

Leadership Development Within Groups

Communicating Effectively

HE-499, September 1992

Communication might be thought of as an "idea transplant." We send 300 to 1,000 messages a day. We probably receive that many messages too.

Communication consists of two basic skills: listening and feedback. There are messages we intend to send, messages we actually send, messages the listener thinks he/she heard, responses from the listener due to what he/she heard, and our reaction to the exchange of messages. Is it any wonder things may get garbled along the way?

Good listening takes a lot of practice. It requires concentration. Our minds think four times faster than a person can speak so our minds tend to wander. As we listen we need to focus on a speaker's words, body language, intended message and even unintended message. We need to listen without judging what we hear. A leader learns to listen at least as much as he/she speaks.

When we speak, we give feedback that includes expressing feelings, sharing information and ideas, understanding others and making observations. There are many ways to give feedback. "I" messages are one type.

*The art of conversation is as much the art of listening as it is the ability to express one's self.
Bits & Pieces, October 1991*

"I" Messages

An "I" message allows us to tell people what impact their behavior has on us without judging them. At the same time, it lets them decide whether or not to change that behavior. Using "I" messages, we describe our responses and do not evaluate behavior or suggest changes. We are not forcing them to accept our ideas.

An "I" message has three parts:

1. identify the specific behavior
2. describe the feeling we experience because of that behavior
3. tell the effect of the feeling.

"When I am interrupted, I feel upset because I lose my concentration."

"I am frustrated because not everyone in the group has had a chance to talk. We may be missing some great solutions to this problem."

Other Types of Feedback Include:

1. Active Listening

This is feedback that lets the speaker know we are concentrating on her/his message.

"I see...Hmmm" (nodding)

2. Asking for More Information

This enables others to expand on initial information.

It tells the speaker we are interested in her/his thoughts

"That sounds interesting." "Tell us more."

3. Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is saying what we think the speaker said. This gives the speaker a chance to confirm our interpretation or to clarify what was meant.

"Did I hear you say that although the plan isn't finished, we should start marketing the workshop while the committee works on the details?"

4. Sharing Information

Everyone's input is important. Group leaders need to be as open and honest as other members.

"I believe we need to move slowly and consider all possible options before we make a decision."

5. Checking Feelings

It's best to check to see if the emotion we think we see is the correct interpretation.

"Are you are frustrated? Would you like to talk about it?"

6. Reporting Feelings

Tell others what your emotional state is at a given time.

"It's been a long day. I'm not productive any more. Could we talk about this at the next meeting?"

7. Offering or Requesting More Options

Even good ideas can be made better when more people are involved. Suggesting other options is helpful.

These are some great ideas here. Could we expand any of these ideas now?"

Leaders practice skills that enhance communication within a group. Effective communication helps a group function successfully and helps individuals develop, too. Positive communication helps members feel valuable and welcome to share their talents.

When all members practice effective communication, trust, cooperation and productivity in the group will be enhanced. The following hints ensure effective communication:

- Group members listen and pay attention to one another
- One topic is discussed at a time
- Members work through conflict rather than avoiding it
- Everyone has a chance to state their views
- Decisions are clearly stated so all members understand
- Regular feedback helps the group to stay focused on goals.

Body Language -- Check the Message

Nonverbal communication is called body language. Facial expressions, gestures, eye contact and body posture are parts of body language. Even when we are speaking, we need to observe body language. Body language can tell us if listeners are interested, bored, confused or disagreeing with us.

Don't jump to conclusions about what we think we see in body language. It is important to observe nonverbal communication and use it as a *check point* to see if we understand the message.

"I see some frowns. Does anyone have a concern about this option?" "There has been very little reaction to this proposal. How does the group feel right now?"

Our culture teaches us what is acceptable nonverbal communication. Some cultures find certain types of body language (Ex. eye contact, standing too close) inappropriate or even offensive. Effective communication includes being sensitive to those differences. Observe body language and then check the message.

*It's all right to hold a conversation as long as you let go of it once in a while.
Bits & Pieces, June 1991*

Helping All Members Participate

A group is most effective when all members contribute. Some members may be very quiet during a meeting or a few members may dominate. Here are techniques that encourage and enable everyone to participate.

Round Robin

The round robin may be used at the beginning of a discussion if it's likely that everyone already has an opinion about a topic or at the end of a discussion when everyone has been informed about a subject. Then:

a. Ask the group one question.

"If we had unlimited funds, how would you solve this problem?" "What is your opinion about this proposal?"

b. Allow several minutes for members to think.

c. Ask each person to write his/her comments on paper.

d. Each person takes a turn telling the group her/his response.
(Individuals have the option to PASS without commenting.)

e. Every person in the group must have the opportunity to share his/her response BEFORE any person can speak a second time.

Small Group Discussion

A small group discussion is helpful when a topic is complicated or there are many factors to consider. Some individuals are more comfortable speaking in a small group than among many people. Communication in small groups can be more direct and productive than in a larger group. To facilitate a small group discussion:

a. Ask a discussion question. Make sure everyone understands the question and purpose of the discussion.

b. Announce the amount of time groups will have to discuss the question. A minimum of seven minutes should be allowed.

c. Then divide membership into small groups. A group of 4 to 6 members is comfortable. Discussion becomes more difficult with more than 10 people.

Encourage new combinations of ideas by inviting members to vary the individuals they talk with in the group. Ways to divide members into small groups include:

-- Members select their own group

"Find someone you haven't spoken with recently."

-- Members with same birthday month become a group

-- Groups form around a favorite color: blue, red, yellow

-- Individuals with colored name tags meet together

d. Ask one person from each small group to record comments, summarize and report back to the large group. Reports may be written on newsprint and taped to a wall for the group to consider during discussion.

I'd rather know some of the questions than all of the answers.

James Thurber

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is the process of collecting as many ideas as possible in a short time. People should be encouraged to list a quantity of ideas rather than sorting out the quality ideas. "Free wheeling" is encouraged. Ideas don't have to be practical. This can be done with a large group.

a. Ask for a volunteer to write all ideas on a blackboard or flip chart where members can see and hear ideas.

b. Review the rules of brainstorming with the group. They are:

-- List as many ideas as possible.

-- Feel welcome to add ideas quickly.

- A key word from every idea will be noted.
- No judgment can be made about an idea.
- Wild ideas are welcome. Creativity is good.
- It's O.K. to expand an idea that's already been mentioned.
- Brainstorming will continue until no new ideas are added.

c. The leader's role is to help capture key words from every idea that is mentioned and invite comments from members who have not spoken.

d. When no more ideas are being added, the leader should stop the brainstorming session.

e. It is helpful to take a break after brainstorming to allow members to look at the list and discuss some of the ideas.

f. Then the group should establish criteria for selecting the best ideas. Narrow the list of ideas that meet criteria. The final solution may be a combination of ideas.

Nominal Group

This technique involves individual brainstorming and small group discussion. It provides the group with a priority list of ideas or solutions to consider. It can be done with a large or small group. If there are more than 8 people in the group, begin by dividing into small groups of four to six members each.

- Distribute a notecard to each person.
- State an open-ended question. EXAMPLE "What are some ways to encourage shopping on our main street?"
- Ask everyone to spend several minutes writing down as many ideas as they can generate on their own notecard.
- In small groups, ask each individual to share each item on his/her list to be written on a flip chart. Questions can be asked for clarification, but no judgment is made about an idea.
- When all ideas have been listed, each individual selects five ideas from the total list and ranks the top five ideas on his/her notecard. (The highest ranking idea receives 5 points. The lowest ranking idea receives 1 point.)
- Then each person identifies his/her five top ideas and reports the point ranking assigned to each. A facilitator places the number of points assigned to the ideas selected.
- Add the points for each idea listed to identify which ideas rated highest among the group.

Parliamentary Procedure or Consensus?

Parliamentary procedure can be very helpful during meetings. It is the formal way to implement majority rule decision making in a group.

Majority rule decision making is not comfortable to all people, especially in some cultures. Consensus is another way to make group decisions that may be more comfortable.

Consensus occurs when everyone in the group chooses to agree without taking a vote.

The advantages to consensus are that it:

- Encourages open communication
- Requires members to identify the issue and understand it
- Involves all members in a cooperative team effort
- Allows people time to "buy into" a decision so everyone wins
- Can set the stage for a clear action plan.

The disadvantages to consensus decision making are that it:

- Takes time. The larger the group, the more time it takes.
- May not work if members of the group do not trust one another enough to speak out.
- Requires a leader to facilitate the discussion, time for input and encouragement for every person to speak.
- Requires a leader help keep the discussion focused.

Consensus decision making is similar to problem solving. The steps are:

1. Define the problem
2. Brainstorm all alternatives
3. Evaluate the alternatives

- a. Explore as many views as possible
 - b. Give everyone a chance to be heard
 - c. Listen
 - d. Disagreements should be viewed as ways to clarify ideas or as sources of new information
4. Select alternatives that will provide win/win solutions without deadlock for the group.
 5. Implement the decision.
 6. Evaluate what has been accomplished.

As a leader, you should have confidence in yourself, be flexible, and be able to listen to people. The reason you want to listen to people is so you can understand what they want. By finding out what they want, you can [help them] meet their needs.
Don Alexander

Keep It Simple

Communication is most effective when it is simple. Most people can only absorb 80 percent of what they hear. Information should be offered to a group in small bits and pieces. More information can be provided as group members learn and understand a basic idea.

Group leaders know effective communication should:

- Refresh people's memories periodically to help recall basic information
- NOT offer more information than is needed
- Be as creative and simple as possible
- Offer a message in more than one method, such as verbal, written and demonstration.

Complex information should be:

- Offered to the group in written form with a verbal report
- Given in step-by-step, logical order
- Checked for understand by asking, "Would someone please give the group their interpretation of this information."

If you don't understand a problem, then explain it to an audience and listen to yourself.
Roger von Oech, President, Creative Think

I can...

Learning is more complete when you experience and apply information you have just thought about. Consider the following questions on your own or with a friend to learn more about communicating effectively within a group.

- What are common communication problems you have observed in an organization or club?
- How do you feel when you are asked to talk or you choose to talk in a group?
- Are you confident? Nervous? Enthusiastic? Shy? Why do you feel that way? Which communication skills would you like to improve?
- If one member of an organization tends
- to dominate a meeting or discussion, what could you do to change that situation?
- The next time you are in a group and members do not participate in a discussion, what could you suggest? Can you think of three different options?
- Imagine a conversation with someone. Practice "I" messages:

When _____. (behavior)

I feel _____. (feeling experienced)

because _____. (impact of the behavior)

Images

Stand up straight so they will see you. Speak loudly so they will hear you. And sit down quickly so they will like you.
Galion

*Fail to honor people, they fail to honor you,
But of a good leader, who talks little,
When his work is done, his aim fulfilled,
They will say, 'We did this ourselves.'*
Lao Tzu

We hear and apprehend only what we already know.
Roger von Oech

Applause is the only appreciated interruption.
Arnold Glasgow

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Prepared by:

Marilyn Lesmeister

Leadership and Volunteer Development Specialist, NDSU Extension Service

In Cooperation with:

Ron Anderson, Center for Rural Revitalization

Paige Baker, NDSU Extension Special Programs

Becky Koch, NDSU Extension Communications

Carmen Richards, President, ND Extension Homemakers Council, Inc.

Anita Rohde, NDSU Extension Home Economist

Carol Sellie, NDSU Extension Home Economist

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North Dakota State University Agriculture and University Extension
Dept. 7070, Morrill 7, P.O. Box 6050, Fargo, ND 58108-6050