

Am I Making Myself Clear?

This collection comprises fifteen checklists about all the different aspects of communication – from misunderstandings in communications to how to communicate bad news, and from the significance of body language to dealing with complaints, discontent and reprimands. It's easy to take with you anywhere and is always handy for checking if you've forgotten something. A great gift for anyone involved in communicating – and that means all of us.

We wish you much success!

The basics of communicating

Communication is a process between the person communicating (the sender) and the person 'receiving' (the receiver).

- The message is noted, interpreted and evaluated.
- When the message fails to get through, there is what is known as 'disturbance'.
- This may be external disturbance, such as a bad telephone line or noisy surroundings.
- Internal disturbance also exists – in the form of misunderstanding, misinterpretation or mistakes.

Channels

Sender – Message – Receiver

Everything we do involves communication. It is impossible not to communicate.

- It involves content – what is said, our verbal behaviour.
- Then there's form – the way we say it, also called non-verbal behaviour.
- You need to be sure that these are consistent with each other.
- If the form and the content are not consistent, the person at the receiving end will only notice the form.
- This can lead to serious misunderstandings.

Misunderstandings in communications

Everyone who receives a message does three things with it:

- they note it (what I heard, saw, felt, experienced),
- they interpret it (what it means for me),
- they evaluate it (what I think about it).

The message is filtered through:

- their own past experience,
- their norms and values (beliefs about what's acceptable and what's not acceptable),
- their expectations,
- their convictions about themselves,
- the personal significance of particular words (emotional value).

As a result, misunderstandings can arise in communications.

- Be aware that you will always be interpreting what the other person has said.
- Check your interpretations and assumptions by asking questions and summarising.
- Make sure you are on the same wavelength.
- What does the other person mean, what are they aiming at?
- Sort out misunderstandings (avoiding them is impossible).

Body language

Body language and movement are very important in non-verbal communication.

- Make eye contact with the other person without staring at them.
- Turn your body towards the other person – this conveys the fact that you are paying attention to them.
- Use facial expressions to back up your words (frown or smile, for example).
- Use your hands and arms to reinforce what you are saying (shake hands, maybe pat someone on the shoulder when paying a compliment).
- Use intonation to make your message clear (whispering, talking loudly or quickly).
- Make sure you look neat and tidy.
- Walk and sit upright.
- Make sure you smell fresh!

A good listener...

- looks at the other person when they are talking,
- asks for clarification about what the other person is saying,
- appears interested by asking about feelings,
- summarises what the other person has said,
- doesn't hurry the other person along while they are saying something,
- is balanced and calm,
- reacts appropriately with nods, smiles or frowns,
- always pays attention,
- doesn't interrupt the other person,
- keeps to the same subject until the other person has formulated their thoughts.
- is not busy coming up with their own arguments while the other person is talking.

Summarising

Effective summarising

Goal: to check if you have understood the other person.

- Say in your own words what you have understood (paraphrase).
- Note the most important points and agreements again (classifying).
- Talk about feelings. Indicate which emotion has come across in the other person's account (happy, angry...).

For example, someone tells a story very loudly about something that has really irritated him. The summary of this would be 'You're really angry about this, aren't you?'

Pitfalls to avoid when summarising:

- Repeating what the other person has said literally (parrot fashion). This can come across as unsure and even facetious.
- Interpreting what has been said too freely gives the other person the feeling that they have not been heard and understood.
- Adding your own opinion to the summary – putting words into the other person's mouth.

Asking questions

Open questions

Ask open questions if you want to gain an understanding, gauge an opinion, obtain background information, want to look deeper into something or encourage opinions or attitudes.

- Open questions start with words such as *who, what, where, when, which, how, how many, how often*.
- ‘What do you mean exactly?’, ‘How did you deal with that?’

Closed questions

Ask closed questions if you want to know certain facts or want to confirm information.

- Closed questions begin with a verb.
- ‘Are you...?’, ‘Do you...?’

Counter-productive or ‘suggestive’ questions

It’s best to avoid this type!

Goal: to get the answer you want, to confuse or mislead and avoid what the other person is really saying.

- ‘Isn’t it true that...?’

Improving communications

Identify the disturbance.

Try to explain the disturbance which is affecting the communication.

- Lack of clarity about content (subject of conversation, information exchanged)
- Lack of clarity about procedure (agenda, time, place, appointments)
- Disturbance in terms of relationships (images of each other, expectations about role and atmosphere)
- Disturbance in terms of emotions (tension, dissatisfaction, irritation)

Rephrase the disturbance in terms of communication.

Check whether the other person has also noticed the disturbance.

Look for a way to remove the disturbance.

Request a meeting:

- Why has it gone so badly?
- Why have I become irritated?
- Why is the other person so distant?
- What have I done wrong?
- What should I do differently next time around?

Feedback

Giving feedback

- Formulate your feedback in clear, practical terms.
- Use 'I' instead of 'we' or (even) 'one'.
- Feedback should be given about measurable and changeable behaviour.
- Give feedback in good time.
- Ensure that the feedback is acceptable and relevant.
- Keep feedback concise.
- Ask if the other person has understood the feedback.
- Express as far as possible the behaviour you want from the other person.

For example, someone turns up half an hour late for a meeting without letting you know. The feedback here would be: 'I find it annoying that you're half an hour late; I've lost time because of it. I'd like you to be on time in future, or at least let me know if you are going to be late.'

Receiving feedback

- Don't interpret feedback as a personal attack.
- Don't immediately go on the defensive.
- Ask for more information and try to understand the feedback.
- Demonstrate your appreciation for the feedback.
- Evaluate the feedback.
- Do something with the feedback.