

The Art of Business Communication

PSSST! It's a Two-way Street




BY TIM PRICE

"Who were you talking to, Dad?"

My daughter asked me that question one day, and it prompted me to ponder what business communication really is and why people have so much trouble with it.

I had been talking 30 minutes when she asked me the question, and when I replied "Honey, I'm working," she asked me if that was my job: talking to people. As I reflected on her comment, I realized that while talking is certainly an important part of what I do, I was doing way too much of the talking and not enough listening.

If the goal of communication is mutual understanding, why then, is there so much misunderstanding between people in the business world? That's a good question, and I believe the answer has something to do with balance.



What we're saying

One way to look at this is to break up what takes place between two communicators into these eight messages:

- 1) What you actually say
- 2) What you think you're saying
- 3) What your body language says
- 4) What your tone says
- 5) What the receiver hears
- 6) What you think the receiver hears
- 7) What the receiver's body language says, and
- 8) What the receiver's tone says if they echo the message back to you.

As this shows, it's not just what we're saying, but how we're saying it.

Psychology and communication expert Albert Mehrabian says that every message has three components:

- Content (which makes up 7%)
- Tone (38%) and
- Non-verbal behavior (55%).

If you put those three together, you have the whole message, but your communication is still a one-way path.

Listening

Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that listening isn't part of what we all learn when we're first learning to communicate. Even in the few schools that focus on communication, public speaking is usually what's taught.

That doesn't teach us interpersonal communication. Even the Holy Bible tells us: "He who answers before listening—that is his folly and his shame," as well as, "Do you see a man who speaks in haste? There is more hope for a fool than for him." Do we need to be hit on the head any harder? If you want to be a good communicator, stop talking and begin listening.

Why is this so important? Think about how you feel when someone really listens to you: respected, important, satisfied. Can you imagine the impression you make after a sales call by leaving the customer with feelings of respect and importance?

On the other hand, think about how you feel when you are not being heard: your time is wasted; you're disrespected; you feel unimportant and dissatisfied. Is that the impression you want to make?

Inspirational writer Ron Willingham said: "People are more apt to trust and open up to you when you listen to them, care about them and have a sincere desire to understand them."

This last part—understanding what they're saying—is crucial. Yet how many times during a conversation are you thinking about your reply before the other person stops talking; or better yet, how many times do you finish the other person's sentence? Since 55% of our message exchange is non-verbal, you need to show you're listening, which means, turn off the smart phone and look at the other person, watch their eyes, their body language and gestures. Also, when the other person is speaking, be aware of your own non-verbal messages—a smirk or a roll of the eyes may be all it takes to make the speaker angry.

Hearing is not listening

"I hear what you're saying," is a common expression today, but it pinpoints very well what part of the problem is: there is a real difference between hearing and listening.

We hear all the sounds and conversations around us. Hearing is the physical phenomenon of sound waves colliding with the eardrum. Listening goes beyond that physical act—it involves interpreting the sounds, which usually leads to responses and actions.

Most of us have good hearing but poor listening skills.

There are four levels of listening that people practice:

Passive listening, which is way too common. The passive listener's face is expressionless with maybe just an occasional nod of the head to let the speaker know the listener is alive. This form of listening does very little to stimulate the conversation and may send negative messages to the speaker, such as, "I would rather be anywhere but here."

Selective listening. My wife often accuses me of favoring this form of listening, which she says means I hear only what I want to hear. The selective listener is often distracted and is famous for responding before the sender is finished. The selective listener may even try to change the conversation if it's not to his or her liking.

Attentive listening. Now we're moving to a more positive style. The attentive listener uses good eye contact, raises questions, yet might not be 100% focused on the sender. The attentive listener might withdraw from the conversation if the sender becomes too emotional or uses threatening or unpleasant body language.

Active listening. I believe our goal as a good listener involves active listening. The active listener uses good eye contact, but also is attentive to nonverbal messages. Such a listener uses questions to explore the content and the emotions of the message. The active listener is responsive, reflective, patient, and acknowledges and accepts emotions without passing judgment.

Where are you?

If you are using passive or selective listening, I guarantee it is affecting your personal relationships and professional life. If you see yourself as an attentive listener, you might want to strive for the active style of listening.

As an active listener, the first priority is **receiving the message**. To receive, we need to create the right environment, which means:

- Putting the sender at ease by showing an interest in him or her.
- Tuning out the world and its distractions: forget about the next sales call you have scheduled, what's happening at the office or what's for dinner. Your entire world is the present conversation.
- Be calm and focused. Exhibit good posture and good eye

contact without staring a hole into the other person's soul. Don't frown or smirk; one wrong nonverbal message could change the course of the conversation.

- Pay attention to the other person's nonverbal message.
- Don't mentally formulate a response while in receiving mode.

The second stage of active listening involves **processing the message**. This involves analyzing the content, tone and nonverbal message. One good way to clarify the message is to use the technique of "echoing" or simply restating the message to ensure you understand what's said. Another good way is probing, which is asking focused questions to aid your understanding.

Stage three of active listening is **responding to the message**.

This is where the greatest opportunity to really connect lies. You need to respond both verbally and nonverbally and make sure the two match. Your mouth shouldn't be saying "yes" while your crossed arms and defensive posture say "no." You also need to pay careful attention to the sender's nonverbal actions to see if your response is properly understood. Finally, you need to make sure you follow up promptly on any action items required. Slow follow-up or lack of action on your part

will undermine your entire contact, and the sender will lose confidence in you and your company.

Listening builds trust and lets others know they are important to you. It allows you to "hear" the total message and prepares you for a proper response. The impact on both your internal and external customers is positive when they feel listened to: It builds stronger working relationships, increases productivity, builds repeat business, makes for easier problem solving and generally creates less stress and a better quality of work life.

In the next issue of MasterCast™ Connection, Price will give his tips on the second part of the equation: talking. ■

FOLLOW THE FAMOUS 80/20 RULE: LISTEN 80% OF THE TIME AND TALK 20% OF THE TIME.

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