver.

Delivering the Message

The method you use to deliver the message will be more crucial than the actual message itself. By this, I mean that the language and choice of words you use, the tone of your voice even your body language is central to the way the receiver will interpret the message.

In regards to language, there is plenty of room for interpretation and distortion of the meaning of words especially if they are not easily understood. Because meaning needs to be given to the words to be understood, there are factors that can affect how an individual will attribute this meaning. This in turn gives more scope for error especially since no two people will assign the same meaning to identical words. Their own experiences, feelings and background will contribute to this interpretation. Thus, being clear is vital.

If the message is being given in person, how is your tone of voice? Using an angry, aggressive voice will only breed an aggressive response and stop the receiver from listening appropriately therefore blocking the message getting through.

So before you proceed with a message think about what language to use to convey effectively what you want to say. It is always better to use simple, straightforward and specific words.

Potential Barriers

What is a barrier? And how is it relevant to communication?

Anything that can potentially interfere or alter with the delivery of a message could be perceived as a barrier. There are a number of sources that can enter into the

communication process regardless of the relationship between the receiver and the sender.

The following list shows how widespread barriers are. Any of the following could potentially interfere with the message being received effectively:

- stress
- noise
- accent
- assumptions
- defensiveness
- distorted perceptions
- inconsistency
- time/day message is given
- cultural differences
- overload of information

The above list barely touches the surface of potential sources of possible barriers. Familiarising yourself with some of the barriers is helpful in being aware of what could disturb the delivery of the message.

All barriers are important, however, some more so than others. Studies suggest that over 90% of the message received is from non-verbal behaviour. So how you present yourself will affect how the message is received. It will be confusing if you say one thing but do another. Being aware of the receiver's body language while you are giving your message will provide you with clues as to whether the receiver actually understands your message the way you intended.

The timing of the message is also extremely important. For example, if feedback is given in the workplace but is given just as the receiver is about to walk out the door the message will not be fully understood and more likely misinterpreted.

Check Message has been understood

While giving your message you can look for the non-verbal clues mentioned above. However, once you have finished with your message it is best to see if the receiver has understood. Ask questions and engage the person in conversation. Ask the receiver to paraphrase what you said as this is an excellent way to look for inconsistencies of the message.

Also allow the receiver the opportunity to speak if they want to. It is important that you give them this opportunity and therefore listen openly without interrupting. Listening is one of the key skills in communication for both parties. While the receiver speaks, listen honestly and with empathy. Respond in a way that shows you understand their concern. Most people want to be heard, not necessarily agreed with.

Feedback

Once you have finished this, seek feedback from the receiver on how you could improve the way you give a message (you don't have to be in a work environment to do this). Ask for their views or suggestions. Allow them to respond authentically, truthfully and openly.

You will learn and improve if you are open to this process. Although communication is dependent to a degree on the receiver and their listening skills, the method, timing and body language of the sender all contribute to the receiver having more opportunity at understanding better.

A major source of problems in communication is defensiveness. Effective communicators are aware that defensiveness can be a typical response. Following the six steps allows the sender to minimise this defensiveness. The sender can't control the receiver's response. However, being respectful, clear and honest will more likely result in a more productive communication process.