

Developing Interpersonal Communication Skills

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Received Date :18.02.2020 Revised Date 05.07.2020 Accepted Date 22.08.2020

ABSTRACT

The paper supports the objective of improved communication with others. The interpersonal communication is one of the most important and fulfilling activities humans can accomplish – but like any activity, it needs to acquire some qualities in individuals, well highlighted in the paper, to proceed with success. The first action in any communication is to clearly outline one's communication objective. In the job of communication, we have to deliver our knowledge to the full understanding of our listeners. Each group of listeners will be of a different type, with varying degrees in the power of their understanding. The successful communicator will be he who can judge the person or the crowd of listeners around him and intelligently modulate his speech to the ability, mood and interest of the crowd. Let us learn to love our listeners, and feel a sincere concern for their welfare. We have to thus change our „*Raaga*’ & „*Taal*’ according to the quality of our listeners; we must plan how to explain to people of different standards of grasping power. We should keep smiling and have faith in ourselves. We must be flexible and adapt to our partner's style and the situation. We should remember that if we aren't getting the results we want, we need to change our approach.

KEYWORDS: Non-Verbal Communication, Emotional Intelligence, Behavioural Pattern, Holistic Listening, Empathy

INTRODUCTION

Poor communication skills can condemn one to a life of mediocrity and unhappiness. However, good communication skills can lead one to success beyond his wildest dreams. By the time we reach adulthood, most of our communication activities are performed subconsciously – that is, we use our communication skills whether we are aware of them or not. Following qualities will help make one more conscious of how he communicates and how he can change his style to become a better communicator.

“No man is an island,” said the sixteenth century poet, John Donne. By their very essence, human persons have been created as social creatures. Hence, as social beings, persons cannot exist without communicating with one another. Communication is the fabric of life. If you were to ask yourself how you have become what you are, mentally, psychologically, socially, culturally, emotionally and spiritually, you will realize it is only through communication with other human beings. You have developed and will in future continue to develop till you reach the fullness of your personality only through learning from others. This learning will come through communication with them. Beginning with our parents and going on through our brothers and sisters, relatives, teachers, friends, employers, employees, the books we have read through which authors have spoken to us, the films we have seen which are made by others, dramas acted by others, we are constantly learning and developing ourselves through communication with, and by others. Hence, communication is a fundamental fact of human existence. It is anthropological reality, essential both for human living as well as for human growth and development. Communication is also the way in which God makes himself known to us, and by which we respond to God. (Booher, 1998)

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATORS

Throughout history, outstanding leaders have been ordinary people with extraordinary vision – and the skill to communicate it. Think of someone who you consider to be a good communicator. What makes that person effective? You’ll probably find that three things do: A positive attitude, a clearly defined goal, and People skills. A positive attitude means that you approach what you want as though you can’t fail. If you assume you’ll fail before you start, that will communicate itself in your voice and actions. As Henry Ford once said, “Whether you think you can or whether you think you can’t, you’re probably right.” A clearly defined goal must not only be clear in your own mind, but must be linked to your listener’s needs. In fact, your own goal must be something that your listener also needs, or believes he needs. People do things for their reasons, not yours. You must provide the benefits in order for your listener to act. Finally, people skills, or communications skills, take practice and knowledge regarding how to proceed. These basic skills include self awareness, self-control, self-motivation, an understanding of differences between people, and the ability to cope with the feelings of others. (Laborde, 1997)

BEHAVIOURAL LANGUAGE

The most you can hope for is to have the other person listen, understand and consider the benefits of your proposal. Deliver your message in their language and you will accomplish just that. We all have certain specific behavioural tendencies. That’s not to say we’re pigeonholed into being one thing or another. We are not locked into these tendencies – but more times than not, we tend to behave the same way again and again. Why? By default, we return to what we feel is safe and comfortable.

Each of us is different. Fortunately we are predictably different and our difference makes us simultaneously attractive and frustrating to others. The secret of persuasion is to understand yourself and others. Then you can adapt effectively to the needs of the person and the situation. Information is power, but it’s only powerful if you know how to obtain and use it. David Golman, author of Emotional Intelligence, defined “EQ” as an ability to understand one’s own feelings and to express empathy for the feelings for others. His studies showed that EQ is four times more likely than IQ to indicate your level of success. According to Golman, the communication skills responsible for EQ are: Empathy, Graciousness, and The ability to read others.

The ability to influence others is dependent on the degree of willingness you and your partner wish to exercise in being cooperative and getting along. The greater your ability to adapt to your partner’s behaviour and to communicate in his language, the more receptive he will be to you and the greater your chance of success will be. The key to influencing others lies in your ability to present your needs in terms of meeting their needs and in wording your proposal in a way that is most receptive and understandable to them. In short, we want benefits spelled out for us in our own language. We want these benefits presented in a way that we can understand, so that we can put them to good use. If you want to influence someone, you have to do the work of delivering your message in the receiver’s behavioural language. You must design your presentation to meet his needs so he can immediately see the benefits.

To sum up: You have a preferred behavioural pattern. You also have the ability to modify it to suit the situation and environment. This ability makes you uniquely gifted and tremendously effective as a communicator. (Robinson, 2006)

BODY CLUES

You can use body clues to predict a whole range of actions. Body movements indicate things about another person that may have great importance for creating communication – to give you reasons to avoid it. Here are a few easy-to-spot characteristics that can help you determine whether it’s wise to continue your present course of actions:

1. Readiness and Enthusiasm: When people are ready to take action, they’ll often sit forward in their seats or stand with their hands on their hips. They are anxious to get going. They will stand or sit in an erect position. They are alert, with wide, bright eyes. Their body motions are alive and animated. Their words can’t keep up with their hands. When you see these signs get going – because they’re ready!
2. Frustration: Most of us are familiar with these signs. How many times a day do you see some of these gestures: hand wringing, running fingers through hair, clenching hand or jaw, and exasperated sigh, or

tension in the small muscles of the face? If you see these signs in others, retreat before approaching with any request!

3. **Superiority:** People who feel superior to you often appear relaxed, with their hands clasped behind their heads or backs. The chin and head is often held high. They may lean back in their chairs, or lean their bodies against a wall, table or desk. When someone behaves this way it's important for you to control your emotions, apply your communications skills and focus on the issues at hand.
4. **Boredom:** Bored people tap their fingers or feet. They're often preoccupied with personal grooming or with other insignificant details, such as sharpening a pencil. They will also point their bodies to the door, and often check their watches. Often, asking a question or stating your observation of their behaviours will involve them in the conversation.
5. **Nervousness:** Nervous people cover their mouths when they speak. Their voices are often high, and may even break. Their speech is hesitant, and they use "ums" and "ahs" incessantly. They may clear their throats and wring their hands while looking down at their shoes. You may also see their facial muscles twitching as they shift back and forth on their feet. It's important for you to create a safe environment for them to speak, to maintain rapport, and to be patient and encouraging. (Robinson, 2006)

BODY LANGUAGE

It is emphasized that we need to hear with our eyes, not just with our ears. Body language is the major key to understanding, and while it's important to observe it in others, these same signs transmit message about us. One caution – several supportive gestures are a more reliable indicator than a single gesture. Confident eye contact shows trustworthiness and truthfulness. Shiny eyes indicate aloofness and distrust. If someone won't maintain eye contact it may mean they are uncomfortable with either you on the topic. Intent staring is considered aggressive. Maintaining eye contact marks us as confident, credible and connected. Related indicators include raising the eyebrows in disbelief, scrunching the face, and winking. Posture: Posture both reflects and affects how we feel. Sloppy posture occurs when we're too loose. If we're too stiff, we appear tense and stressed. Crossed legs may signal disagreement and self-protection. When we're withdrawn and holding our heads down, we appear weak, indecisive and lacking in confidence. With a confident posture, our heads are up and we're sitting and standing erect. Develop a confident, brisk walk, with freely swinging arms, a self-assured person moves with purpose. Our hands and arms say a lot about us. Gestures are sometimes deliberate, but most often they occur unconsciously and naturally. If we're stuck for words, our gestures become more animated, as if to replace missing words and express things that words seem incapable of expressing. Arms across the chest indicate that we're protecting ourselves, or we're cold. (Matin, 2010)

EMOTION

It's normal to feel angry, frustrated, and let down by what others do. How you respond, however, is always up to you! Your emotions can both help and hinder communication. When you're communicating with another person, set aside your first reactions and suspend judgment for the moment. Find a way to control your emotions. We live in a world of cause and effect, stimulus and response. Effective communicators create a pause between the stimulus and their response. A pause allows you to choose your best response.

EMPATHY

You can persuade someone much more easily by aligning with his or her feelings than by trying to convince with reason or logic. Empathy differs from sympathy. Empathy acknowledges someone else's feelings as being real and valid for them – even though you do not feel the same way. Sympathy is a state of having similar feelings to someone else. It is important to empathize with others, to acknowledge emotion without becoming emotional. This is especially true if you have bad news to deliver. Prepare your partner as much as you can. Say right up front that you have bad news for him. This gives your partner time to prepare for it physically. For example: If you have to dismiss an employee. As soon as he enters your office, say, "I have some bad news for you." Then tell him he's

about to be dismissed, give him the reasons why, and ask if he has any questions. You can't feel what he feels, but you can acknowledge his emotion.

Take these concrete steps to defuse stress whenever you must deliver bad news to people or give them corrective feedback: Choose the best time and place. Prepare them by them what you're about to discuss. Deliver the bad news or corrective feedback. If it's bad news, tell them the reason, discuss how you can help, and legitimize their emotions. If you're delivering corrective feedback, you must include the specific behaviour or situation creating the problem, the effect it has, and the possible consequences. Check their perceptions of what's happened. Do they agree or understand? Discuss options. Follow up. It works the other way, too. When an employee has a triumph, no matter how minor, acknowledge the effort. Recognize good behaviour and the employee will feel even better about it. Recognize is the number one motivator. What is recognized and rewarded is repeated. (Goleman, 1998)

FACIAL LANGUAGE

If one had to choose whether to focus on the body or the face – he would prefer to focus on the face. What is a person's emotional state: angry, sad, surprised, happy, fearful, or disgusted? Dr. Paul Ekman at the University of California has developed a facial-action coding system by identifying six emotional expressions that are universally recognized. Here is a brief description of the facial gestures associated with these states: Sadness – raised eyebrows with a wrinkled forehead, Surprise – raised eyebrows with an open mouth, Anger – lowered eyebrows with intent staring and bared teeth, Happy – smiling in the mouth and eye area, mouth open, Fear – wide open eyes and mouth with raised eyebrows, Disgust – wrinkled nose and open mouth. (Murphy, 2008)

HOLISTIC LISTENING

Listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force. You can see that when you think how its friends that really listen to us are the ones we move toward, and we want to sit in their radius as though it did us well, like ultraviolet rays. Holistic listeners combine empathetic listening with analytical listening and integrate what they hear to achieve win/win outcomes. Most importantly, they take the time to connect and listen. They use what is said and not said, what they feel, what they know and everything else at hand to improve their understanding of the person and the situation. Holistic listeners can separate concrete information from opinions and enthusiasm from evidence. They are capable of weighing facts and feelings – and digression or repetition doesn't faze them. They acknowledge people and their ideas and don't deny them their feelings. They don't fight to be right, offer advice, or lecture others. Most importantly, holistic listeners don't prejudge. Prejudging is a form of listening in which the listener has already determined what he or she expects to hear and then selectively listens for evidence to support that view. Once the listener hears what is expected there is determined attempt to shut down their communication partner by using judgmental comments such as "I thought so," or "That's ridiculous," or even "Uh-oh ... here it comes!" (Robinson, 2006)

UNDERSTANDING

Understanding is your reward for listening. Understanding is the process of learning your partner's perceptions so you share his or her meaning. You don't have to accept it, but by being open-minded you can, at least for a moment, enter into your partner's world and share it as this person sees it. Understanding isn't tangible thing ... its intangible. It can't be seen, heard, or felt. It has to be received, much like a satellite dish receives a signal. First, the dish must be adjustment to face the satellite. Only then can a message be received. Communication is the sharing of thoughts, feelings, and expectations – even in difficult situations. All are valid. Sharing means listening for your partner's thoughts, feelings, and expectations while willingly stating yours in an assertive manner. Passive communicators merely listen, while aggressive communicators speak without listening. Assertive communicators do both. This takes high self-esteem, self-awareness, self-confidence, and empathy, but it will lead to understanding. Understanding is the removal of distortions and the mental transformation of words, sounds and images into shared meaning. You don't have to like or agree with the speakers, but you do need to receive what he has to say and mentally transform his message before you can evaluate it accurately and respond properly. When you speak, you

learn what you know. When you listen, you learn what you know. When you ask questions, you probe for understanding. (Murphy, 2008)

NON – VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Meanings are in people, not in their words. It's easier to change your words than to hide your intentions. Your words might disguise your intent, but not to your subconscious physical responses. By itself, a single gesture means nothing. Meaning comes from reading your partner's overall impression and combining it with what is being said. Non verbal communication or NVC includes: Body language, Posture, Gestures, Eye contact, Space, Facial expressions, Movements, Tone of voice. In 1872, Charles Darwin noted that our ability to signal feelings, needs and desire was critical to our survival. NVC reveals the truth more accurately than words. Studies confirm that it is more reliable more accurate and more informative than what is said. While NVC is influenced by culture it remains to some degree universal and universally recognizable. People from different parts of the world, for instance can all identify six basic emotions: Anger, Fear, Sadness, Disgust, Surprise, Happiness. Misunderstanding is common because we focus too intently on hearing what is said, and not observing and understanding non-verbal communication. The greater your awareness of NVC, the more powerful a communicator you will become. (Murphy, 2008)

MARKETING YOURSELF

You might market yourself poorly. You might market yourself well. But you cannot not market. Marketing may seem a strange topic for interpersonal communication. But when you are communicating with another individual you are, in fact, "marketing" yourself and your ideas to that person. In its broadcast sense, marketing can be conscious or unconscious. Conscious marketing involves all the steps you take to sell your ideas. But unconscious marketing may determine how someone perceives you before even open your mouth. In a few words, marketing is: Express who you are, defines what you do, creates a perception of your value. Marketing is not just about projecting a successful image for your company. It's about projecting a successful image of yourself – and controlling the perceptions that people have about you. (Murphy, 2008)

LEADERSHIP

The greatest discovery of this generation: Human beings can alter their lives by altering their attitudes. When two people communicate, one has to be the leader. This is not always the person who is doing the talking. Communication leadership can be obtained through asking questions, tone and body language. In effective communication, the "leadership" switches back and forth from one partner to the other. That's the simple way of stating something that's fairly complex. The key is to be a good leader, and leadership comes from within. It involves: Knowing yourself, Having vision and passion, Taking risks, Being able to communicate effectively, Being aware of your progress and the results you get. These are known as the five key steps to personal and professional leadership from within, a system now used in many companies and leading universities. (Matin, 2010)

MOTIVATING

Motivation results from unfulfilled needs. Knowing how to motivate others is crucial to successfully influencing other people. In face to face communication, you want to focus on questions that will help you discover what motivates the person you're speaking to. We'll do anything to avoid pain or gain pleasure, although the desire to avoid pain is often more powerful than the desire to gain pleasure. Questioning about this is a first step to understand how the individual is motivated. Is the person motivated by wanting to avoid pain? ("I want to quit smoking because I'm afraid I'll get lung cancer.") Or is the person motivated by pleasure? ("When I quit smoking my food will taste better!") When you want to influence someone's opinion you must get him or her into a receptive state. You get someone into this state by changing the person's mental focus and/or physical state. The physical state is what a person is doing. The mental focus is what a person is thinking about.

Have you noticed how difficult it is to start something rolling? Pushing a car is an example. It takes a lot to get it moving but once it starts it gains momentum and becomes easier to push. This is also true of people. In order

to overcome inertia you must physically move the person. Changing a person's physical location will change a person's mental position. Try it. Change the person's present activity. If she is sitting, have her stand. If she is writing, ask her to step and get something for you. Suggest you take a walk together perhaps just moving to another room. Once you've moved the person physically try to get her to refocus her thoughts. This process works personally as well. For instance: you are trying to write a letter. Nothing comes. You feel drained of ideas. No matter what you do, nothing happens. Get up. Go for a coffee or a tea. When you come back to your task your mind seems to be working again. It is. You changed your physical state to allow yourself to refocus. Another way to change a person's mental state is to ask him questions. First, however, ask yourself whether the person is proactive or reactive by nature. Proactive people are motivated to act on their own. Reactive people generally wait until they absolutely have to act.

Remember: In the simplest terms we are motivated by anything that will give us pleasure or help us avoid pain. Some of us want money and tangible things; others want recognition and intangible rewards. Good listeners listen for those pains and pleasures. If you're asking about your partner's pains and your partner is focussed on avoiding pain, you're not hearing what's important to him. Strive to understand who behind the what. If you want one thing and your partner wants something else you face a potential roadblock. For instance: Imaging an upcoming decision regarding the purchase of some equipment for your department. Your boss is stalling because she wants her decision to be perfect. She wants you to research it more. You're impatient because you know there's no perfect piece of equipment. You just want it purchased and up and running, because time and money are being wasted with all the ongoing research. You both have the same goal, but your motivations in the buying decision differ. This is when careful listening will help you. Your persuasion efforts might better focus on the cost of delaying the decision to offset the minimal difference that exists between the types of equipment available. (Matin, 2010)

CONCLUSION

How can it be that in this age of sophisticated communications technology, our interpersonal communications are suffering? The answer is that few people take the time to learn the skills needed for effective one-to-one communication. In fact, few are even aware that communication skills can be learned. This paper highlights few key communication concepts everyone can learn to communicate freely, persuasively, and with confidence. Helpful tips to improve business and personal relationship are narrated in the paper for an entrepreneur looking for more successful interactions with clients, a manager trying to deal with difficult people, or an employee seeking more productive relationships with boss and co-workers. Down-to-earth guidance on how to improve communication among family members is also incorporated in the paper.

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