

Communication—simple yet complex, easy to do and easy to blunder. “We send from 100 to 300 messages a day. These include the message we intend to send; the message we actually send; the message as the hearer interprets it; the response of the hearer based on what he or she heard; and our reaction to the exchange of words, meaning and interpretation.”<sup>1</sup>

*We hear only half of what is said to us, understand only half of that, believe only half of that, and remember only half of that.*<sup>2</sup>

Communicating effectively helps group members build trust and respect, foster learning and accomplish goals. Written, oral and body language are important tools for sharing ideas, feelings and commitments. Your group is made up of people who share a common interest and commitment, and yet perhaps see things from a variety of perspectives. Effective communication is the way this diverse group of people will be able to understand the issues and make decisions for effective change.

<sup>1</sup> Kathy Walker et. al, “Communication Basics,” LEADS Curriculum Notebook Unit II, Module 2-1 (Kansas State University, 2002), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Dina Jo Chacon, cited in Walker, 2.



Why do people talk to each other? When we talk, it is because we have a thought, idea or feeling that we want to share with someone. We talk so as to become acquainted, build relationships, express emotions to others, share information and persuade others to understand our personal views. In order to have communication, both listening and speaking are necessary.<sup>3</sup>

## Active listening

When asked to define communication, most people describe the techniques used to express what they think, feel, want, etc.—namely talking, writing or body language. However, when you confront difficult issues, listening is more important than speaking or any other form of expression.

To improve communication, recognize the importance of listening and make listening a key part of your group’s culture. Active listening has several benefits:

- It saves time because you cut through people’s defenses and get more information without having to repeat the same

conversation over and over.

- It helps you assess a situation accurately.

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## What you will learn:

- Why active listening is important, and how to do it well
- How to express yourself directly
- How to express and receive anger
- What dialogue is and why it is important

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- It helps speakers clarify what they are saying and makes them feel heard.
- It reduces emotions that block clear thinking.

Everyone can learn the art of active listening. The key to listening effectively is relaxed attention—listen with your whole body by using verbal and nonverbal skills like facing the person and maintaining eye contact. Try to be at ease and avoid interrupting the speaker.

### Direct, assertive expression

If half of the equation in communicating is active listening, the other half is speaking and expressing what you think, feel or want in a clear, true and nondefensive way. Be clear about what you want, and what you are willing to give.

When expressing yourself, use “I” statements. Using “I” statements lets you share what you think or feel without sounding like you are blaming or attacking. These statements communicate your preferences and keep you responsible for your part in the exchange.

For example, here are three comments you might say or hear, followed by alternative “I” statements in italics:

- “You know that’s not right.”  
*“I see it differently than you do.”*
- “You are really irritating me.”  
*“I’m feeling really irritated right now.”*
- “You’re not listening to me.”  
*“I don’t feel heard.”*

### Step 1. Acknowledge the thoughts, ideas or feelings first.

Show your readiness to listen by recognizing and hearing the thoughts, ideas and feelings of the other person. Use nods, “uh-huhs,” and comments that indicate you recognize the validity of the speaker’s feelings.

**Example:** “It’s been one frustration too many. You’re wanting to give up,” or “Sounds like you’re really upset by this.”

### Step 2. Say it in different words.

A powerful and important component of active listening is reflection—otherwise known as paraphrasing. Paraphrasing lets the other person know you are trying to understand. It clarifies the communication and slows the pace of the conversation.

To paraphrase, repeat what the speaker is saying in your own words, without adding anything not there in the first place.

**Example:** “Sounds like you have tried everything, and you don’t know where to go next,” or “If I’m following you, you are really wondering how this recent decision will affect your home.”

### Step 3. Ask open-ended questions.

Ask for help when you get lost in a conversation. Test your interpretation of what the speaker is saying. Ask relevant, open-ended questions beginning with “what,” “how,” “please explain,” or “describe.”

**Example:** “How will that influence teenagers in your community?” or “If this policy goes through, describe how it will affect your business.”

### Step 4. Summarize and clarify.

Pull together what you have heard. Make sure you understand the speaker’s intent. This keeps you from falling into “selective perception.” When you perceive selectively, you are already expecting the speaker to react in a certain way—perhaps based on past experience, or on the way you would react. You then respond to the reaction you’ve predetermined, instead of to the real one. This is unhelpful and unclear communication.

In addition, getting clear can help the speaker clarify possible choices.

**Example:** “You mentioned talking with them or just letting it go. What might be some other options?”



### Step 5. Give an opinion.

Do this with caution. Ask whether the speaker is willing or wants to hear your opinion. Don’t give it if the speaker declines.

**Example:**

1. Pause for a moment.
2. Ask, “Would you be interested in hearing my perspective on this issue/situation?”
3. Let it go if they respond with “no.” Maybe they just needed to talk and they will figure it out on their own. If they respond with “yes,” use the skills presented throughout this publication to guide you through a helpful exchange of thoughts, ideas and feelings.

## Body language

We communicate as much or more through body language as we do with words. Body language includes facial expressions, eye contact and the stance or movements of arms, hands and legs.

Be aware of your body language and what it might communicate to others. One way to do this is to become aware of body language in others. The next time you are involved in a group conversation or watching one on television, watch the body language of one of the listeners and consider how it might affect the speaker. Check out the speaker's body language and see if it tells the same story as the words. Examples of body language that support effective communication include an open body stance, sitting on the edge of your chair and focusing your eyes on the other person. Conversely, pointing your index finger,

wringing your hands, crossing your arms on your chest and casting sideways glances can block effective communication.

## Anger—expressing it and receiving it

While working in group settings, you are bound to encounter conflicts and feelings of anger. Anger is one of the least understood emotions. It can provide information and stimulate energy that can be used positively. It is important to understand that other emotions, such as pain, fear, despair or frustration are often expressed as anger.

Here are things to remember when you are angry:

- Use "I" statements.
- Talk about yourself first: "I feel frustrated . . ." This avoids making the listener defensive. Be descriptive: let listeners know exactly what situation you feel angry about.
- Avoid judgments. Using words such as "better,"

## Blocks to effective communication

- Me-too-ism, such as, "That's nothing, let me tell you what happened to me!" These statements make the speaker feel unheard.
- Moralizing, preaching, being judgmental. Recognize that the speaker may say something that offends your value system. Set aside the judgment so you can listen.
- Asking a direct question to satisfy your curiosity. The speaker will share more information when and if ready.
- Giving advice.
- Consolation comments, such as "It's going to be all right."
- Arguing or disagreeing with the speaker.
- Analyzing or interrupting.

"worst," or "should" makes listeners defensive. Similarly, exaggeration can cause them to argue about the exaggeration rather than about the real issue.

Receiving another person's anger can be challenging. Here are ways to make it easier:

- Understand your own anger or emotions and how they might affect your response.
- Acknowledge the thoughts, ideas or feelings of the other person. When you show interest, an angry person often starts to relax.
- Rephrase what you heard the person say. The angry person won't be receptive to your response until his or her thoughts, ideas or feelings are communicated and understood.



- Get agreement on what the issue is.
- Invite the other person to join you in addressing the issue.
- Take action and follow up.
- If the other person is not receptive to reaching an agreement or acting with civility, let it go and disengage from the interaction.

## Dialogue—what it means and how to do it

Dialogue is continued, thoughtful exchange about the things that matter most to us. It is what folks do around kitchen tables or during a long car ride—sitting together, talking as ideas come to us, without an agenda, time pressure or the need to solve something.

Dialogue is as important as what is being discussed. Its purpose is to honor, at a deep level, the development of human beings, ideas and organizations. Thinking about communication in this sense is important as your group members work together and communicate with each other and the outside world.

Dialogue is a conversational practice. Like sports, exercising or other practices, you build skills as you work at it. Here are some important dialogue skills to practice:

- Allow others to finish their thoughts.
- Respect others' thoughts, feelings, views and realities, even when they differ from your own.
- Listen deeply without needing to fix, rescue, counter, argue or resist.

The best way to improve your dialogue skills is to listen in a supportive way and see what happens.

## Summary/self review

Use the following questions to help you see where your group may need to work on its communication:

- Do members of your group feel heard?
- Do members of your group have the opportunity to clarify meaning at meetings?
- Can members of your group readily list the elements of active listening?
- Does your group feel you are being clear about what you want and what you're willing to give?
- Do you use tools for direct assertive expression?
- Do members of your group use the tools for expressing and receiving anger?

- Can members of your group recognize when you are in dialogue versus discussion?
- Do members of your group listen to understand, give others enough time and space to finish a thought, and listen deeply without the need to fix, rescue, counter, argue or resist?

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## Reading & resources

Ellinor, Linda and Glenna Gerard. *Dialogue: Rediscovering the Transforming Power of Conversation*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1998.

Kelsey, Dee and Pam Plumb. *Great Meetings! How to Facilitate like a Pro*. Portland, ME: Hanson Park Press, 1997.

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