Did I Really Say That?

Effective Communication: A Skill or a Process?

By Joseph F. Maurer

Have you ever walked away from a conversation wondering if the other person was speaking the same language as you? Or if, over the course of the discussion, they mentally wandered off and alighted on a subject completely different than the one you intended? Ever completely agree with something that an individual was saying just so that you could bow out of the strangest conversation you've ever had? Maybe these questions could be answered "yes" by any number of people after having talked to YOU. What does it mean to communicate effectively? Is communication a skill? Or is it a process? Maybe, just maybe, it's both.

There exist all kinds of examples of poor communication. Two of my favorites to reference are found in movies. In the 1994 movie Father of the Bride, (Touchstone Pictures), Martin Short plays a wedding planner whose spoken word leaves Steve Martin's title character perplexed. The women in Martin's life (his wife and his daughter) are undaunted by Short's heavy accent, but the father is in obvious need of a translator. Similarly, in the 2001 movie Snatch (Screen Gems), Brad Pitt plays a character named Mickey, who speaks in "Pikey," a barely recognizable form of English. Mickey's mates follow his диалогues without fault, but those not familiar with the dialect find themselves at a complete loss. The most pertinent point in both of these examples is: although an individual's speech and language may be understood by those close to him, that does not necessarily mean that it can be understood by everyone.

So, let's begin with the most basic, obvious question: What is communication? There are four key points to effective communication: hearing/listening; speaking clearly; understanding (on the part of the listener); and being understood (on the part of the speaker). When all of these aspects are combined in a conversation, chances are that both parties will walk away feeling like effective communication took place.

Hearing/Listening

Is there a difference between hearing and listening? Sure there is. Hearing is the physiological process of sound traveling through the ear canal to the
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The physiological act of hearing takes place constantly, but our brains filter out what is unnecessary in order to maintain a focus on what is important to us. Usually, this is accomplished without a conscious command. At other times, it may not be so subconscious (think of the classic example of a husband "not hearing" his wife's requests while he is watching sports on TV). Listening, on the other hand, takes into account a person's focus. There are four basic types of listening:

- Non-listening: This is basically ignoring. The listener's focus is completely directed somewhere else, with no semblance of interest in the conversation at hand.
- Pretend listening: The listener's focus is elsewhere, with just enough attention to the conversation to make it seem like they are involved in it. Most of us have been on the giving or receiving end of this during a long telephone conversation—we agree, laugh, or make a sympathetic noise where it seems appropriate, all the while planning our agenda for the day, or ticking off items on the to-do list.
- Selective (self-focused) listening: The listener's attention focuses only when the topic of conversation touches on something in which they have an interest or that is directly related to her/him. Otherwise, attention wanes.
- Empathic (other-focused) listening: The listener's complete focus and attention are to the speaker and their point of discussion. All other distractions are cast aside in the interest of the dialogue.

As should be obvious from the above descriptions, we want to strive for empathic listening in our communication with others. One of the greatest difficulties to achieving that comes in the form of distractions. A good example of distraction can be seen through an experiment demonstrated in a group setting. Volunteers who are designated as "listeners" are exposed to two different stories being told to them simultaneously (one in each ear), while viewing a series of words and pictures on a screen in the front of the room. They are asked to remember as much detail as possible about the story told in their right ears, but are also told that they will be asked to recall as many of the words and pictures as possible. Now, in a room full of people reading their stories and a series of words and pictures flashing by, the point is fairly evident—but the bottom line is that when you try to focus on several things at a time, you can never fully focus on any one thing. This leads to poor communication.
There is a significant difference between understanding and agreement, and these should not be confused.

When the effects of distraction come into play in a group setting (for example, in a student organization meeting), the results can be a loss of productivity and a sense of frustration for many, if not all, of the participants. Group leaders must shoulder the task of avoiding this problem by addressing it from the beginning. This can be done in a number of ways, although some basic ground rules usually prove helpful—such as only one person being allowed to speak at any given time, being formally given the "floor" by the group leader before speaking, and respecting each member's right to their say. A more informal approach may include suggestions to group members, like encouraging participants to jot down ideas or questions that they would like to discuss, so that their attention may be focused on the discussion at hand rather than on attempting to remember exactly what they wish to say. Then, once the current topic has been exhausted, they may go back to their original idea without having lost an opportunity for continued participation in the previous discussions. The issue comes back again and again to focus—where is the participants' focus during a discussion, and how can group leaders work to facilitate a better focus overall for their team? By working to reduce or eliminate distractions, effective communication may improve by leaps and bounds.

Speaking Clearly

A significant responsibility in effective communication falls to the speaker, in that the first obstacle to overcome is for the speaker to be able to communicate his/her ideas in a clear, concise manner. While not everyone has had the opportunity to participate in a speech/public speaking class, the basic tenets of public speaking hold true in any situation. An individual who is attempting to communicate a thought or idea must be able to do certain things, each of which will build upon the last to create a persuasive, effective form of communication:

- Formulate the idea before it is spoken—in order for a point/argument to make sense to others, it must have a logical introduction and flow to a logical conclusion. A speaker must have this "route" established, to some extent at least, in order to be able to communicate it clearly to others. An argument that is not well organized in your mind will come out sounding fragmented and disorganized as it is spoken.
- Fully believe in and commit to the idea that is being presented—if a speaker does not believe fully in what they are communicating to another person or group, the listener(s) will not put faith in the idea either. There is, of course, nothing wrong with changing your position on an issue after having heard opposing input, but at the time at which you are attempting to present your opinion, you should have a clear understand-
ing of where you stand and present it to others in a way that allows them to know where you stand. The quickest way to convince others to disregard your input is to present it in a way that makes it seem like you are not sure of what you are saying. When that happens, your attempt at effective communication is lost.

- Speak in a clear, firm, assertive way—once a speaker has formulated an idea and believes in what they are saying, the final step is being able to communicate it to others with assertion and pronunciation. If the communication is to take place in a group setting or as a formal presentation, it is always a good idea to rehearse your thoughts/input aloud in advance of the situation. If the setting is more informal or the discussion takes place off-the-cuff, there is nothing wrong with taking a couple of seconds to organize your thoughts before speaking, once you are acknowledged to do so.

Speaking clearly eliminates one of the first obstacles to effective communication, by working to ensure that the actual words of the speaker are clearly understood. Then it falls to the process of making sure that the meaning of those words are understood as well.

**Understanding and Being Understood**

These points are combined for one simple reason—they coexist over the course of effective communication in conversation. Here, more than anywhere else, is where effective communication becomes a process rather than a skill. As a thought is being communicated, the speaker must have in the back of their mind the question of whether the listener is grasping the concept they are trying to propose. At the same time, the listener should be making a sincere effort to understand what the speaker is expressing. The process of this communication is essential to recognize and, when necessary, address directly. In other words, if the speaker notices that their listener seems lost, they must take the responsibility of pausing in the course of the conversation to ask if the listener understands, or to backtrack if needed and reword some previous idea in order that it be better understood.

In the same vein, the listener(s) should be expected to communicate (in a respectful and helpful way) to the speaker the fact that the idea has not been fully understood. There is a significant difference between understanding and agreement, and these should not be confused here. In effective communication, the goal is for the participants to understand each other's positions, not necessarily to agree with one another. This may be accomplished simply by the speaker asking intermittently if their points are understood (which shows that they are open and welcoming to feedback and willing to clarify as needed), or by the listener(s) asking the speaker to review a point again or to explain it in a different way. If both parties make a conscious effort to ensure that true understanding is taking place, a great deal of confusion can be avoided.

As we consider barriers to effective communication, it is important to acknowledge the effect of multiculturalism in our world today. More and more we find, especially in academia, an integration of various cultures and languages in our daily interactions. This creates both an opportunity and a challenge when it comes to communicating. The opportunity lies in the chance to learn more about other languages and cultures as we interact with those of differing backgrounds and to incorporate those experiences into our own lives. The challenge lies in overcoming the language barrier that threatens to keep us separated. This can be an intimidating challenge, as individuals strive to understand one another without offending. Essentially, the "rules" of communication remain the same, as we must help each other to ensure that effective communication is taking place.

Difficulties can occur not only in communicating with those whose primary language is different from our own, but even with those who speak "our" language with a heavy accent different than ours. To go back to a previous example, in the movie Snatch, Brad Pitt's character spoke English, but with an accent that was barely understandable. In one scene, he is with a group of close friends and family while speaking with two "outsiders." While his peer group understands him perfectly, the outsiders do not. Yet, when Pitt's character asks them if they understand, one responds, "Yeah, Mickey—that's perfectly clear." He then turns around and privately asks his partner, "Did you understand a word of what he just said?" It is clear in the scene that he does not want to offend Mickey, especially with his peers around him, for fear of repercussions. In spite of this, however, the situation would have been much improved had the listener asked for clarification. In situations like this, it is essential for all parties to consider the effect of the language barrier. If this is addressed and accepted by all involved, then clarification can be requested without fear of embarrassment or offense.

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Nonverbal Communication

The avenues to effective communication thus far have focused on verbal communication, but the effects of nonverbal communication cannot be denied or ignored. The words we use are not the only way we communicate our thoughts, ideas and feelings to others. In many cases, our nonverbal communication gives others a better sense of what we are trying to share than do our words. In a very real sense, our actions are speaking louder than our words. Here are some of the areas to consider and be aware of during communication with others:

- Body position—For a speaker, body position helps to clarify or reinforce an idea. Going back to the point of the speaker believing in what they are saying, body position can either enhance the effect of belief, or contradict the speaker's words. Posture, position/use of hands, and proximity of the speaker to the listeners can all play a part in how effective the speaker's communication will be. At the same time, the listeners' body position will say quite a lot about how they feel about the speaker and/or the idea being discussed. If you, as a listener, are slouched in your chair, have your arms crossed, or your head in your hands, it is fairly evident that you are either bored or uninterested in the conversation. If, on the other hand, you are sitting up straight, with body position facing toward the speaker, you are showing more interest and involvement in the topic.

- Gestures—We all know of body gestures that effectively communicate a specific message. Sometimes those gestures are positive, sometimes negative, sometimes obscene. What they have in common, consistently, is that a message is taken from those gestures. Throwing your hands up in the air, making a circle with your finger close to the side of your head, or pumping your fists in the air—some of these may have different meanings to different people. The important thing to consider is what the person on the receiving end of the gesture reads into it.

- Facial Expressions—In a similar way to gestures and body position, facial expressions help to either reinforce or contradict a verbal communication. In addition to this, they also serve as independent signals when used without words (in the case of the listener). It is important to consider how your face reflects your thoughts during a conversation—even details as little as whether or not you are smiling while someone is talking to you can send a message to the speaker. Intentional or otherwise, facial expressions help a speaker gauge the interest of their audience, assist in assessing agreement, and in some cases serve to affect the length of the communication. The next time you are engaged in conversation with someone, continually frown while they are speaking and see how quickly they stop mid-sentence to ask what is wrong with what they are saying to you.

- Eye Movement—Tied in with facial expressions, eye movement can signify many things over the course of communication. On the part of the speaker, a level of trust with the audience can be established through good, direct eye contact. Returning once again to the idea of belief, direct eye contact by the speaker tells the audience that they believe in what they are saying and gives credibility to the speaker so that the audience may do the same. Conversely, if during the course of a conversation, you cannot look the listener in the eye, that gives your audience the sense that you are not to be trusted. On the part of the listener, eye movement can signify belief (or disbelief), as well as communicating other ideas—such as exasperation when rolling the eyes, or suspicion when the eyes become narrowed.

- Voice—Using your voice to communicate employs not only the words that are said, but also the level, tone, and inflection of how the words are spoken. The same sentence can be spoken with differing tones, inflection and level of voice and have two completely different meanings. This is especially true when the sentence is spoken in an energetic, sincere way versus a sarcastic manner—and even more so when the sarcasm is paired with a rolling of the eyes or other facial expressions or gestures.

Keeping nonverbal communication in mind during the course of discussions will help participants to avoid conflicting messages, as well as to utilize communication in a very positive way by reinforcing a verbal message (when used correctly).

Effective Communication—a Skill and a Process

Without a doubt, effective communication is enhanced when those participating in the discussion are skilled in communication. Even those with great communication skills can falter, however, if they pay no attention to the process of communication. At the same time, individuals with few public speaking skills may still be able to effectively communicate if they remain aware of the process and keep these things in mind (adapted from Velasquez & Gaddy Maurer, et al, 2000):

- Speak in a clear, firm voice.
- Make direct eye contact.
- Use statements that begin with "I"—especially in a group situation. This helps to avoid the feeling of accusation when speaking, which could lead to defensiveness.
things like "You did this..." or "You should (have)..." automatically put the listener on the defensive. Instead, try wording the ideas in ways such as "I feel..." or "I'd like to see..." that put the responsibility on the speaker, rather than the listener.

- Suggest alternatives. Again, in a group situation, communication will be enhanced when discussing an issue if individuals suggest alternatives when they don't agree with a given suggestion. Sometimes participants will interject with "That won't work because..." or "That's just stupid..." without providing another idea. This type of communication quickly leads to either an argument, which is usually counterproductive, or a breakdown in communication because participants will be hesitant to suggest ideas if they are continually just shot down.

- Be direct and clear. The best approach in communication is usually the direct approach. Be clear about what you are trying to say, and be direct in sharing your thoughts and ideas. This leads to better understanding on the part of the listener/s and typically a more productive discussion.

- Be aware of body language. While no approach is foolproof, utilizing the elements in the process of effective communication should help lead to more productive, rewarding interactions. Of course, it never hurts to practice, either.

References


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