



Unit 3

The Role of Communication in Conflict Resolution

Learning Outcomes

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

- ✓ Develop effective techniques for intervention strategies.
- ✓ Become more confident of your ability to manage conflicts to enhance productivity and performance.

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The Communication Chain

The most common causes of conflict include a breakdown in communication, or sometimes just a lack of communication, between individuals and groups. What we say isn't always what the other person hears. Our message goes through a complicated system of filters and outside influences before it reaches the recipient. We must always clarify that the person has received the message that we intended to send.



Speaker's Words

Some things to think about when you are the speaker and want to have your message heard as it is intended:

- Avoid absolutes like “always” and “never.”
- Try not to use the word “but” too often. (It tends to negate what you say in front of it.)
- Big, complex words or jargon creates opportunities for misunderstanding.
- Negative words like “problem, can’t, or won’t” create an impression of unwillingness.
- Use positive words that listeners understand.

Speaker's Facial Expressions

Some things that other people will see when you are speaking:

- Our face is our most important non-verbal message to listeners. They are put off by an angry or blank, disinterested expression.
- Rolling the eyes, frowning, or not making eye-contact all send negative messages.
- Some cultures find eye contact arrogant or aggressive. Know where you are and to whom you are speaking to create the best experience.
- Try to have an alert, pleasant, relaxed look on your face.

Speaker's Tone of Voice

This is how your voice sounds to others. If you are not certain what your own voice is like, ask a trusted colleague or a mentor.

- Negatives about a speaker's tone of voice include: monotone, too loud, too soft, sarcastic, impatient, too fast, and too slow.
- Listeners want to hear a voice that is loud enough to be heard but not so loud it hurts the eardrums.
- They want to hear sincerity and interest.

Other Body Language

- While our facial expressions will be noticed first, listeners are also aware of impatient little movements like glancing at our watch, shifting uneasily in our chair, gathering our papers, or crossing our arms.
- There are many reasons for someone to cross their arms, yet this is recognized internationally as disinterest, closed mind, adversarial position.
- Aim for a relaxed position with your body slightly leaning toward the speaker.

Other Barriers

There are other barriers besides those we have discussed that can get in the way of good communication.

Paradigms

For example, we all operate within certain **paradigms**. A paradigm is a set of rules and regulations (written or unwritten) that does two things:

- It establishes or defines boundaries.
- It tells you to behave inside these boundaries in order to be successful.

Let's look at the game of tennis. Tennis is a game that is itself a paradigm. If you were to hit the ball across the net with a golf club, or use a domino in place of a tennis ball, you would be laughed at or perhaps kicked off the court, because you'd be breaking the rules of the game, or the paradigm.

For example, we often make judgments about the behavior of others who we believe are breaking the rules without knowing the full story. Does that untidy front lawn belong to someone who doesn't care about their surroundings, or does it belong to someone crippled by arthritis who can't afford to pay others to do the yard work?

Education

Education can create communication barriers. You may have a PhD in philosophy, and use words I may not understand. I think you are showing off, when these are everyday words in your world. Or you don't have any degrees and I do, so I believe you will be less knowledgeable than I about any number of things.

Assumptions

We also make assumptions about people that are not based on fact. For example, you saw a friend walking down the sidewalk toward you. Shortly before you came face to face, your friend crossed to the sidewalk on the other side of the street. You might immediately make the assumption your friend just snubbed you. It may be that your friend is short-sighted and didn't have a clue the person coming toward her was you.

Establishing Positive Intent

About Positive Intent

One way to minimize barriers right from the start is to establish **positive intent**. Positive intent includes the idea that you have good reason for what you are saying and doing, and so do other people. It's best to come from a place of concern and providing support when you deal with conflict and positive intent helps to do that. In order to demonstrate your positive intent, avoid making negative assumptions and statements, and focus on the future instead of the past. Remember, dealing with conflict helps us create productive outcomes and resolve differences.

Test your Knowledge

Rewrite the following messages using positive intent in a conversation.

I need that report immediately!

There's no way we are doing that!

I can't stand the way you talk to me.

Accepting Differences

Another aspect of positive intent is to accept **that not everyone is like you**. People have strengths, and they also have limitations. You have to consider why a particular behavior is a problem. Is it a problem for you because of your perspective, or is it genuinely a problem? Have your feelings been hurt? If so,

then you need to get a handle on your feelings, identify the root cause of the problem, and be prepared to keep those feelings in check.

Active Listening Skills

The problem is that listening and hearing are not the same thing. Most of us were fortunate to be born with hearing, but listening is a skill that must be learned and practiced in order to use it successfully. When you **hear** something, sound enters your eardrum, passes through your ear canal, and registers in your brain. **Listening** is what you do with that sound and how you interpret it.

Here are some tips for successful listening:

- Listen intentionally for people's names.
- Listen with interest.
- Try to get rid of your assumptions.
- Listen for what isn't said.

Listening is hard work. When other people are listening to us, they have the same difficulties we do in trying to focus on a message. Our minds wander, noises or thoughts distract us, and we can be thinking about what to do next.

Active listening means that we try to understand things from the speaker's point of view. It includes letting the speaker know that we are listening and that we have understood what was said. This is not the same as **hearing**, which is a physical process, where sound enters the eardrum and messages are passed to the brain. Active listening can be described as an attitude that leads to listening for shared understanding.

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 to 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, provided you are genuine in using them.

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 until 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.

Paraphrasing Skills

What is Paraphrasing?

Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is an essential skill in conflict resolution. It means restating what you heard back to the person you are speaking with. (However, make sure you use your own words. You don't want to sound like a parrot!) Paraphrasing can help you ensure that you're hearing the other person, and it can make sure the other person feels heard.

Here are some phrases that you can use when paraphrasing:

- "Here's what I understand from what you just said."
- "So if I understand you correctly, you..."
- "I'm hearing that..."
- "What I hear you saying is..."

Make sure to check for understanding with statements like, "Is that right?"

Case Study

Bill and Sue are the two most senior people on the design team at Acme Widgets. Things are changing fast in the widget world, and their team has been tasked with developing the most revolutionary widget yet. Bill thinks that they should develop a touch screen widget, while Sue thinks that voice activation is the way to go. They've been butting heads for days, and a decision needs to be made soon.

Sue used paraphrasing to help her understand Bill's position.

- Bill: "We definitely need to improve the touch screen. That's what everyone else is doing. We also need to make sure we have support for styluses."
- Sue: "So if I understand you correctly, the touch screen is the most revolutionary. Is that right?"
- Bill: "Yes, that's what Smith Widgets and Jones Widgets just released."
- Sue: "And our second priority should be including stylus support?"
- Bill: "Well, it should be incorporated with the touch support."
- Sue: "OK, so stylus and touch support are both features that other companies have."
- Bill: "That's right."

Summary Questions

You can also use a **summary question** to ensure understanding. Let's say that the person you are speaking with has just related their efforts to help resolve the conflict at hand. Your summary question might look like this: "You have tried ignoring the scent of your colleague's cologne, you have talked with

him about how it affects your allergies, and you have tried shutting your door to keep the scent from your workspace. None of these has worked and now you are asking me to intervene. Have I got it right?”

Pairs Exercise

Find a partner and take turns paraphrasing the other’s statements. When you are the speaker, put as much drama into each statement as you wish. When you are paraphrasing, try to reflect what you hear the person saying, as you might when trying to understand where they are coming from.

Here are some sample statements:

- You are mean and cruel. I can never do anything right.
- I think you pay more attention to what George and Tony say than you do what I say.
- Does nobody around here care what I think?
- Why can’t you see that I do want to work as part of a team? I just don’t always get the chance to show that I do.
- You just want to grab all the glory for yourself. You never give the rest of us any credit for what goes on around here.
- Whenever you come up with an idea, it’s a creative initiative that shows outside the box thinking. Whenever I come up with an idea it is impractical and expensive.
- I am not disorganized; I’m just trying to do too much. I need another pair of hands or another couple of hours in the day to get all the work done that keeps getting piled on my desk.
- I don’t get paid enough to take all the stuff that keeps getting thrown my way.
- This company just asks us to give and give and give and they sit back and take and take and take. Shouldn’t there be a little recognition for the work we do around here?
- When the chips are down, I will be the one who will take the heat. Therefore, I think I should be the one to call the shots as well. If I’m going to be blamed for something, then I’d at least like it to be for my own ideas.

Powerful Questions

Asking Questions

We spend a lot of our lives asking and answering questions, but we aren’t always aware of how we ask questions. Open questions in particular often give us difficulty, which is unfortunate since they are the most important ones for us to become skilled at using.

Closed questions can be answered with a single word or two or a simple yes or no. They can begin the closing process in a conversation, or provide confirmation of a detail, but they don’t usually lead to gathering more information. Where most people need more practice is asking the **open question**, those where the listener is given a chance to explain, to tell how they feel about an issue, or offer suggestions.

Open questions give us more information because:

- They encourage other people to talk
- We get opinions and ideas from others
- They can help us determine if people have interpreted what we say correctly
- They can help us arrive at consensus much more readily

Open questions typically begin with a variation of the five W's (who, what, when, where, why) or ask how. Good open questions include:

- "What is your opinion?"
- "How do you think we should solve the problem?"
- "What would you do in my shoes?"
- "Tell me more about..."

Note: Be very careful about "**why**" questions. All too often these questions sound like accusations, and the listener immediately becomes defensive.

Good questions can 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 be acceptable to you?

Test your Knowledge

Write down the names of three people that you consider good listeners.

Did you write down the name of a person that you do not like?

Do any of the three people fit into one of these categories?

- Someone that you like
- Someone that you love
- Someone that you respect

Based on this, if you wish to be liked, loved, or respected, how is it that you need to behave?

Probing Techniques

Many people are better at presenting their own point of view than they are at drawing out information from others. **Probing techniques** can help you draw out information from the individual and help you understand their side of the difficult conversation.

One of the most common ways of probing is to ask an **open question**, such as:

- “Can you describe that more clearly?”
- “Would you give me a specific example of what you mean?”
- “What do you think we should do?”

The difficulty here is that if you ask too many of these probing questions, the other person begins to feel like they are under interrogation. Be thoughtful about what and how you ask. Consider how many probes you really need to offer.

A second, very effective way of probing is a **pause**. Stop talking. Let the other person fill the silence.

A third way is to ask a **reflective or mirroring question**. For example, let’s say the person has just said, “What I really want is fairer vacation policies.” You may respond by just reflecting back to them, “Fairer?” The reflective question usually provides you with an expanded answer without you needing to ask more questions. Of course, it is best used in conjunction with a pause.

Reflective questions or statements focus on clarifying and summarizing without interrupting the flow of the conversation. They indicate your intent to understand the sender’s thoughts and feelings.

A fourth method that is particularly useful to make certain you are clear about what the individual has said is **paraphrasing** what has just been said, in your own words. An example: “So if I understand you correctly, you...”

You can use this response to show that you want to increase the accuracy of your understanding of what has just been said. You may also want to use it to ensure the sender hears what he has just said. Finally, paraphrasing reassures the sender that you are trying to understand what he/she is saying.

The last method, most often used as a conversation is winding down, is the **summary question**, which we discussed during our paraphrasing section. This type of question summarizes everything the other person has said and then confirms understanding.

Body Language

In significant (though often misinterpreted) research, Albert Mehrabian found that when it came to discussing emotions, only 7% of the speaker's message was communicated by words, while tone of voice was responsible for about 38% of the meaning, and body language about 55%. This means that the words themselves played only a very small part in conveying meaning. In other conversations (not the ones about emotions), we know that tone of voice and body language have a large impact on those messages, too.

In our fast-paced world, we don't have time to get more than a quick snapshot of how a person looks before we make up our mind about them. They are making up their mind about us at the same time, so it is essential that our non-verbal messages are consistent with what we say verbally.

The face and the eyes are the most expressive means of non-verbal communication. Additional positive or negative messages are sent by your gestures, posture, and the space between you and the other person.

Positive body language is important to encourage conversation and support your positive intent in meeting with the other person. When we don't pay attention to our non-verbal signals, we often send mixed or confusing messages to people. Get control of your image by working on your non-verbal language.

Test your Knowledge

What are your suggestions about the following aspects of non-verbal language?

Facial Expressions

Smiling

Eye Contact

Body Language

Pre-Assignment Review

Bring out your pre-assignment and review it in terms of what you have learned in the workshop so far. Will you alter any of your answers given what you have learned?

What tangible steps can you take personally to influence conflict resolution in your teams at work?

The Conflict/Opportunity Test

The Conflict/Opportunity Test

Here are some questions to ask yourself when you find yourself caught up in a conflict:

- What is the conflict?
- Who are the players?
- If this conflict is resolved, what are the benefits?
- If this conflict is not resolved, what are the payoffs or benefits for me?
- If the conflict is not resolved, what harm can follow?
- If this conflict is resolved, will the benefit create a better situation than before the conflict arose?
- Whatever the outcome is, can I see that the conflict added a positive dimension to the potential outcome?

Skills Test

Situation One

An employee is asking a supervisor for a raise. The employee obviously thinks he or she deserves it but the supervisor knows the company cannot afford to offer any raises at the present time, whether the employee deserves it or not.

Situation Two

An employee is always late for work, and their manager must speak to them about it.

Situation Three

The organization seems to be permeated with low morale. Careful observation has revealed that the cause is a respected employee with a very negative attitude. Talk to the employee in an attempt to fix the situation.

Situation Four

A supervisor asks an employee to change his or her vacation plans in order to meet a production deadline on a major project. The employee knows that the project would have been on time if the supervisor had planned more carefully.

Further Reading:

- ✓ *Patterson, Kerry, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler. Crucial Confrontations: Tools for Resolving Broken Promises, Violated Expectations, and Bad Behavior. McGraw-Hill, 2005.*
- ✓ *Stone, Douglas, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen. Difficult Conversations (10th Anniversary Edition). Penguin Books, 2010.*