

Better Communication and Active Listening

By Weelan Ho



Basic concepts of communication

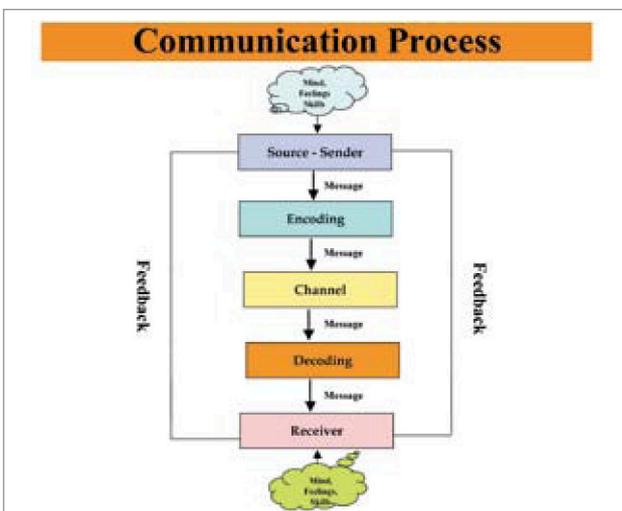
Communication is a big word. We use it often but how many of us really understand what it is. It is useful to revisit and remind ourselves of what it entails as communicating well is not an option, but a necessity.

What is communication?

Communication is the imparting and transmittance of messages from one party to another, and that the meaning of the messages is received and understood by both parties. Communication occurs when what is said is correctly interpreted and received.

The communication process

The communication process consists of a sender encoding (translating) the intent into messages, using different medium or channels of communication to convey the messages, with the messages being decoded (interpreted) correctly by the receiver through a series of clarifications encompassed within the feedback mechanism, as shown in the diagram below.



Communication barriers

Anything that prevents the sender and receiver from achieving common understanding and meaning is considered a blockage or a barrier, and such communication barriers can occur at any point(s) within the communication process. Ineffective communication is a result of barriers. These barriers are manifested in:

- Barriers stemming from the mind - attitude
- Barriers as a result of feelings
- Barriers because of skill deficiency

These barriers are not independent from one another and, unbelievable as it may be, they can and often do exist at the same time – a combination of barriers from the mind, feelings and skills deficiency all in one!

Stages of life and awareness for improving communication

Awareness is the basis for any improvement. We can't improve unless we are aware of our own deficiencies, or, to put it positively, the areas for improvement. Communication is no different from any other issue here. Some people go through life not knowing better ways of communicating, so there isn't necessary a linear relationship between age and better communication – even though we hope that as we grow older, we also grow wiser in everything we do, including able to communicate better. But it is never too late and we are never too old to learn.

Communication is a socialization skill. We learn through and from the people around us, starting early on when we were toddlers and we learn from our parents. Our parents are our role models; their choice of words and behaviour influence us without us realizing, be it positive or negative. We probably choose the same vocabulary and exhibit almost the same behaviour. For example, if your parents or the people around you are fond of using negative words such as “stupid”, as an adjective or a figure of speech, the chances are that you will do the same.

Putting the negative burden of guilt on our parents, our childhood influences, is wrong for we are in control of our own life as we grow older. As adults, we must be responsible for our own behaviour. Thus, we need to make a conscious effort to remember what effective communication means, what it entails, and have the awareness to constantly confirm our ability to communicate.

Guiding principles for better communication

- 1 Start with a positive attitude – be open and not defensive, genuine and accepting of others, be non critical and avoid judging others or looking at people with prejudice
- 2 Consider people’s feelings – treat people with respect, promote self esteem of others, i.e. don’t put people down
- 3 Choose positive or neutral words – avoid abusive and negative words
- 4 Frame what we want to say in a positive form – e.g. instead of saying “you cannot go out with your friends because you need to study”, a better substitute in a positive form is “I would prefer you stay home to read”
- 5 Listen actively – be sure you understand, and that you are understood
- 6 Allow others the opportunity to talk – try not to talk over others. Pause to listen
- 7 Respond but do not react – a response is rational,

whereas a reaction is often based on emotions without considered thoughts

- 8 Avoid blaming in words and tone – blaming only aggravates the situation. It never helps
- 9 Discuss, explore and express – engaging others is much better than telling, advising and instructing
- 10 Maintain two-way communication – conversation is not a monologue

Active listening

Active listening is central to making communication work both ways. It requires us to be sensitive of the environment, to consider other people’s needs and to engage people, encouraging others to express their thoughts. Very importantly, it requires us to understand and confirm what has been said by using reflecting skills such as paraphrasing, clarifying and verifying, reflecting meaning and probing skills.

What is not said is equally important. This is usually conveyed through body language, or that little pause, or that little hesitation that adds flavour to the content of what was said. Active listening is not about hearing the words. Active listening requires us to use all our faculties.

- Eyes to observe – body language
- Ears to listen – to the words, tone and the little pauses or hesitations
- Nose to sense – scents and sixth sense
- Heart to feel – could be empathy, a sense of things, a hunch
- Brain to provide logic, to differentiate and to draw conclusions based on all of the above

A message has two parts – the content and the feelings that give the full meaning. Body language doesn’t lie. Active listening – two simple words; a simple term – encompasses all. **T/D**

Weelan Ho is Principal of PGA Consulting Limited, Consulting Advisor to MR-Asian Consulting Limited, and Director of Ascent Global Service Pty Ltd (Australia). For more information, visit www.pgaconsulting.com.