Effective Verbal Communication with Groups
Checklist 108

Introduction

As organisations become less formally hierarchical, it is increasingly important for managers to get things done by involving and co-operating with others, rather than by simply passing instructions on to their team, other colleagues or external personnel. The ability to make things happen depends on adopting different roles, styles and techniques appropriate to the circumstances, and on being an effective member of different groups both within and outside the organisation. These can include virtual and international teams with differing skills and cultural identities. Verbal communication skills are crucial to being a good team member, whatever your job role, but managers in particular need the ability to communicate effectively with groups in order to manage their teams effectively.

This checklist provides an introduction to skills and techniques for oral communication with groups.

Definition

For the purposes of this checklist verbal communication is defined as voice to voice contact with all types of groups., whether face to face or through telecommunication systems such as telephones and video conferencing equipment. Within the organisation, this may range from large staff gatherings to smaller team briefings and from formal meetings to informal discussions between two or three colleagues from different departments. External groups may include: suppliers, customers, business partners, competitors, the media and regulatory authorities. In each context, managers may play a slightly different role, but the principles of effective oral communication remain the same.

Action checklist

1.   Define the purpose of the communication and the most appropriate communication method

Firstly, clarify the purpose of the communication. Consider whether it is, for example, a meeting at which decisions need to be taken, a briefing session intended to impart information, or a brainstorming/mind-mapping session designed to generate new ideas. What is the communication designed to achieve?

Next, consider whether verbal group communication is the most appropriate form of communication or whether another medium, such as an email message or a written report, would be more suitable. Some tasks, such as sifting existing ideas, coming up with new ideas or involving people in a key decision, are best carried out in groups. Others are best left to individual or written communications, particularly where there is a need to impart large amounts of factual information.

It is also important to consider which communications method to use. Although teleconferencing and videoconferencing involve verbal communication they may still have limitations in terms of the ability to read

others because of time delays or reduced non-verbal signals. It may also be more difficult to ensure that all those involved get a chance to participate. An effective way to do this is to appoint a chair for the discussion.

2.   Define the extent of the communication

Think about setting both a time limit (even for an informal encounter) and an agenda (even if it is an unwritten one). Be realistic about what you can expect to achieve within the group, given the roles and responsibilities of those present, and be sensitive to the pressures on other people's time.

However, open-ended conversations can be an important part of building relationships and influencing others. Be aware that participants may need further clarification or wish to put forward an alternative viewpoint and don't be pedantic about sticking to the agenda and time schedule if others are happy to go with the flow of the discussion. If you have defined the purpose of the communication well, as suggested in point 1, this should make it clear when it is appropriate to close the session.

3.   Ensure the right people are there

Group communication works best when all those present have a legitimate reason to be there, have something to contribute to the discussion and have an interest in the outcome. If the right people are unable to attend, postpone discussions rather than waste time on an inconclusive debate.

Five has been recognised as the optimum number for effective debate and decision making in most group discussions. This is because it makes it possible for members to adopt different roles, and allows a single member to be in the minority without experiencing undue pressure to conform. Getting the right people together, however, is always more important than getting the right number. If a larger group is unavoidable, consider using room layout to create no more than five subgroups and apply the same rules to each smaller group.

Discussion in larger groups should be chaired or led by an appropriate person. The task of the chair is to ensure that each member of the group contributes effectively, that different views are heard and that, as far as possible, the purpose of the communication, reaching a decision, for example, is achieved within the time allocated.

4.   Prepare

Whenever the communication is pre-planned make the effort to prepare and know the subject in advance. "Winging it" is a dangerous strategy, especially when others have had the chance to prepare. It can also be viewed as insulting to others who have taken the time to think things through beforehand.

Preparation does not just entail researching the subject. It also involves understanding the point of view of other participants. Try to truly consider things from their perspective and consider their priorities and ideas on the matter in hand. It may be wise to have an informal conversation with individual group members beforehand in order to understand their viewpoint and to highlight any potential difficulties.

If appropriate, send documentation out in advance, even if this is just a list of key points for discussion. This will help others to prepare for the meeting and to contribute more effectively.

5.   Facilitate introductions

If you are leading a group, introduce yourself and encourage others in the group to do the same. If they have not done so already themselves, make it clear what other people's roles are, why they are there and what they are expected to contribute. If expectations turn out to be unrealistic, allow people either to leave, or to suggest alternative group members.

As a member, define the contribution you expect to make and your authority for making it - whether your authority is personal (a function of your own position), for example, or vested (you have been asked to speak on behalf of someone else).

Set the tone for the language to be used. Will it be technical and specific, or more general? The language of communication must be inclusive to facilitate good communication. If possible, avoid jargon or technical language, particularly when addressing people from outside your organisation.

6.   Be rational and respectful

Speak slowly, clearly and directly in short sentences. Structure your arguments logically. Think about what you are going to say, say it and then summarise what you have said. Link your comments to what others have already said, and clarify areas of support for, or disagreement with the positions of others.

Most people respond to a logical argument but verbal communication may be more effective if managers can present their arguments in a way that appeals to the communications preferences of other group members – for example, by using verbal imagery or making comparisons.

Take up a clear position on the issues, but be willing to listen to rational argument, and be prepared to change your mind. If you do change your mind, explain why. Groups work effectively only if participants are open to new information and different points of view.

The key to effective group communication is mutual respect. When you believe someone is wrong, criticise the idea by all means, but not the person. Make any criticism constructive – for example, preface it with a word of support or agreement on a related topic. Resist any temptation to allocate blame – any attribution of blame for mistakes or failures is likely to lead to a break down in group dynamics.

If you believe a group is taking the wrong decision, stay calm and don't become emotional in defence of your own point of view. Stress points of agreement and minimise areas of disagreement, with a view to finding a way forward. Reiterate the purpose of the meeting so that all members of the group can be sure they are working towards a common aim.

7.   Be an active and considerate participant

If you have agreed to be part of a group, be active in it. Take full responsibility for its success or failure, be energetic and make positive contributions. At the same time, allow and encourage others to contribute to the discussion – listening well is as important as speaking well. If you have nothing to contribute yourself, admit it, and step down rather than waste the time of the other contributors.

Be aware that someone may be "quiet" because they hold a contrary viewpoint to others. Try to draw their views out without intimidating them, or allowing others to intimidate them. A contrary view may be the breath of fresh air that stimulates further productive discussion. While group members may be competing to present individual positions, remember that you all need to cooperate to find an overall, acceptable solution which all will support and deliver.

8.   Be aware of the dangers of unconscious domination

If the 'leader' always gives his or her views first, it is possible that others may:

- be unduly influenced from the start
- think that the ends are all 'sewn up' and they don't need to contribute, just react
- get into the habit of not thinking for themselves.

Use open-ended questions which facilitate discussion, and take care to ensure that you do not appear to be interrogating other group members. Ensure that each member has the opportunity to speak, even if you have doubts about the likely wisdom of their views. Don't put your own ideas ahead of the group's overriding objective.

9.   Guard against a tendency towards 'groupthink'

'Groupthink' is a natural, psychological phenomenon linked to group dynamics which leads those within the group to conform with the opinions of the majority. Whilst compromise may be necessary in order to reach a consensus, 'groupthink' can result in false assumptions and poor decision making.

Reduce the influence of groupthink by defining your contribution in terms of how it meets the group's objectives; then stick to your position unless you are genuinely convinced by the arguments of others. Have a genuinely open mind and employ listening skills throughout the conversation. Adopting the "Six Thinking Hats" approach of De Bono may also help to prevent groupthink, as it encourages group members to adopt different viewpoints (See Related models at the end of this checklist for further information).

10.   Make good use of non-verbal communication

Use gestures to reinforce your key messages and non-verbal signals to convey attitudes and expressions. Make regular eye contact with each member of the group and use non-threatening but positive body language to convey an impression of calm and confidence. Pay close attention to the non-verbal signals of others as these will help you to read the situation and the mood of participants: are you irritating or patronising them, are any opting out of the discussion or is one member of the group dominating others?

11.   Bring the communication to a conclusion

Review what you were expecting to get out of the communication and whether you have achieved this. Agree a statement of "decision and action". Write this up as soon as possible after the meeting. Make sure all those present receive a copy, and pass copies to any interested parties who were unable to be present. Be careful not to re-open the issue if a decision has been reached.

Managers should avoid:

- knowing too little about the reference points of other group members, and how their views of an issue may hinder the achievement of objectives
- allowing 'groupthink' to lead group members to say only what they think the leader wants to hear
- dominating discussions and allowing their conviction of the merits of their own argument to blind them to the merits of the arguments of others
- allowing personal prejudices or assumptions, and consequent expectations of how particular group members will react, to affect them.

National Occupational Standards for Management and Leadership

This checklist has relevance to the following standards:
Unit EC4 Communicate information and knowledge
Unit DD1 Develop and sustain productive working relationships with colleagues

Additional resources

Books

Conversations that get results and inspire collaboration: engage your team, your peers and your manager to take action, Shawn Kent Hayashi
New York NY: McGraw-Hill, 2013
This book is available as an [e-book](#)

Exploring internal communication: towards informed employee voice, 2nd ed Ruck. K (ed),
Harlow: Pearson Education, 2012

Crucial conversations: tools for talking when the stakes are high, 2nd ed., Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan and Al Switzler
New York NY: McGraw-Hill, 2012
This book is also available as an [e-book](#)

The language of leaders: how top CEOs communicate to inspire, influence and achieve results, Kevin Murray
London: Kogan Page, 2012
This book is also available as an [e-book](#)

The communication problem solver: simple tools and techniques for busy managers, Nannette Rundle Carroll
New York NY:,AMACOM, 2010
This book is available as an [e-book](#)

Successful workplace communication: instant manager, Phil Baguley
London: Hodder Education, 2009

The communication toolkit: practical ways to improve personal and work performance, Stuart Emmett
Cirencester, Management Books 2000, 2008

This is a selection of books available for loan to members from CMI's library. More information at:
www.managers.org.uk/library

Journal articles

How to speak so people listen, Mike Clayton
Training Journal, December 2013, pp 37-41

Why does nobody understand me?, Hugh Greenway
Training Journal, December 2008, pp35-39

This is a selection of articles available for members to download from CMI's library. More information at:
www.managers.org.uk/library

Related checklists and models

Handling effective meetings (002)
Effective communication: delivering presentations (031)
Effective communication: preparing presentations (032)
Effective face to face communication for interviews and meetings (096)
Team briefing (081)
De Bono's six thinking hats

This is one of many checklists available to all CMI members. For more information please contact

t: 01536 204222   **e**: enquiries@managers.org.uk   **w**: www.managers.org.uk

Chartered Management Institute
Management House, Cottingham Road, Corby NN17 1TT.

This publication is for general guidance only. The publisher and expert contributors disclaim all liability for any errors or omissions. You should make appropriate inquiries and seek appropriate advice before making any business, legal or other decisions. Where legal or regulatory frameworks or references are mentioned these relate to the UK only.

Revised May 2014