The Human Factor
Verbal, Non-Verbal Aspects Impact Communication, Listening Skills

By Melanie J. Rotz

To communicate or not to communicate is not the question. The question is how to communicate—and listen. Whether you are a student or a professional, you probably can find room for improvement in how you communicate with and listen to others on a daily basis. After all, you are all human, meaning that emotion, attitude, conflict, biases and confrontation shape and dictate how you interact with others. Even the most seasoned professional needs to take a moment to brush up on a few interpersonal skills.
In addressing effective communication and active listening, three primary areas emerge: verbal communication, listening skills, and non-verbal communication. In exploring each of these areas, you may find some new insight, some gracious reminders, or a hint or two to help you improve your communication style.

**Verbal Communication**

1. **Say what you mean.**
   
   The art of verbal communication is truly a challenge to master, but easy to abuse. How many times have you found yourself in a meeting where people speak just for the sake of hearing themselves talk? Is the issue under discussion debated over and over and over again? It is fair to say that you all know someone (and maybe that someone is you) who could learn to economize when it comes to offering input.

   Think before you speak. This is much easier for some than others. But what does it really mean? Here are some examples of ways to slow down the speaking process while increasing the tendency to think beforehand.

2. **Outline what you want to say prior to speaking.**
   
   Imagine that you are in a meeting and the group becomes embroiled in a heated debate. You feel tempted to jump in and get your point across. But the problem comes when everyone starts jumping in to get their points across, making the meeting last forever. Here is where the outline comes into play. Quietly participate in the debate—agree and/or disagree with the discussion by taking notes and establishing why you believe what you do. Gather information from others in the course of the meeting and use that information to help you prepare what you are going to say. By suppressing the need to speak immediately, you will actually listen more intently to what is being said and make sure that when you do speak, you address the topic at hand and don’t go off on a tangent. Some people naturally process information this way, but for others it is a learned skill.

3. **Limit the number of times you speak.**
   
   If outlining your thoughts during a meeting seems extreme to you, there are other ways to find a happy medium for talking and listening. Consider challenging yourself to speaking only five to 10 times during the meeting and stick to that number. Each time you make a comment, place a slash mark on the top of the agenda. Once you reach five or 10, stop offering input. Setting such limitations, or establishing guidelines to when you choose to communicate, will make you more selective in what you say. You will also work harder at listening to others in an attempt to not repeat information.

4. **Be clear and concise in what you say when you choose to speak.**
   
   Words such as “um,” “like,” “whatever,” “you know,” and “but” inhibit effective verbal communication. Some of these words are very natural and portray nervousness when you do not have a solid grasp on what you are trying to say. Others are just language habits. Here is an experiment to try: at your next meeting, count the number of times people use any of these “filler” words. The number will start to add up quickly. Being conscious of your use of such words will help bolster your verbal communication skills by forcing you to be more thoughtful about word choices.

5. **Consider the context of the communication.**
   
   When speaking with others, you may find that outside distractions, time constraints, and modern technology become major players. As you run off to your next meeting or class, spewing a list of instructions to a co-worker does not constitute effective verbal communication. That innocent bystander does not know your frame of mind, does not know your current thought process and most likely feels left out of the loop. You return from your appointment only to find that nothing has been accomplished. Before you get angry, ask yourself, “Did I say what I needed to communicate, or did I just speak?” Take time to make sure the person you are speaking to understands your needs, requests and suggestions. You may need to provide some background information in order to get that person on the same page with you. However, the time you take to do this will be well spent.

**Listening Skills**

1. **Listen to what others want you to hear, not to what you want to hear.**
   
   Listening could be considered a lost art form. With so much noise and commotion surrounding you each day, you develop a routine to drown out certain elements and adopt selective hearing. With all the chatter going on around you, it becomes easier to filter information then it does to truly process it. The importance of what is being said can and does get lost in the shuffle.

   There is an old adage that says, “You have two ears and one mouth.” Therefore, you should listen twice as much as you speak. This adage needs to be re-adopted in our modern age.

   In order to fully understand what it means to actively listen, let’s determine the difference between hearing and listening. According to Webster’s Dictionary, hearing means “the act or process of perceiving sounds.” Listening, on the other hand, means making “a conscious effort to hear, attend closely.” You might hear a lot of things, but the question is, do you really listen to what you hear?

   In addition to the definitional differences between the words, there is a very real and physical component to active listening. By portraying active listening non-verbally, you are providing encouragement to the speaker as well as pro-

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Don't multi-task. Avoid typing on the computer (unless taking notes), answering the phone, or interrupting the conversation to talk to someone in the hallway. A lot of these environmental distractions convey disrespect and lack of caring towards the speaker. Be honest with the speaker with regard to how much time you have available. If you have five-minutes between meetings or classes, inform them of your time constraints and either dedicate that time solely to them, or make an appointment for when you can give them your undivided attention. Being deliberate with your time creates a great listening environment.

Always strive to truly understand what someone else’s body language tells us. Someone might be standing in the back of the room with their arms crossed over their chest. Are they standoffish and unwelcoming, are they comfortable and listening, or are they cold and attempting to conserve body heat?

There is arguably no correct or incorrect way to use body language, just an awareness of how you use it. Moving your hands excessively while talking may be distracting. Standing with your hands in your pockets may be intimidating. Playing with your pen in a meeting may be annoying. Body language should effectively support what you are saying or how you are listening. To see how you use non-verbal actions to communicate at those objects will convey impatience. Create a circle with the three points of interest and use them to establish a pattern of eye contact that is comfortable and effective for you. The more you practice, the more it will become easier to do. You will also notice that your level of interaction with people will change because you are also engaging in active listening techniques.

Facial expressions play as important a role as body language and eye contact. Immediate reactions, emotions and and/or confusion will be displayed on your face as others communicate with you. It is human to react to things that you hear, and your face provides your first response. Facial expressions also encourage continued communication by giving the speaker an indication that you have heard and are processing what they have said. Just as with eye contact and body language, you need to establish levels of facial expressions that enhance your ability to communicate, not detract from it.

Knowing that you communicate without ever saying a word, it becomes increasingly important to make sure that the entire message you put forth is a good one.

the other person is saying. Human nature often leads us to react and jump to conclusions. In active listening, though, you need to suppress that urge. Please note that you do not need to agree with or support what the person is saying—just understand it. Start by paraphrasing. This does not mean repeating to the person exactly what they said to you. It means taking what the person has said, putting it through your personal filters and then sharing the results with the speaker. This process of paraphrasing will do three things. First, it will allow you to personally process the information to guarantee that you have a grasp on what the speaker is trying to convey. Second, it will provide the speaker an opportunity to either confirm or correct the information that was shared. Third, it will keep you from forming your rebuttal. Rather then taking just the words you want to hear and construing them to match your viewpoint, you are listening to what the speaker wants you to hear.

Active listening is a skill that needs to be continually practiced, but the outcome of understanding what the other person is trying to say is invaluable.

Non-verbal Communication

Your words are telling me one thing, but your body language is telling me another.

If you haven’t already noticed, body language plays a large role in effective communication and listening. Not only do we need to understand what our body language tells people, we have to be in tune enough to interpret correctly.

References


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About the Author

Melanie J. Rotz is an account executive/consultant with High Impact Training (MN). Previously, she served as director of Student Activities at the College of St. Scholastica (MN) and as director of Student Leadership and Involvement at the University of Redlands (CA). Active in NACA, she has held volunteer positions in the former Upper Midwest and Far West regions and was named the former Upper Midwest Region's Outstanding New Professional in 1997. She has been named to Who's Who Among American Professionals, as well as to Who's Who Among American Teachers. She holds bachelor's degrees in communications and language and literature from The College of St. Scholastica (MN) and a master's degree in experiential education from Minnesota State University-Mankato.