Communication Skills

Overview

> ### *Purpose*
>
> The purpose of this module is to present basic principles of communication and an opportunity for participants to practice effective communication techniques.
>
> ### *Objectives*
>
> At the end of this module participants will be able to:
>
> - Identify characteristics of effective communication.
> - Demonstrate active listening techniques.
> - Demonstrate techniques for giving and receiving supportive and corrective feedback.
> - Recognize blocks to effective communication.
> - Identify a three-step technique to help in communicating feelings.
>
> ### *Content*
>
> - The Communication Model
> - Communications Channels
> - Communication Skills
>   - Active Listening
>   - Giving and Receiving Feedback
> - Blocks to Effective Communication
> - Communicating Feelings

The Communication Model

Communication is the act and art of giving and receiving information. The purpose of good communication is to be able to understand and exchange ideas.

Effective communication is important for two reasons. First, communication is the process by which the functions and goals of the team will be accomplished; communication is the activity to which team members devote an overwhelming proportion of their time.

Secondly, a coach's communication skills will determine to a great extent his or her success in facilitating and providing training to a team.

The Communication Model
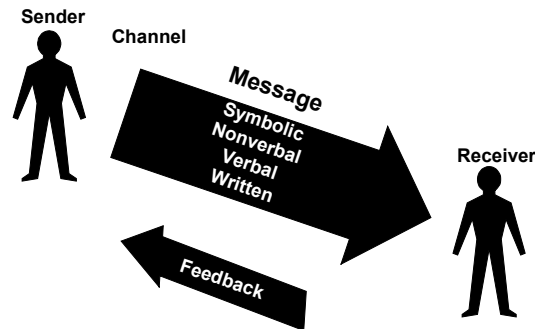
The basic model of communication is:

Sender $\rightarrow$ Message $\rightarrow$ Channel $\rightarrow$ Receiver $\rightarrow$ Feedback

- A message is sent through an appropriate channel from a sender to a

receiver.
- The receiver understands the message.
- The receiver provides feedback to the sender that the message has been received and whether there is agreement about the message.

The Communication Model

This simple model does not begin to suggest the complexity of the communication process. Due to this complexity, we must employ communication techniques such as, active listening, giving and receiving feedback, and effective questioning to ensure that the message sent is the one that is understood and accepted.

Understanding the message that is sent depends upon both the sender's and the receiver's:

- Communication skills
- Attitudes
- Experience
- Knowledge

In the context of each communication, the sender's feelings or self-concept will affect how the message is perceived. Conscious and subconscious attitudes enhance or detract from the effectiveness of the message. Issues that can affect a person's self concept include:

- "Do I feel worthwhile in this situation?"
- "Am I safe in offering suggestions?"
- "Is this the right time (place)?"
- "Am I the subordinate or the supervisor in this situation?"

Usually, the more comfortable or positive the self-concept, the more effectively the sender communicates.

Linked to self-concept is the belief that one has rights, such as the right to

- Change one's mind.
- Say "I don't understand" or "I don't know."

- Follow a "gut feeling" without justifying it.
- Make mistakes and be responsible for them.
- Say "I am not sure I know, but let me work on it."

Believing in such rights can help strengthen the sender's self-concept and avoid the defensive maneuvering that hinders communication when exchanging information. Remember these rights include responsibility. For example, one may say, "I don't know," but one usually has the responsibility to find out.

How the sender feels about the message he or she is sending also impacts how it is sent. One may ask, "Do I feel the information I have is valuable? Is it something I want to say or do not want to say? How do I feel it will be received? Is the topic interesting or not interesting to me? Do I understand the information correctly, and do I know the best way to say it?"

The probability that communication will be effective is increased if the sender feels positive or respectful toward the receiver. Positive or respectful feelings usually carry a built-in commitment and/or desire to share communication. Negative feelings require conscious effort in order to communicate effectively. For the sender, it is important to know it is all right not to like everyone – or, to like some people less than others. It is also important to know that we live in a world in which not everyone is going to like or respect us, and that is all right, too.

Commun-ication Channels

Messages can be sent:

- **Symbolically**: Clothing, jewelry, hairstyle, etc.
- **Nonverbally**: Body language and behavior such as eye contact, gesturing, word emphasis, etc.
- **Verbally**: Face-to-face conversations.
- **Written**: Letters, books, reports, etc.
- **Electronically:** Through machines such as answering machines and voice mail, faxes, e-mail, etc.

Effective Sending

In order to communicate messages effectively, the sender should consider the following suggestions:

- Become aware of your thoughts and feelings. Do not be quick to brand them "good," "bad," "wrong," or "right." Accept them as a reflection of the present "you." Consider what your thoughts are whispering or shouting to you. By increasing awareness of your thoughts and feelings, you can better decide what to do with them.

- Feel comfortable in expressing your feelings. Such expression, when appropriate, can enhance communication.

- Be aware of the listener. Try to verbalize your message in terms the listener will understand, and indicate why you feel the message is

important to him or her. Does it have a special significance for the listener, or is it just "general information"?

Communication Skills

Three communication skills are essential for effective team function:

- Active listening
- Giving and receiving feedback
- Effective questioning

This module will address active listening and feedback skills. Material on effective questioning is found in Module 4.

Active Listening

Active listening is as important to communication as effective sending. Active listening is a process in which the listener interacts with the speaker. It requires mental and verbal paraphrasing and attention to nonverbal clues like tones, gestures, and facial expressions. It is a process of listening not just to every word but also to main thoughts and references.

Active listening includes the following behaviors:

- Being quiet; no interruptions or taking over the discussion.
- Using body language to communicate interest and understanding, such as leaning forward, nodding head, open gestures.
- Maintaining eye contact.
- Restating the person's words.
- Using encouraging words, such as "I see" and "Yes" to encourage free flow of conversation.
- Using open-ended questions to encourage the other person to elaborate their thoughts and feelings.
- Asking for clarification when needed.
- Summarizing at various points.
- Being non-judgmental
- Restating a speaker's main points before offering an opinion.

The feelings and attitudes of the listener can affect what he or she perceives. How well the recipient listens is affected by how the listener feels about himself or herself, how the message is perceived, and how the listener feels about the person sending the message.

The listener should keep in mind the following suggestions:

Be fully accessible to the sender.

Being preoccupied, letting your mind wander, and trying to do more than one thing at a time lessen your chances of hearing and understanding effectively. Interrupting a conversation to answer the phone makes the interrupted speaker feel unimportant.

Be aware of your feelings as a listener.

Emotions such as anger, dislike, defensiveness, and prejudice are natural, but they cause us not to hear what is being said and sometimes to hear things that are not being said.

Maintain and enhance the self-esteem of the team members.

"John, that's a good suggestion for how to collect our data."

"Jose, that's an important consideration, but Maria was making a relevant point. Let's hear what she has to say before moving on."

"That is an important consideration. Write that down. I'd like to come back to that after we finish the subject we are on, okay?"

"Sounds like that is a problem we ought to address."

Listen and acknowledge with empathy.

"I understand that these statistical tools can be a little overwhelming when you first learn about them."

"It sounds like you feel that doing this flowchart is a waste of our time. I think you may be right. What would be a better use of out time at this point?"

Check for understanding (both your own and other members') by paraphrasing or requesting clarification.

"Let me see if I understand your question…"

"I still don't have a clear picture of the real problem. Can you restate it for me?"

"Oh, your perception is…. That is how you see the problem."

"Can you say a little more about that?"

Make suggestions about the process.

"Let's spend ten more minutes working on the flowchart, then we can talk about what needs to be done before the next meeting."

"It's a good question, but we need to check it out with the rest of the team."

"Hold on. I think we are talking about two problems. The first is… and the other is…. They are both important, but let's talk about them one at a time."

- Suspend judgment for a while.
- Pay attention to the listener.
- Be aware of feelings.
- Listen and acknowledge.
- Check for understanding.
- Make suggestions.

How can you remember these suggestions?

Some acronyms may help you to remember important things about effective communication.

For ideal verbal communication remember the **KISS** principle:

Keep

It

Simple and

Specific

Things you do when using effective listening, and effective verbal communication describe **CLEAR** communication:

Clarify

Listen

Encourage

Acknowledge

Reflect

Nonverbal communication literally means communicating without words. In the training section of this reference we will present more information about nonverbal communication. Remember key advice about nonverbal communication with **ROLES**:

Relax

Open and approachable

Lean toward team members (to indicate closeness)

Eye contact

Sit straight and comfortably, and **S**mile when appropriate

Giving and Receiving Feedback

Feedback is important for effective communication, because it allows the team to gather information about itself. In effective teams, members learn from their experiences. Time must be set aside to transform experience into learning. The insights gained from feedback are the raw materials for future

improvements. Without this experience, team members are likely to repeat errors again and again.

Types of Feedback

There are two types of feedback: *supportive* and *corrective*. Supportive feedback reinforces current behavior while corrective feedback suggests desired changes in behavior. The goal of any kind of feedback is to help team members maintain or increase their current level of effective or appropriate behavior.

Feedback may be given to individuals by the coach, team leader, or another team member privately outside a team meeting. Also, the team may engage in a group feedback session. During a group feedback session, members of the team analyze the strengths and weaknesses of their individual and collective performance, make open and honest personal assessments, and accept criticism without hostility. The real challenge is for each team member to perceive feedback as a valued gift. This can happen only when each team member feels truly accepted by his or her colleagues. Without this sense of commitment to one another, the process of critical analysis can be threatening or even damaging.

Supportive feedback

Supportive feedback is used to reinforce an effective and desirable behavior. One of the most mistaken beliefs about feedback is that the only time feedback is necessary is when someone does something wrong. As a result, many people never give supportive feedback. In fact, it is more important to give supportive feedback than corrective feedback, because supportive feedback lets people know that behavior is desired.

Corrective Feedback

Corrective feedback is used when trying to change behavior. Although corrective feedback rarely causes harm if used properly, it is not a particularly pleasant experience. Team members may feel embarrassed or defensive.

When giving corrective feedback, the sender should be able to suggest alternative courses of action to correct the problem. When a team member is made aware of substandard behavior, showing an alternative can be effective in changing the behavior. When the person in charge immediately offers the alternative after providing corrective feedback, the recipient is free as quickly as possible from an uncomfortable situation. The person giving feedback is seen as a supportive person, and this greatly contributes to forging productive and constructive working relationships. Moreover, the feedback giver might offer an option that the team member has not considered, or one that the team member considered but then rejected. More importantly, the feedback helps everyone realize that there are alternative

courses of action.

Use of Feedback in Reviewing Performance

In order for feedback to be effective, the team needs to establish clear criteria for success in all of its major activities (both the tasks to be accomplished and the processes by which the team operates).

The review process begins with the team members determining whether they have achieved what they set out to do. They assess whether they have performed as expected, differently than expected, or better than expected.

Then comes the important step: to determine the reasons and to decide how to improve in the future. Results are the true test of the team's effectiveness. If the team has failed and if the causes are obscure, the team needs to analyze further to discover the cause(s).

In reviewing its performance, the team must answer the following questions.

- Have all of our objectives been achieved? If not, why not?
- Did we meet our criteria for success?
- Were our criteria for success relevant and achievable yet challenging? If not, why not?
- Were all the causes of failure beyond our control?
- Did we use the minimum necessary resources possible?
- Did we focus our resources adequately?
- Have any other individuals or groups tackled similar tasks and done better?
- If so, why was our performance less effective than those of the other groups?
- What have we learned from this analysis?
- What behaviors should we adopt in the future?

Guidelines for Giving and Receiving Feedback

Feedback must be used with care. Excessive praise can lead group members to unwarranted pride and complacency. Negative comments may be interpreted as sabotage and may provoke an argument.

Both positive and constructive feedback are important. All too often, feedback is given only when things go wrong. Feedback sessions can become "witch hunts" for scapegoats when blame and recrimination occur and when each team member hopes to lie low to avoid being exposed to humiliating criticism.

Open critiques can be especially threatening to senior team members. As the people representing authority, they may feel a greater sense of ownership. Hence, their self-esteem can be more at risk.

Typically, teams dash from one thing to the next without taking time to review what they have done. Leaders usually say that they believe in the merits of feedback but, in practice, they do not allow time for it. So the team repeats the same errors time and time again, members' performance remains substandard, and the potential of the team is untapped.

Feedback must assess both success and failure. Unless some praise is given, the critique will fail to energize and nourish the team. On the other hand, some teams appear to operate under an informal conspiracy to exclude criticisms. The result is the inhibition of the free flow of judgement and commentary necessary for creativity and learning.

Team members may withhold their criticism for several reasons:

- **Politeness:** Team members believe that social etiquette precludes confrontation.
- **Fear of loss of face:** People fear that criticism will erode their images.
- **Unwillingness to "rock the boat":** Team members do not want criticism to expose weaknesses or to undermine morale.
- **Inadequate skills:** Team members appreciate the benefits of feedback but do not have skills to give and receive feedback.
- **Lack of opportunity:** Insufficient time or no time is allotted for review of the team's performance.

Guidelines for Giving Feedback

- For individual feedback: focus on the behavior of the individual; describe the person's behavior; not the personality or character of the person.

- For team performance feedback: focus on criteria that has been established for both the tasks to be accomplished and the processes by which the team operates

- Make your comments specific (what, when, where, etc.)

- Direct your comments at behavior that can be changed.

- Make your comments timely: either at the moment the behavior is occurring or as soon afterward as possible.

- Remember that people are uncomfortable receiving feedback, even if you are handling it the best way possible.

- Whether the person agrees or doesn't agree, express your appreciation for listening to your concern.

Guidelines for Receiving Feedback

- Actively listen to the person's description of your behavior and recommendations to continue what you are doing or suggested

changes that would be helpful. Although it may sound easy - this suggestion takes practice.

- Give the feedback serious consideration. Do not dismiss it as irrelevant or unimportant.

- Notice if you are feeling defensive; trust that the intent of the feedback is to help, not hurt, you.

- Paraphrase or summarize the feedback to make sure you have heard it correctly.

- Communicate to the person changes in his or her behavior that may be needed to help you change.

- Whether or not you intend to use the feedback, express appreciation to the other person for caring enough about the relationship to give you the feedback and request that he or she continue to do so.

The following table contains additional suggestions for giving and receiving feedback.

AVOID:	TRY TO:
Talking too much.	State your points simply and one at a time.
Jumping in and quickly moving on.	Explore ideas and feelings in depth.
Glossing over problems.	Explore difficulties and their causes thoroughly, using a "what can we do about this" approach.
Raising false hopes.	Arrange a contract that you believe is realistic.
Acting "parental" (condescending).	Respond as an "adult," rationally, rather than as a "parent."
Not taking the process seriously.	Make it evident that you value the process enough to spend time in serious discussion of these issues.
Being inconsistent.	Ask whether you appear inconsistent and clarify all apparent inconsistencies.
Criticizing a person's ambitions.	Find out why the person thinks the way he or she does; contribute information and options rather than judging him or her.
Making commitment too readily.	Be honest and make a commitment only if you are sure that you can honor it, and set a time scale that you know is realistic.
Displaying a negative and uninterested attitude.	Give your support and energy to make a session valuable; try to use the discussion as an important opportunity to improve.
Solving others' problems.	Encourage others to suggest their own solutions and not depend too much on you.
Using targets (goals for performance) as potential weapons.	Set targets for learning rather than for discipline.
Seeing only one way ahead.	Be flexible and look carefully at options, even if you decide to discard them later.

Blocks to Effective Communication

Communication blocks will occur when the sender perceives the listener's responses to be negative. Negative responses convey non-acceptance of the speaker's feelings; the desire to change the speaker; a lack of trust; or the sense that the speaker is inferior, at fault, or misbehaving.

The following are examples of behavior and comments that can block effective communication. These responses may be appropriate for some situations, but when used inappropriately they impede communication.

Evaluation. While there is a time for evaluation, if it is given too soon, the sender usually becomes defensive. Phrases like "you should…," "Your duty…," "You are wrong," "You should know better," "You are bad," and "You are such a good person" create blocks to communication.

Advice-giving response. "Why don't you try…," "You'll feel better when…," "It would be best for you to…," and "My advice is…" are phrases that give advice. Advice is best given at the conclusion of conversations and generally only when requested.

Discounting of Others' Experience. "That's nothing; you should have seen…," "When that happened to me, I…," "When I was a child…," and "You think you have it bad…," are all phrases that seem to set the speaker above the listener. This approach shifts attention from the person who wants to be listened to and leaves him or her feeling unimportant.

Diagnosing, psychoanalytic response. "What you need is…, "The reason you feel the way you do is…," "You don't really mean that," and "Your problem is…" are phrases that tell others what they feel. Telling people how they feel or why they feel the way they do can be a two-edged sword. If the diagnosis is wrong, the sender feels confused or misunderstood; if the diagnosis is right, the sender may feel exposed or cornered. Most people do not want to be told how to feel and would rather volunteer their feelings than have them exposed.

Prying-questioning response. "Why," "who," "where," "when," "how," and "what" are responses common to us all. However, such responses tend to make the sender feel "on the spot" and therefore resist the interrogation. At times, however, a questioning response is needed for clarification or an emergency.

Warning, admonishing, commanding response. "You had better…," "If you don't…," "You have to…," "You will…," "You must…," are used constantly in the everyday work environment. Usually such responses produce resentment resistance, and rebellion. There are times, of course, when the information being given is critical to human welfare.

Logical, lecturing response. "Don't you realize…," "Here is where you are wrong…," "The facts are…," and "Yes, but…" can be heard in any discussion of two people with differing opinions. Such responses tend to make the other person feel inferior or defensive. Of course, persuasion is part of the world we live in. In general, however, we need to trust that when people are given correct and full data they will make logical decisions for themselves.

Devaluation response. "It's not so bad," "Don't worry," "You'll get over it," or "Oh, you don't feel that way" are familiar phrases used in responding to others' emotions. A listener should recognize the sender's feelings and

should not try to take away those feelings or deny them to the owner. In our desire to alleviate emotional pain, we apply bandages too soon and possibly in the wrong places.

Commun-icating Feelings

Communicating feelings requires the ability for speakers and listeners to stop and check what feelings they are experiencing at the moment, and decide how to respond to these feelings.

The three-stage technique described below is helpful to use when responding to feelings. With enough practice, this technique can become second nature.

- First, focus on the feelings being experienced.

In this stage, stop at any point in time and mentally ask, "What am I feeling?" One usually experiences a kaleidoscope of emotions but can choose to focus on one dominant feeling.

- Next, focus on the behaviors that may have generated the feelings.

After one feeling is identified, the second question is, "What perceived behaviors are causing that feeling?" Other mental questions then follow: "Is it *what* the other person is saying, or *how* they are saying it? Is it because I do not want to be bothered?"

- Finally, focus on possible responses to the feelings. In this stage, one chooses how to respond.

It can be important to let others know our feelings so that actions and words are congruent. However, one can choose not to express a feeling because of inappropriate time, place, or circumstances. For example, one may identify a feeling of annoyance at being interrupted. To share this feeling may not be appropriate. However, it is important to be aware of the annoyance and what caused the feeling, and choose whether or not to let it block further listening. One may think, "I am annoyed but that feeling is not going to get in the way of listening."

"Hindsight analysis" is another way of becoming aware of feelings. Following any given situation, an individual can mentally recheck his or her feelings and/or responses: "What happened to cause these feelings? What was I feeling during my responses? Why do I tend to avoid certain people, and why do I enjoy being around others?"

Asking oneself "Why?" is very helpful in identifying feelings and the behaviors that cause those feelings. As a person works with this technique, identification of the sources of feelings and decision making will improve, resulting in more effective communication.

The communication process is complex but vital to effective problem solving and meaningful personal relationships. It requires certain attitudes,

knowledge, techniques, common sense, and a willingness to try. Effective communication happens when speakers and listeners exchange information with clarity and mutual respect. It is a process that is never completely mastered, but one which can continually improve.

References and Recommended Readings

Schwarz, Roger M. *The Skilled Facilitator*, San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1994.