

Principles for Effective Communication

Communication is fundamental to all relationships. Poor communication is the most frequently cited cause of discontent within organisations and it would be reasonable to expect that most employers are seeking to appoint people with good communication skills. It is no surprise, then, that people often cite “excellent communication skills” as one of their key qualities on their CV. So, what do we mean by good communication? How do we recognise it, and how do we ensure that we really *do* have excellent communication skills? Furthermore, why can communication go so badly wrong and what can we do to improve our communication skills? This paper seeks to address these questions and give practical tips and ideas to help each of us improve as communicators.

What is the purpose of communication? At its most fundamental level, the aim is **to hear** and **be heard**. Whether we are communicating in the written word, verbally, in pictures or through movement, if the message that we wish to convey is altered in any way, we have not communicated our true meaning. This forms the basis of misunderstanding and miscommunication. How and why do these misunderstandings occur? Unfortunately, they happen all too simply, because we interpret meaning from what we see and hear, based on our own experiences.

Misunderstandings can occur at any time. We do not always listen carefully to what we are being told, and often do not clarify the meaning of what we are hearing. Instead, we end up putting our own interpretation on the message and our understanding of what we have heard may be very different from the intention of the speaker. The same misunderstandings occur through the written word. We “read between the lines” and jump to conclusions, that may be very different to the intention of the writer. If we don’t check out meaning with the person we are conversing with, small misunderstandings can rapidly lead to deterioration in relationships and escalate to major fall-outs.

So how can we avoid breakdown in relationships due to poor communication? A good starting point is to apply some basic principles of general communication, whenever we are communicating with another person. We build relationships by communicating with people. The start of any relationship occurs with our first communication. It could come in a face-to-face meeting, a virtual introduction by a mutual acquaintance via e-mail, or a chance meeting on-line. It may start by reading about someone in a newspaper, or an article or book that they have published. We might see a work of art, such as a photograph, painting, wood carving or piece of pottery. It could be the designer of the clothes we are wearing. However we “meet” the person, whenever that first introduction is made, our relationship begins.

The Principles

Trustworthiness

Effective relationships are built on trust and, with respect to communication, trust that both parties are applying the same principles. Without a sense of trust, it may be difficult to really engage in meaningful communication. If I say something to someone in confidence, I need to trust them to keep that



confidence. If someone asks me a question, I trust that my answer is being listened to and that I am being heard. If I am asked for my opinion, I need to trust that my opinion is believed to be as valid as the next person's. I need to feel safe to speak honestly. I need to trust that my questions will be received as I intend them to be and that I will not be judged as ill-informed or stupid; that I am seeking understanding in order to learn. I need to trust that I am not being judged for my opinions or for whom I am; that the difference I bring to a discussion is as valid and valuable as the next. I need to trust that people will ask me to clarify my words, and not jump to their own conclusions or make their own interpretations about what *they think* I am saying. I need to trust that, if the person I am talking to doesn't like what they are hearing, they will be honest and open with me in a respectful way. I need to trust that there is mutual respect. Trust is, therefore, the foundation for all the principles.

Active Listening

Active listening means being focussed entirely on the person speaking, and not interrupting or starting to fashion your own response before someone has finished their sentence. This "inner chatter" that goes on in our heads is a barrier to hearing. The moment we start thinking about our response, we stop listening actively. Not only is this disrespectful to the person who is speaking, but also we might hear only half of the message and assume how the message finishes. If we have already come to a conclusion, we have ceased to listen. Active listening is difficult and takes practise. Most people want to talk rather than listen. Use your ears and mouth in that proportion i.e. listen twice as much as you speak!

Non-judgemental

Judging others is not a good basis for building relationships. It is very easy to say that we should be non-judgemental, but an extremely difficult principle to live by. It is so easy to judge; we do it all the time. As human beings we seem to be programmed to judge other people. What is meant by being judgemental? Put simply, it means that the person who is judging another thinks that "I'm right, you're wrong". "I'm better than you are" or "you're better than me" and "my ideas are better than your ideas" are other examples of passing judgement.

Judging is about hierarchy in some shape or form - who (or what) is best. If you think of situations when judging is carried out – such as judging dogs at Crufts, exhibits at the Chelsea Flower Show, and ice-skating championships – all these are examples of judges deciding who is the best. There are criteria against which the judging takes place, to ensure that there is logic to the decisions that are taken. All this is legitimate. The problems begin when we start judging *people* on what they say and do. It can be very difficult for some people to stop judging others and, again, it takes a lot of practise.

Value Difference

Value the different contributions that people you interact with bring to your relationships. Their opinions may be different but not better or worse. If you can create a trusting environment, whereby people know that their contributions will be valued, they are not being judged, people are respectfully listening to them and appreciating their input, that what they say remains confidential and that they are being listened to fully, you create an environment for active engagement and fruitful relationships.



No Assumptions

People can interpret words they hear in a way that was not intended by the person who said them. If someone says one thing and another takes those words to mean something completely different, communication has not occurred. There has simply been an exchange of words without comprehension. This happens when we assume that we understand what is meant without checking things out. It is important to clarify what someone means, rather than make assumptions that you have understood what they are trying to convey. To assume can make an ASS out of U and ME! Similarly, it is helpful to check the understanding of a person that you are communicating with, to clarify that they have understood correctly the points that you wish them to receive.

Authenticity

Be truthful in your communications. We communicate in a number of ways, not just by the words we use. *How* we say things and movement of the body all have a bearing on the message that is conveyed to the listener or observer. Research tells us that words actually have the least impact on our communication (around 7%). The manner in which we say things – tone, speed, etc (music 38%) and our body language (dance – 55%) are far more important in conveying our message. It is important that all three elements of words, music and dance are congruent. People are generally attuned to picking up non-verbal signals and can tell if there is a mixed message between the words, music and dance.

The person who keeps looking at their watch whilst saying that they have plenty of time to sit and listen to your concerns is unconsciously conveying to you that they are anxious about the time. They are saying one thing, but their body language is very clearly saying something else. This is known as leakage and occurs when the words you use are not congruent with your body language. It is very important that we are authentic in our communication. If we are not, the truth may well leak out and be picked up. People “believe” the body language; they are not “fooled” by the words.

In conclusion

Following these basic communication principles will help to ensure that we have heard and been heard without misinterpretation. In short, we need to listen actively, with respect and without judgement and not make assumptions. We need to check for understanding of our listener about what we have said, and clarify our own understanding of what we are hearing. We should always be authentic in our communication, mindful that our non-verbal cues have a far greater impact on our communications than the words we speak. Being true to these principles will provide a firm foundation for trusting relationships and effective communication.

About the author:

Barbara Bradbury is a personal and organisational development consultant, trainer and coach. She is a highly experienced change agent and is passionate about improving patient and client care. She contributes to this by facilitating and supporting the personal /professional development of both clinicians and managers in the health & social care sectors.

