

Ensuring Clear Communication Checklist 200



Introduction

Clear communication is critical to business and personal success, but is often fraught with difficulties. This checklist provides an introduction to the basic elements of the communication process and outlines some principles that will help readers improve their communication skills, both as the 'sender' (the speaker or writer) and the 'receiver' (the listener or reader) of messages. More detailed guidance on some specific types of communication is given in a number of related checklists (see **Related Checklists** section at the end of the document).

Definition

All communication consists of three elements – the 'sender' who originates the communication, the message that is being communicated, and one or more 'receivers' of the message.

Communication occurs when one person speaks or writes a message, or uses non-verbal body language to convey a message which is received by one or more people. True 'communication' is not necessarily the message that the sender intended to send, nor is it even necessarily the words that the sender used – it is the message that was understood by the receiver. Clear communication exists when the message received is the same as the message which the sender intended to send.

Why is clear communication important?

Because:

- it improves efficiency in all activities
- it reduces the frustration which arises from misunderstandings
- it promotes clearer, more structured thinking
- clear communication involves putting oneself in another person's place; it leads to enhanced understanding of other people and to more effective management of relationships. This does not mean that relationships are necessarily more harmonious, although this may be the case.

What are the issues?

Communicating clearly can be surprisingly hard work. It is comparatively easy to:

- 'speak before thinking'
- shoot off a quick email without considering the impact it will have or the impression it may make on those who receive it
- use words and phrases which mean something to you but which may not be fully understood by others
- assume that the other person has the same background knowledge of the situation or issue as you do
- assume that the other person is from the same cultural background as you.

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Why do communications go wrong?

Because:

- the message is not clear in the sender's mind
- the words of the message do not adequately express the thoughts in the sender's mind
- the words of the message are not consistent with non-verbal messages also being given out by the sender
- the receiver does not understand the words of the message
- assumptions or prejudices in the mind of the receiver may hinder the correct understanding of the message
- cultural values find certain forms of communications offensive.

Action checklist for senders

1. Prepare your message

Ensure that the message is totally clear in your own mind. What are you trying to achieve? How will you know if you have achieved it? Try to identify any assumptions you are making (for instance about the other person's cultural background, knowledge of, or attitude to, the subject). Look for any underlying prejudices affecting your view of the situation and the message you are trying to convey.

Think about your communication from the other person's perspective. Ask yourself:

- How will this affect X?
- What problems might it give X?
- How does this fit in with what I know of X's objectives?
- How does this fit in with what I know of X's prejudices, likes and dislikes?
- Does X have the necessary background knowledge to understand the message?
- Will X understand any jargon or technical terms?
- Is this the best time and place to be communicating with X?
- What is the best way to communicate with X? Email, social media network, telephone, or face-to-face meeting?

Anticipate X's likely reaction, but do not assume that this reaction is bound to occur or be misled by wishful thinking. If your message is complex, plan and structure it with care.

It is unrealistic to prepare consciously for every communication but, if your message is particularly important or is likely to be 'difficult', it is worth spending time on preparation. Consider seeking advice from a colleague. Ask someone to review drafts of any written communication, and discuss it with them. Organise a dry run of presentations, interviews or conversations. If the content is confidential, use your manager or HR as a sounding board. Consider doing some cultural research if the person the message is being communicated to is from another country.

2. Choose your words carefully

Check your understanding of any words you are not sure about, or better still, avoid them. Misunderstood and misused words can be dangerous. For example, if I realise that I do not understand a word, I can ask for an explanation. But if I assume that 'continually' means 'constantly' or 'without stopping' and it is (correctly) intended to mean 'repeatedly', then there is a problem. The message 'Evacuate the building when the fire alarm sounds continually' could become a recipe for chaos and disaster!

Remember the mnemonic KISS – Keep It Simple, Stupid.

- Eliminate unnecessary words. Avoid 'gobbledegook' and keep sentences short. Your aim is communication, not literary elegance. Here are a few examples:
 - 'although...' not 'in spite of the fact that...'
 - 'while...' not 'during the period that...'
 - 'soon' not 'in the not too distant future'

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- 'I think...' not 'the data appears to indicate that...'
- use short words – polysyllables are cumbersome
- Avoid jargon unless you are sure the other person will understand it. The most dangerous jargon consists of words used in a technical sense which have a slightly different everyday meaning, as they can easily be misunderstood – much management jargon falls into this category. Acronyms and abbreviations should also be avoided, or defined on the first occasion they are used. However, if you and your receiver do both understand the technical jargon then use it to make your communication more precise.
- Prefer positive phrases rather than negative ones – they are easier to understand as well as being more persuasive: for example 'Please call me if...', not 'Please do not hesitate to call me if...'. Double and triple negatives can obscure your meaning. 'There is no doubt that his request will not be granted' – well, will it be granted or not?
- Use concrete rather than abstract verbs and nouns. For example:
 - 'sandwich bar' or 'canteen' or 'coffee machine', not 'refreshment facilities'
 - 'tell' or 'write to', not 'inform'.
- Use active rather than passive verbs for simplicity and clarity. For example:
 - 'I think...' not 'it is thought that...'
 - 'You requested...' not 'It was requested that...'
- Use 'I' language when you wish to give accurate, non-aggressive feedback or to handle a difficult situation. This is more accurate and conveys the meaning more fully.
 - 'I don't understand' rather than 'What do you mean?'
 - 'I felt let down' rather than 'You let me down.'
 - 'I particularly need the job by the deadline because...' not 'Don't miss the deadline.'
 - 'I support your decision' or 'I disagree, but I am prepared to go along with your decision' not 'It's your decision'.

Be careful to avoid language which may cause offence or be construed as patronising or discriminatory in any way.

Ask questions to seek information or direct a conversation:

- Open questions encourage the other person to answer at some length, expressing their views and feelings. They are often introduced by 'what', 'why' or 'how'; for example 'What do you think?' rather than "Do you agree or not?"
- Closed questions should be used to elicit short, specific pieces of information, even just 'yes' or 'no'. They are ideal for clarifying a problem or situation. For example 'When did that happen?' or 'Have you told your manager?'
- Reflective questions can be used to bring underlying feelings and opinions into the open, or to check that you've understood the other person correctly.
- Statements such as 'Were you pleased with that solution?' or 'You sound upset about it' can also be used to gauge feelings and opinions.
- Leading questions are those where the question suggests the answer you want or expect to receive, for example 'May we conclude that...?' These are less helpful than other types of question, as you cannot tell whether you received the answer you expected because it was correct or because of the way you asked it.

3. Reinforce your message

It has been suggested that in any face to face communication, the words used make up only 10 percent of the message. It is certainly clear that body language – posture, facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice and non-verbal utterances such as grunts and sighs - play a significant role in communication. If your spoken words do not match your tone of voice or body language the receiver is more likely to be influenced by these than by the verbal message. 'I agree' said with a clenched jaw, or 'What a great pity' spoken in a light, casual tone, convey the opposite message to the words.

When your message is not what people expect to hear, take particular care to match non-verbal communication with your words. Bear in mind that people often hear what they expect, or want to hear.

To improve face-to-face interactions, try to 'pace' the other person's voice and body language. 'Pacing' is a delayed, understated matching of the other person's voice tempo and volume, body posture, gestures and facial expressions. This is a very powerful tool for making communications more productive, and can reduce conflict, embarrassment and reserve. It does not mean you will invariably get your way however. It may feel awkward at first, but it is a skill which improves rapidly with practice.

Remember the old training adage: first tell them what you're going to tell them, then tell them, then tell them what you have told them. Providing preliminary summaries for complex messages and recapping for all but the simplest or least important communications will increase understanding and retention of your messages.

When a spoken message is important, confirm it in writing so that it is documented.

Action checklist for receivers

1. Prepare

Try to put yourself in the sender's position. What are they likely to want to achieve? How important is it? However, do be careful with any assumptions, as they can frequently lead to misunderstanding.

2. Listen

The receiver has as much responsibility for the success of a communication as the sender. Poor listening is a common communication problem. Causes include:

- the mind wandering, because your brain can think at a much faster rate than people speak
- fatigue or stress
- focusing on how you will respond to the message rather than on what is actually being communicated
- thinking about other things, perhaps because of lack of interest
- pre-conceived ideas and assumptions about what the speaker will say
- hostility towards the speaker.

A simple mnemonic, LISTEN, can help:

- **L**ook interested – maintaining eye contact with the speaker helps you to concentrate; an alert, interested expression will, believe it or not, actually make you feel more interested (in the same way that it is difficult to feel angry about something if you are smiling and laughing).
- **I**nquire with questions, to check your understanding. Don't make assumptions.
- **S**tay on target, using any slack thinking time to consider the implications of what the speaker is saying.
- **T**ake notes, to help you concentrate and refresh your memory later.
- **E**valuate the whole message, watching body language as well as hearing the words.
- **N**eutralise your feelings, acknowledging to yourself any prejudices you may have. Try 'pacing' the speaker yourself.

3. Read

Important material should be read carefully, but it is not always possible to read everything we receive.

Some unimportant communications, such as junk mail, can be filtered out and left unread. Some written communications can be scanned rapidly (reading the first sentence of each paragraph is an effective way of scanning a document, as these are often 'signposts' to the contents of the paragraph).

It is not as easy to check your understanding of written communications by questioning the sender as it is for spoken communications, but it is just as important. Points listed above such as taking notes and neutralising your feelings are relevant to readers as well as to listeners.

Managers should avoid:

- underestimating the cost of poor communication, in terms of both money and relationships
- making assumptions without realising you are doing so or checking them with the other person.

National Occupational Standards for Management and Leadership

This checklist has relevance to the following standards:

B: Providing direction, units 5, 6, 7, 9

F: Achieving results, unit 12

Related checklists

Effective business writing (091)

Effective communications: delivering presentations (031)

Effective communications: preparing presentations (032)

Effective communications: communicating with groups (108)

Handling effective meetings (002)

Networking (118)

Report writing (051)

Additional resources

Books

The conversation company: boost your business through culture, people and social media, Steven Van Belleghem
London: Kogan Page, 2012

The language of leaders: how top CEOs communicate to inspire, influence and achieve results, Kevin Murray
London: Kogan Page, 2012

Managing cross-cultural communication: principles and practice, Barry Maude
Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011

Talk normal: stop the business speak, jargon and waffle, Tim Phillips
London: Kogan Page, 2011

This is a selection of books available for loan to members from CMI's library. More information at:
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Revised April 2013

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