



Essential Skills for a Communicator

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Speak with more confidence in one-on-one conversations
- ✓ Feel more confident speaking socially or small groups such as meetings

Essential Skills for a Communicator

Good Communication Skills

How do we get to be better communicators? To make powerful, impressive, and lasting presentations, start from within.

- **Talk to yourself.** Clarify the message in your own mind before you try communicating it to someone else.
- **Rehearse.** Nothing clarifies your thoughts more than writing them down, and then saying them in different ways until you get them to where you want.
- Be very aware of the messages or **inner tapes** you are playing to yourself. Don't sabotage yourself by giving yourself negative messages about your ability to communicate, or about how the other person will take your message.
- Most of us are way too hard on ourselves. Plan what you will say and then **be optimistic** that it will come out right and be received well.
- Who is stopping you from being **self-confident** and **self-reliant** right now? I'm not stopping you. Have a look at any barriers you are putting up and make a decision to deal with them.
- When you speak to individuals, take the time to express yourself in an **organized** manner. Don't rush.
- **Clarify.** Ask for feedback. Do not assume that the message sent was the message received.
- Take part in all the activities we'll be doing today. When you take part, you are preparing yourself to **be a leader**, rather than a follower, in your workplace and your community. You are being a role model for your colleagues, your children, and those who look up to you in other ways.
- Know when to **stop talking**.

When presenting to a group, make sure you:

- Have a message worth communicating
- Understand your audience and what their needs are
- Gain the listener's attention
- Emphasize understanding
- Get feedback
- Watch your emotional tone
- Persuade them to adopt your point of view or take the action you want them to take

Today you will have several opportunities to practice the skills of speaking in public. Use these exercises because they are good learning opportunities and practice makes perfect.

Barriers to Communication

What are some of the barriers that keep us from communicating well with others?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Interpersonal Skills

Listening

The two most basic elements of good communication are listening to others and asking questions. The physical process of **hearing**, where sound enters your eardrum and is registered in your brain, is not the

same as listening. **Listening** is more of an attitude, a desire to understand what is being communicated. It is an essential communication skill.

Many of us don't listen very well, and we fake it a lot of the time. We pretend we are listening when we really aren't, and that can create a whole lot of trouble with other people.

The good news is that we can all learn to be better listeners. We can talk about listening in terms of two types of listening:

- **Passive Listening:** We hear the sounds but we aren't taking an attitude that allows us to hear the message.
- **Active Listening:** We make a conscious effort to hear and understand the message.

Steps to Active Listening

- Non-verbal cues, such as eye contact, leaning toward the speaker, and an alert expression on your face.
- Short verbal cues, such as "Uh-huh," "Yes," "I understand," etc.
- Feedback: Where the listener summarizes, clarifies, or asks questions.

Getting ready to listen means becoming prepared psychologically. It is like thinking, "OK, another person is taking a turn and I must get ready to listen." It is important in a group that every member finds a useful way to listen.

When we make a decision to listen for total meaning, we listen for the **content** of what is being said as well as the **attitude** behind what is being said. Is the speaker happy, angry, excited, sad, or something else entirely?

Responding to Feelings

The content (the words spoken) is one thing, but the way that people feel really gives full value to the message. Responding to the speaker's feelings adds an extra dimension of listening. Are they disgusted and angry or in love and excited? Perhaps they are ambivalent! These are all feelings that you can reply to in your part of the conversation.

Reading Cues

Really listening means that we are also very conscious of the non-verbal aspects of the conversation.

- What are the speaker's facial expressions, hand gestures, and posture telling us?
- Is their voice loud or shaky?
- Are they stressing certain points?
- Are they mumbling or having difficulty finding the words they want to say?

Demonstration Cues

When you are listening to someone, these techniques will show a speaker that you are paying attention, providing you are not acting them out.

Physical indicators include making eye contact, nodding your head from time to time, and leaning into the conversation.

You can also give **verbal cues** or use phrases such as “Uh-huh,” “Go on,” “Really!” and “Then what?”

You can use **questions** for clarification or **summarizing statements**. Examples:

- “Do you mean they were charging \$4.00 for just a cup of coffee?”
- “So after you got a cab, got to the store, and found the right sales clerk, what happened then?”

Tips for Becoming a Better Listener

- **Make a decision to listen.** Close your mind to clutter and noise and look at the person speaking with you. Give them your undivided attention.
- **Don’t interrupt** people. Make it a habit to let them finish what they are saying. Respect that they have thoughts they are processing and speaking about, and wait to ask questions or make comments when they have finished.
- Keep your **eyes** focused on the speaker and your **ears** tuned to their voice. Don’t let your eyes wander around the room, just in case your attention does too.
- Carry a **notebook** or start a conversation file on your computer. Write down all the discussions that you have in a day. Capture the subject, who spoke more (were you listening or doing a lot of the talking?), what you learned in the discussion, as well as the who, what, when, where, why, and how aspects of it. Once you have conducted this exercise 8-10 times, you will be able to see what level your listening skills are currently at.
- Ask a few **questions** throughout the conversation. When you ask, people will know that you are listening to them, and that you are interested in what they have to say. Your ability to summarize and paraphrase will also demonstrate that you heard them.
- When you demonstrate good listening skills, they tend to be **infectious**. If you want people to communicate well at work, you have to set a high example.

What are some additional ways of improving your listening?

Why Don't People Listen?

Let's take a look at the problems and some possible solutions.

The listener has decided in advance that the speaker or the subject will be uninteresting.

This leads the listener to tune out. Instead, tell yourself you will make a real effort to learn something new during the conversation and put effort into listening.

The listener is distracted when someone is speaking.

Choose an area without distractions. Refuse to be distracted.

The listener didn't adjust to what the speaker was saying. For example, you were talking about the weather, but the topic has now shifted to what the speaker did on vacation.

This requires some mental agility. You could ask the speaker to slow down and give you time to shift gears.

The listener took too many notes.

Rather than copy down every word, just note key points. This takes practice, but is worthwhile mastering.

The listener felt that what was being said was too difficult to understand so they tuned out.

The listener should ask questions to clarify, or ask the speaker to illustrate the point. The speaker can also watch for non-verbal cues that the listener is getting confused and adapt their language to help communication.

The listener got sidetracked by their own biases.

Let's say the speaker used the word "refugee" to refer to the people made homeless by a flood or earthquake. You prefer the word "victim." This may be important to you, but try not to raise this point until the speaker has had opportunity to complete their thoughts.

The listener jumped in too soon to relate their own ideas or experience.

Be patient. Listen. Give the other person their turn. Then present your ideas or experiences, if appropriate.

The listener listened only for the facts and didn't pay attention to body language.

This is all about increasing your awareness of those around you and how they are reacting emotionally to what is being said. Learn more about body language to help you.

The listener was daydreaming.

Self-discipline is required to listen. Bring yourself back to the conversation by internally saying “stop.” Remember to make eye contact to connect with the speaker. This will also help you to stay engaged.

Asking Questions

Get in the habit of asking good questions to clarify what has been said. We can do this by paraphrasing (“Are you saying...?”) or by asking other questions such as, “Do you mean...?”

Other open questions that can gather more information include:

- What do you think we can do about this?
- What would you like me to stop doing?
- Would it be helpful if I...?
- Supposing we were to...?
- Help me understand where you’re coming from?
- Let’s set a time when we can talk about the changes we’re both prepared to make.
- I’m prepared to... Would that help with the situation?

Three people that I consider to be good listeners:

Getting Comfortable in Conversation

Four Levels

Being comfortable speaking with others in small social settings can have a big impact on both your personal and your professional life. We are all more drawn to the person who looks at ease and confident than we are the person who looks ill-at-ease and awkward. Individuals who can carry on a conversation have stronger relationships. They also tend to be more confident when it comes to speaking in public.

At work, our first encounter with another person often begins with a handshake and a smile, while looking directly at the other person. This does not include staring at another person unblinkingly, but rather, looking at their face: the eyes, nose, and mouth triangle.

Level One: Small Talk

What can you do to give yourself an advantage when striking up a conversation? Let’s spend a little bit of time talking about the different levels on which we communicate.

Small talk means a very superficial conversation about the weather, the traffic, current events, etc. While this may seem purposeless, it isn't. This is our chance to size up another person and decide whether you have something in common. You don't know the other person and you aren't expected to reveal anything personal about yourself.

We are aware of a young teenager who had a hard time in conversation with people her own age (especially boys!). She decided that since lots of the boys she knew were interested in sports, it would be a good idea to learn about some of the sports they enjoyed, and to be able to talk about them. Not only did she manage to attract lots of new friends, she also found out how much she enjoyed sports at the same time. This technique was something that she shared with her girlfriends. Taking an interest in other people and the things they are passionate about is a great way to get into a conversation.

Things we might use to make small talk:

Level Two: Fact Disclosure

When the small talk phase goes well, we are ready to move onto the second level of communication with our conversational partner. We will reveal a few facts about ourselves, such as our occupation, our hobbies, or the types of activities we enjoy. Now that you are revealing a bit more about yourselves you may find more you have in common. There is give and take in this conversation as you ask and answer questions with your partner.

Level Three: Viewpoints and Opinions

Generally people don't move to this stage until they feel comfortable with one another and believe they have found common ground when you disclosed facts in the second level. In this level you go beyond that to give your opinion of whatever it is you've been talking about.

Examples:

- Skiing is an expensive hobby
- Your dream is to ski in Jasper, Alberta
- You are counting the days to retirement
- You are hoping to move to another job soon

You may even venture into such quagmires as politics or religion if you are feeling comfortable enough to do that. The general rule is “low and slow,” as in don’t reveal too much too soon. You may want to commiserate about the high cost of sending a child to university today, but wait until you know the person better before you reveal that you took out a second mortgage to send your child to university.

Level Four: Personal Feelings

This usually doesn’t come until you feel very comfortable with your conversational partner. The surest way to get here is to not reveal too much too soon. An example of too much too soon might be telling someone all the details of a messy divorce just five minutes into meeting them, or upon learning someone is of a different political party, launching into a condemnation of that party.

A successful conversation starts at level one and proceeds at a comfortable pace through the second and third levels and continues to the fourth level, although usually not during your first meeting. With some people, you will find yourself moving easily through at least the first three stages, if not to stage four. It usually takes a lot of conversations with someone you feel very comfortable with before you progress to level four.

Practicing Dialogue

Our Role Play

Further Reading:

- ✓ *Berkley, Susan. Speak to Influence. Campbell Hall Press, 2004.*
- ✓ *Boothman, Nicholas. How to Make People Like You in 90 Seconds or Less. Workman Publishing Company, 2000.*
- ✓ *Carnegie, Dale. How to Win Friends and Influence People. Pocket Books, 1998 (Reprint*