

Effective Communication

Carrie Smoot

"Communication is an integral part of who we are, yet we often don't realize what effect our words and body language have on other people," Deborah Ager says. The Hyattsville, MD, workplace life coach says communication styles play important roles in relationships. "Sometimes it's necessary to adapt approaches to different people. People can change how they relate to others, and they often find it improves family life and friendships."

Ager described a situation where a conversation did not go well. A supervisor made a request of a particular employee, but realized on reflection that she had sounded apologetic, had hunched slightly forward, looking at the floor. Therefore, the worker didn't think her request was important.

"Once [the supervisor] learned to make eye contact, change the tone and speed of her voice and appear more open and relaxed, relationships with staff and co-workers improved."

Ager outlined the five stages of speech—requests, offers, promises, declarations and assertions. In each stage, people must decide how to respond, but often don't have enough details or context. That's why it's important for listeners to ask questions, make assessments, offer feedback and iron out details to make sure everything is understood.

Timothy Ursiny, Ph.D., is a Chicago, IL, psychologist, success coach and author of *The Coward's Guide to Conflict*, (Sourcebooks 2003). He says people aren't trained to be effective communicators—they don't know how, and they are afraid to be direct. But there are positive ways to deal with difficult people and situations.

"When having a conversation with someone, make sure body language and spoken language match.

Otherwise, people will believe non-verbal cues every time," Ursiny says. "Another way to 'read' people is to ask yourself whether they are more fast-paced or more methodical and whether they are more task-oriented or more people-oriented. Answering these two questions will help you frame an appropriate response. For example, someone who is fast-paced and task-focused will be persuaded much differently than someone who is methodical and people-oriented. If you and the other person aren't speaking the same 'language,' then you won't understand each other, and conflicts arise."

If you disagree, Ursiny suggests following these steps:

- Gather as much information as possible from the other person about why she is upset.
- Reflect on what the other person said, and summarize it.

- Try to persuade the other person to see the impact of her actions on you, using her words.

- When things get heated, use

the "100 percent plus one percent" principle, meaning that, regardless of what else was said, you find one percent of something to agree with the other person about before sharing another opinion. Asking for a time-out may be a good strategy. "Then," Ursiny says, "people can deal with issues calmly and respectfully.

But don't tell your side of the story or bring up possible solutions until the other person is finished speaking and feels completely understood."

Cherie Kerr is president of ExecuProv.com, a Santa Ana, CA, communications training company that has a few local clients, including the U.S. Naval Academy. "We teach people how to think on their feet and deal with high-pressure media situations," says Kerr whose own career path took interesting turns. Kerr started out specializing in improv comedy—what she calls "the Ph.D. of theater."

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"Improv is a lot like real life because you never know what to expect at any given moment," she says. "The one thing people fear is choking and freezing—either in preparing to give a talk in front of a group or otherwise being in the spotlight. All you really have to do is be there and give it a shot. We have a lot of training exercises, including a mock press conference, that build trust, humor, goodwill and practice in 'off-the-cuff' speaking. You really have to listen to what someone else is saying in order to complete and add on to that current information. Listening is what good communication is all about."

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Lynne Waymon is a speaker and trainer in Silver Spring, MD. A networking expert, she offers many workshops, including "Make Your Contacts Count" and "How to Disagree Without Being Disagreeable."

"Knowing how to resolve conflict is an important life skill," Waymon says. "It's good to ask, 'Tell me what you're thinking and feeling about this,' and get to the hows and whys. If you hate an idea, state what you like about it first, weigh the pros and cons, and then offer another proposal. Be sure to ask for feedback about what would be acceptable." Waymon says using the "Barbara Walters voice"—firm and a little bit friendly—encourages others to listen.

"Everyone has 'holes' in their communication styles that they would like to fix," Waymon says. "For example, a study by Philip Zimbardo at the Shyness Institute says 50 percent of Americans consider themselves shy. Many are nervous about meeting new people. But if you listen with a purpose, with an ear to how you can assist someone, the nervousness goes away. Prepare to be spontaneous. Go with some

topics that you would like to talk about. Everybody's a feature story."

Susan Butler founded the Susan Bulkeley Butler Institute for the Development of Women Leaders in Tucson, AZ. When Butler lived in the D.C. area a decade ago, working as Accenture's first woman partner, she learned to hone her communications skills to the local culture. She learned that it was crucial to keep up with local news, which was, in fact, world news. In her conversations, she learned to "begin with the end in mind," in order to better focus the discussion. Women tend to ramble when they speak, she observes, while men get to the point faster. To enhance their communi-

cations skills, women should ask for more feedback. She also noticed that women miss out on an important networking tool by not introducing themselves by name during question-and-answer sessions at meetings. By not letting people know who you are (by name and position or company), you might miss a valuable opportunity to make an important connection.

If you met Denver, CO, speaker, trainer and author Debra Fine (*The Fine Art of Small Talk*) at a party, you'd never know that she considers herself shy. When she's at an event where she doesn't know many people, she seeks out a few and starts conversations with them. She makes it a point to talk to three new people each week to widen her social circle. But it wasn't easy. "At all kinds of gatherings, people tend to talk only to people that they know, and they miss out on so much," she says. "Yes, you could be turned down by a new person for whatever reason, but at least you made the attempt."

Unfortunately, Fine says, people often start conversations off on the wrong foot. "After the hellos and names are exchanged, people ask

about careers, family and other details, jumping rapid-fire from topic to topic. Your conversation partner has suddenly become an FBI agent, and you, as the listener, are very uncomfortable and want to find someone else to chat with. It's better to stay with one topic and keep asking questions. That way, the other person knows you are interested in what she has to say. Perhaps later in the evening, you'll be able to share contacts or introduce her to someone else in the room." When all else fails, Fine suggests admiring the other person's clothing or carrying a book or magazine to provide an opening (or a "reason") for someone to begin a conversation with you.

Fine offers these examples of icebreakers that work:

- "Bring me up to date. What's been going on with you this year?"

- "How do you know the host and hostess of this party?"

- "What's been going on with the family?"

- "What do you enjoy the most about this time of year?"

- "Tell me about your plans with work or family..."

Fine says the following questions kill conversations right away.

- "How's your spouse?"

- "How's your job at ____?"

- "Are you married?"

- "Do you have kids?"

In any new endeavor, practice is key. "Every conversation is a chance for success," Fine says.

Carrie Smoot is a Northern Virginia freelance writer