



Developing Communication Skills

Learning Outcomes

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

- ✓ Feel more confident speaking socially or small groups such as meetings
- ✓ Practice developing these skills in a safe and supportive setting

Developing Communication Skills

Redesigning Yourself for Strength

Can you imagine what it must be like in broadcasting school? What about being a voice for cartoons or reading audio books? These speakers have learned how to control their voices in order to capture the attention of a listener. By paying close attention to the following elements of voice, you will see the potential for making changes to your own voice and becoming a stronger, more confident speaker.

Tone

Tone refers to the way that you distinguish or inflect your words. We use tone to express emotion, emphasis, contrast, and other features of our speech. Your tone tells your audience **how you are feeling about the words you say**. Good intonation lets others see your attitude and your enthusiasm for your subject, and demonstrates that they are consistent.

Which do you prefer: monotonous or melodious? Do your words come out pleasant and energetic, or lifeless and wooden? Think in terms of friendliness and a desire to communicate with others and develop the best intonation that you can to captivate listeners to what you have to say.

Pitch

This refers to how high or low your voice is. In most cases a **low-pitched** voice is considered an asset. Men and women who have lower voices are considered more exciting, more credible, more sociable, and more relaxed. They are also generally easier to hear when you are in the audience. If you have a **high-pitched** voice, be aware of it and consider how you can best deliver your message. If you have a high voice and will speak frequently, working with a vocal coach can be an excellent idea.

Pacing

Do you **trudge like a turtle** or **race like a rabbit** when you speak? If people cannot follow what you are saying, you'll need to slow down. Speak too slowly, however, and your credibility can suffer. Fortunately, we can train ourselves to pause after a particularly dramatic statement, or after a question we want our audience to respond to. We can learn how to pick up the pace to create energy and to slow it down for heightened emphasis.

Emphasis

Emphasis changes the meaning of our words.

- I was born in Boston. (You, on the other hand, were born somewhere else.)
- I was **born** in Boston! (How dare you suggest otherwise!)
- I was born **in** Boston. (I wasn't born nearby.)
- I was born in **Boston**. (I wasn't born in Sydney or London or Bangor.)

Facial Expressions

The face conveys more messages to the listener than any other part of our body. **Positive aspects** include a smile, eye contact, relaxed facial muscles, and an alert expression. **Negative aspects** include rolling your eyes, frowning, glaring, smirking, or looking tense. If you are curious about what your face is revealing, videotape your presentation or a rehearsal and have a good look.

Posture

The way we stand conveys a lot about our level of confidence. A good posture (head up, shoulders back, both feet on the floor) says we are confident. Watch that you don't sway, rock, or pace when you are speaking to others. Moving around can show how comfortable you are speaking, but if you pace back and forth across the room, you probably look nervous and your constant movement can be distracting.

Body Language

Positives	Negatives

Professionalism

Looking Professional

The way you look really does say a lot about you. Dressing professionally will help you be more confident when you speak, so dress the way you want to be perceived. Look like you care about what you are doing.

Always appear as **neat and clean** as possible, with hair and fingernails that are clean and neatly trimmed, and shoes that are clean and polished.

Choose your clothes carefully so that you look **trim** and **neat**. Be sure clothing fits properly. You won't feel good and you won't look good if your clothes are too tight. If they are too loose, you may look like you don't care. Dress comfortably and be proud of who you are.

You don't have to dress like a fashion maven, nor spend a lot of money trying to keep up appearances. If you are building your wardrobe, consider consignment and second hand resources, which can be an excellent way to build a wardrobe on a **budget**. Make sure that you learn the colors and styles that suit you and stick to them.

Learn how to **maintain your clothes** so that they present you in the best way possible. This means that you need to know how to iron your clothes and how to look after specialty fabrics if you have some. You'll also need to know how to reattach a button that falls off or where there is a tailor that can hem your pants.

Wait! Forget it, you're thinking! **I just need to speak in a meeting, not learn how to sew!**

Really? Step back and think for a moment. You enter a meeting where you need to participate. Around the table are five other people. A couple of them are, as always, nicely dressed. A few others obviously take things out of the dryer and wear them to work. They look "fine" but slightly disheveled. Who has **the edge** that you want or need in order to make a statement?

No matter what we want to believe, **your clothes matter**. You will feel much more confident if you dress up than if you dress down. **Just try it and see what happens!**

Speaking Professionally

Here are some things to think about to help you when you are speaking. Consider each of these ideas, and then see if you can add to the list.

- **Volume:** Too loud or too soft?
- **Clichés:** We all use a few clichés but avoid them if possible.

- **Grammar:** This is too broad a topic to discuss fully today. Ask someone you trust, whose grammar is good, to give you some feedback on your grammatical errors.
- **Diction:** Pronounce words clearly, and watch that you aren't dropping your "-ings."
- **Slang or vulgarities:** No swearing or crude words.
- **Gender references:** Watch that you don't refer to all people in authority or "he" or all those in service positions as "she."
- **Acronyms and jargon:** If you must use words that are familiar terms to you but which will not be understood by others in the audience, either substitute more familiar words or explain the terms.
- **Tact** is diplomacy of the heart. This means saying the right thing. You know when to leave the wrong thing unsaid.

Maximizing Meetings

Four Areas of Opportunity

Meetings are a central part of communication and cooperation within any organization. Don't think of them as drudgery. Recognize them as opportunities to develop skills and develop your reputation, as well as a chance to stay on top of essential organizational information.

Anticipate.

If you receive an agenda ahead of time, take a few minutes to look it over. If you see areas where you may have an opportunity to take the lead or to provide information to others, use that opportunity. If there is no agenda, ask for one.

Prepare.

Do your homework. If you plan to speak on an issue, know what you are talking about. Keep your comments positive and speak with enthusiasm. The direct, relaxed approach works best. Get quickly to your point and stay with it. If you are raising an issue of complaint or concern, it will be better received along if you include reasonable solutions. Busy people have little patience with more than they want to know. However, clarity and conciseness takes preparation.

Participate.

When should you speak up?

- When you know you can clarify a point
- When you can supplement pertinent information or furnish convincing statistics
- When you can correct an error
- When you wish to ask a question
- When you can give credit that's due
- When you have a good idea or an original suggestion
- When someone else has taken your idea and presents it as their own

Be brave! A great way to get more confident at speaking in front of others is to volunteer to chair meetings. Let your boss know that you want to improve and that you are up to the challenge!

Concentrate on Your Message

What does the audience need to hear? Focusing on your message and your audience instead of your nervousness will help to boost your confidence. Put the power in your message instead of holding onto it and giving you a case of nerves to deal with.

Fifteen Ways to Master a Meeting

Know everybody's name.

Know what everybody does so you won't step on anybody's toes.

Be careful about personal comments.

Don't create subconscious barriers to communication (i.e. crossing your arms).

Sit erect and square your shoulders. Look alert and lean forward slightly.

Discuss but don't argue.

The head of the table is a seat considered to have some power or authority. The three other important positions are those to the right or left of the head of the table, and, unless it is too far away, the position directly opposite.

Another good position is a corner position, because you can make eye contact with more people.

If you are seated and an important person enters the room, stand up to shake hands. A woman should rise to her feet as readily as any man.

If you are holding the meeting, reserve the most impressive, appropriately appointed conference room, when the meeting warrants it.

If it is your meeting, lead it!

If it is your meeting, have an agenda and let people know why they are attending the meeting.

Start and end on time.

If it is someone else's meeting, take responsibility and participate.

Demonstrate high energy and involvement.

Sticky Situations

Write down a description of a type of situation that you dread.

What have you done in the past to resolve it?

What might you do in the future?

Suggestions from Others

Controlling Nervousness

Slight nervousness is normal for anyone, especially the first few times you make a presentation or speak in public. These jitters can actually help you and give you an edge when you take that nervous energy and deliberately use it as fuel for your presentation.

Nervousness has a way of spiraling, where you may notice all of a sudden that your heart is pounding, your knees are shaking, or your voice is trembling.

The secret you want to learn is not necessarily the confidence that comes from experience (although that helps), but a change in attitude. When you learn to shift your focus from yourself to the audience, you start to release the hold that fear has on you.

One of things that you will notice is that when you are well prepared for your presentation, you will feel less nervous about it.

Controlling Physical Nervousness

- **Smile.** Look friendly and confident even if you don't feel that way. Your body will pick up on the positive energy and feelings that you generate, which will help you get centered.
- Take **deep breaths** to get oxygen into your brain.
- **Pretend.** There is never a better time to put on a false face of optimism and confidence.
- Your brain will respond to your positive self talk, so **speak kindly** to yourself.
- Athletes **visualize** their entire event so that their brain and body can recall the feelings of success and help them perform well. When speaking, we can receive the same benefits from visualizing that athletes do.
- Expect to do well. Give yourself lots of **positive feedback**.
- **Remember** a time when you did well. Keep thinking of that time.
- **Speak about things you care about**, which will reduce jitters because your focus will be on the subject.
- **Avoid caffeine**, which can increase your nervousness.

Capitalizing on the Law of Attraction

We generally **get what we expect**. We can also create circumstances to get what we want. Positive expectations are one of the most powerful, outwardly identifiable characteristics that winning personalities demonstrate.

Evaluate your self-talk, the inner conversations you have with yourself. A winner's self-talk sounds like this: "I did well today. I'll do even better tomorrow." "I am getting to be a better speaker every day." A loser's self-talk is more apt to be, "Murphy's Law says whatever can go wrong will go wrong," or, "If I didn't have bad luck I'd have no luck at all."

The **way you treat yourself** really shows in your results. If two people have equally rotten things going on in their lives (an earthquake or a tornado, for example), the positive person will recover more quickly than the negative one. Positive people live longer and are healthier than people who are negative.

Do you see where we are going with this? Embrace the **habits of positive, optimistic people** in order to develop those qualities within yourself, and you will find your fears of speaking in public much smaller than they ever were.

Tell Me a Story

Prepare a short two minute talk about an incident in your life that taught you a lesson. Make this talk about something you remember well, so you only need to jot down a few notes. When presenting, think of yourself as someone at a party talking about this incident to your friends.

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Further Reading:

- ✓ *Carnegie, Dale, and Joseph Berg Esenwein. The Art of Public Speaking. CreateSpace , 2011.*
- ✓ *Osborn, Michael, Randall Osborn, and Suzanne Osborn. Public Speaking (8th Edition). Allyn & Bacon, 2008.*
- ✓ *Stevenson, Doug. Never Be Boring Again. Cornelia Press, 2003.*