

Communication: Getting Your Message Across

By Linda S. Eck, MBA, RD, FADA

Every day of your life you communicate. Yet, how many times is your message understood as you meant it to be?

When I think of communications, an image of the three monkeys comes to mind: see no evil, hear no evil, and speak no evil. Communication includes what we see, hear, and speak.

Communication is defined as the process where one person transfers meaning to another person. Some people do this better in writing; others do it better by speaking. But either way, the components of communication are the same: sender, message, and receiver. The sender has an idea to share with someone. The message, which can be verbal or written, is what the sender wants someone else to know. The receiver is the person for which the message was meant.

Speaking or writing indicates only that the message has been sent. There's no guarantee the message was received. It's a mistake to assume that when a message is sent, it has been communicated. In order to achieve communication, meaning must be transferred or exchanged. When the volume of messages increases, the chance of a message being received decreases. Many times we turn off messages and the sender, and ignore unclear communication completely.

Remember the game Whisper Down the Alley? This is a perfect example of how messages are heard and passed from person to person. The message at the end of the line is never the same as it started. Use this example with employees in an inservice to demonstrate why you want information first hand and why they should also get information first hand. You can also remind them of this line from a tea bag that my friend has



posted in her office, *"The rumor goes in one ear and out many mouths."*

What is left unsaid may be more important than what is said in some cases. This is where body language comes into play. Gestures, posture, eye contact, and facial expressions are just some of the things to watch. What kind of message are you sending to others? Think about this the next time you are sitting at a meeting and observe the unspoken language that others exhibit. Attitude is most important, and information transfer is secondary.

Listening skills are vital to everyone. So many activities involve listening – participating in meetings and consultations, giving and receiving instructions, managing others, using the phone, selling, or marketing. We listen best when there is a payoff or penalty involved. The value of the message rests within the audience and nowhere else. "Because I said so" is only important to the sender. The receiver can't answer the question, "What's in it for me?"

A person who gets the facts correct is not always a good listener. Facts are only part of most messages. Good listeners listen for opinion, emotion, and distortion as well. Hearing is the first step to listening. You must also interpret, evaluate, and respond to the message. Listening is not a passive activity. It takes work. When you listen, you are as responsible as the speaker for successful communication. Your mind must be active and your energy focused to be successful.

Barriers to Communication

There are many barriers to communication – perception, knowledge, emotions, interest, appearance, prejudice, and distractions. Think about how these things impede communication. Perception is reality, but perception is not always true. Knowledge can be a problem if you can't take your message to the receiver's level. How personally or emotionally involved is someone with a situation? People listen more when they are interested in the topic. Professional appearance is important to promote respect for your position. Prejudice can be because of age (He's too young to know what he's talking about), sex (What does a woman know about equipment?), or other stereotypes. Distractions can come from noise, temperature, lighting, hunger, etc.

Whether the message is verbal or written, consider the question words: what, where, when, why, who, how, which. What is the message? Where will communication take place?

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When (time of day or time of year) will the communication occur? Why is the communication needed (what is the purpose for or result of this communication)? Who is the audience that will receive this communication? How will the message be communicated? Which ideas will be presented (and in what order)?

The sequence of the message can be numerical, alphabetical, chronological, or progressive. The form chosen depends on the topic. However, disorganization has a negative impact on effective communications. Keep in mind that we talk at about 100 words a minute. We read at about 200 words a minute. But we *think* at over 500 words a minute. This can result in day dreaming.

Communication: More Than Just Words

In a verbal message, it is not only the words you use that count. Intonation, projection, and resonance play a role. Emphasis on a word can also change the meaning of what was said. Try saying the following sentence with emphasis on the word in bold print.

- I never said you stole the money.
- I **never** said you stole the money.
- I never **said** you stole the money.
- I never said **you** stole the money.
- I never said you **stole** the money.
- I never said you stole **the** money.
- I never said you stole the **money**.

How did the emphasis change the meaning of the sentence? The same is true in many conversations we have.

Verbal communications are frequently easier to understand when visuals are used. It is much easier to explain and show someone something than to just explain it to them. Consider the operation of a piece of equipment. You can ex-



plain how to take it apart to clean it, but unless the person who is expected to do this can picture the procedure, the chances of success are minimal.

Communication Stumbling Blocks

For some people, written messages are a concern. Poor grammar, spelling, and composition skills can be stumbling blocks. Words frequently misused include:

accept (to take; to receive) / **except** (verb – to exclude)

I will *accept* all the applications *except* that of Mary Jones.

advice (noun – information; recommendation) / **advise** (verb – to recommend; to give counsel)

My *advice* is to arrive at work on time if you expect to keep your job.

I *advise* you to arrive at work on time if you expect to keep your job.

affect (to influence; to change; to assume) / **effect** (noun – result; impression; or verb – to bring about)

The drug did not *affect* the infection, but it had several adverse side *effects*.

already (previously) / **all ready** (prepared)

The tray has *already* been delivered to the patient.

The trayline is *all ready* to start.

among (where there are three or more) / **between** (where there are two)

The work was divided *among* all morning foodservice workers.

You have a choice *between* white and brown rice.

assure (to give confidence to someone) / **ensure** (to make certain) / **insure** (to protect against loss)

I want to *assure* you that nothing can go wrong on your shift.

I want to *ensure* that nothing can go wrong on your shift.

I want to *insure* this ring for \$2,000.

personal (private) / **personnel** (staff)

I have a *personal* file on John, but his permanent file is in the *personnel* office.

Use a dictionary and a thesaurus as references. Write something and then proofread it yourself or give it to someone else to read. Computers with spell check are not a substitute for proof-reading. If you transpose letters, *dairy* can become *diary*, and *form* can become *from*. In both cases, using spell check will not catch the error. Ten words which are most often spelled incorrectly are: accommodate, a lot, commitment, develop, embarrass, inadvertent, incompatible, occasion, separate, and supersede.

In written communications, remember the KISS principle – *keep it short and simple*. This means a sentence should have 15-17 words, a paragraph 5-6 sentences. Don't use big words



to try to impress someone. Choose your words carefully and watch for sexist language. Avoid inflated words such as *viable*, *ramification*, and *optimum* when *practical*, *result*, and *best* will work. Look for ways to cut words. Use “to” to replace “for the purpose of” or “now” to replace “at the present time.” Avoid redundancies such as *plan ahead* (use “plan”) or *first began* (use “first”).

To add clarity, use action verbs. This means that the subject performs something. “Tom *recommended* that the policy be changed” is better than “It is recommended that the policy be changed.” Be selective using words or phrases to characterize different degrees or frequencies such as often, usually, occasionally, frequently.

The bottom line is to keep the audience in mind. Believability is the key ingredient in effective communicating. ■

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