

10.6: Developing Your Personal Communication Skills

Learning Objectives

1. Learn how to improve your own listening habits.
2. Learn how to handle personal communications in a career-friendly manner.
3. Learn what communication freezers are and how to avoid them.

By being sensitive to the errors outlined in this chapter and adopting active listening skills, you may increase your communication effectiveness, increasing your ability to carry out the managerial functions of planning, organizing, leading, and controlling. The following are additional tools for helping you increase your communication effectiveness.

Ten Ways to Improve Your Listening Habits

1. *Start by stopping.* Take a moment to inhale and exhale quietly before you begin to listen. Your job as a listener is to receive information openly and accurately.
2. *Don't worry about what you'll say when the time comes.* Silence can be a beautiful thing.
3. *Join the Sender's team.* When she pauses, summarize what you believe she has said. "What I'm hearing is that we need to focus on marketing as well as sales. Is that correct?" Be attentive to physical as well as verbal communications. "I hear you saying that we should focus on marketing. But the way you're shaking your head tells me the idea may not really appeal to you—is that right?"
4. *Don't multitask while listening.* Listening is a full-time job. It's tempting to multitask when you and the Sender are in different places, but doing that is counterproductive. The human mind can only focus on one thing at a time. Listening with only half your brain increases the chances that you'll have questions later, requiring more of the Speaker's time. (And when the speaker is in the same room, multitasking signals a disinterest that is considered rude.)
5. *Try to empathize with the Sender's point of view.* You don't have to agree; but can you find common ground?
6. *Confused? Ask questions.* There's nothing wrong with admitting you haven't understood the Sender's point. You may even help the Sender clarify the Message.
7. *Establish eye contact.* Making eye contact with the speaker (if appropriate for the culture) is important.
8. *What is the goal of this communication?* Ask yourself this question at different points during the communication to keep the information flow on track. Be polite. Differences in opinion can be the starting point of consensus.
9. *It's great to be surprised.* Listen with an open mind, not just for what you **want** to hear.
10. *Pay attention to what is not said.* Does the Sender's body language seem to contradict her Message? If so, clarification may be in order.

Career-Friendly Communications

Communication can occur without your even realizing it. Consider the following: Is your e-mail name professional? The typical convention for business e-mail contains some form of your name. While an e-mail name like "LazyGirl" or "DeathMonkey" may be fine for chatting online with your friends, they may send the wrong signal to individuals you e-mail such as professors and prospective employers.

- *Is your outgoing voice mail greeting professional?* If not, change it. Faculty and prospective recruiters will draw certain conclusions if, upon calling you, they hear a message that screams, "Party, party, party!"
- *Do you have a "private" social networking Web site on MySpace.com, Facebook.com, or Xanga.com?* If so, consider what it says about you to employers or clients. If it is information you wouldn't share at work, it probably shouldn't be there.
- *Googled yourself lately?* If not, you probably should. Potential employers have begun searching the Web as part of background checking and you should be aware of what's out there about you.

Communication Freezers

Communication freezers put an end to effective communication by making the Receiver feel judged or defensive. Typical communication stoppers include criticizing, blaming, ordering, judging, or shaming the other person. The following are some examples of things to avoid saying:

1. Telling people what to do:
 - "You must..."

- “You cannot...”
- 2. Threatening with “or else” implied:
 - “You had better...”
 - “If you don’t...”
- 3. Making suggestions or telling other people what they ought to do:
 - “You should...”
 - “It’s your responsibility to...”
- 4. Attempting to educate the other person:
 - “Let me give you the facts.”
 - “Experience tells us that...”
- 5. Judging the other person negatively:
 - “You’re not thinking straight.”
 - “You’re wrong.”
- 6. Giving insincere praise:
 - “You have so much potential.”
 - “I know you can do better than this.”
- 7. Psychoanalyzing the other person:
 - “You’re jealous.”
 - “You have problems with authority.”
- 8. Making light of the other person’s problems by generalizing:
 - “Things will get better.”
 - “Behind every cloud is a silver lining.”
- 9. Asking excessive or inappropriate questions:
 - “Why did you do that?”
 - “Who has influenced you?”
- 10. Making light of the problem by kidding:
 - “Think about the positive side.”
 - “You think you’ve got problems!”

Key Takeaway

By practicing the skills associated with active listening, you can become more effective in your personal and professional relationships. Managing your online communications appropriately can also help you avoid career pitfalls. Finally, be aware of the types of remarks that freeze communication and try not to use them.

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