

Personal Communication

According to research, oral and written communication skills are among the most important skills for nonprofit leaders to have (Hoefler, 2003). This chapter provides information about understanding what you want to communicate and communicate well, primarily in one-on-one and collegial situations. Communication is such a vital skill for nonprofit leaders that we also have Chapter 13, “Persuasion,” and Chapter 14, “Advocacy,” which also deal with communication. Those chapters are geared toward communication with the purpose of moving others to agree with you and to take certain actions. The skills in this chapter are important for being able to be persuasive as well, so these interpersonal skills really form the foundation for communication of all types.

Before moving forward, it is important to remember that the techniques of “communication” are rarely important for their own sake. Communication, at its core, is sending and receiving messages—messages of praise, correction, affirmation, hope, affection, or belonging, for example. Leaders must know the techniques of effective communication to make connections with others within and outside their organization, and to provide a means of accomplishing organizational goals through the work of those others. The most well-written and delivered speech, for example, even if it is a wonderful application of “communication theory,” will fall flat if personal connection is not made.

In this chapter, we have three underlying topics. First, we examine the need for managers to use active listening techniques; second, we examine management of emotions; finally, we look at storytelling as a method of making your message resonate. All of these techniques, when used to communicate with others, are important in developing your leadership capacity.

ACTIVE LISTENING

Arguably the most important skill for effective personal communication (as a manager or otherwise) is to be able to use active listening. Based on the work of Carl Rogers, this process is seen as part of a manager’s job, but the listener must have true empathy for and trust in the speaker’s ability to self-direct, or else it is impossible to truly listen actively. Rogers and Farson (1987) indicate that active listening is “the art of listening for meaning” (p. 1) and that this requires careful listening, but even this alone is not sufficient.

Active listening, according to Rogers and Farson (1987), brings about better self-understanding for the speaker who becomes “more emotionally mature, more open to their experiences, less defensive, more democratic and less authoritarian” (p. 1). The listener also benefits by obtaining more information from the speaker, developing deep positive relationships, and constructively improving attitudes.

To achieve these results, the active listener must use the following techniques.

- **Listen for meaning, not just content.** Messages and conversations have content, but content can be surrounded by additional contextual information. For example, a colleague could tell you, “I just completed the quarterly report for the new project we’re starting,” and you would be likely to give a positive response. Suppose that colleague told you instead, “I finally got done with the quarterly report for the director’s pet project—now I can do some real work!” You would probably understand that a significantly different set of meanings was intended by your colleague. Even if you gave the same content response, such as “Congratulations!” it might be construed differently in the two situations by your colleague. In the first situation, you might find the meaning given to your word as a straightforward and supportive acknowledgement. In the second situation, however, your coworker might assume you are being ironic, which could still be seen as supportive, but might be interpreted as disrespectful by the director if you were overheard.
- **Respond to feelings.** For active listening to take place, you must let the speaker know that you have comprehended both the content of the statement and the feelings that emerge with the content. In the same example, you could be a better listener if you replied, in the first instance, “Congratulations! That must feel good to have that finished!” and, in the second, “You sound like you’re not too happy with having to do that job. It must be a relief to move on to something else.” Neither of these responses takes much longer to say, but both indicate that you are trying to understand how your coworker feels about what has just been said.
- **Note nonverbal cues.** Communication happens through many channels, including voice tone, speed of talking, volume level, vocal hesitations, facial expressions, hand gestures, and other body language. To completely understand someone else’s meaning, you must decode what all these nonverbal signals mean.

While the benefits of active listening are many, there are at least three reasons why people do not listen actively. Multitasking is a common behavior where we try to do something else while the speaker is talking. This frequently results in miscommunication because important nonverbal and emotional cues are not noticed. It is best to lay aside other things and focus on the speaker when you wish to listen carefully. Some people are unable to actively listen to a speaker because they are formulating their own responses to the previous statement the speaker said. They may even be lining up the reasons why the speaker is wrong instead of following along with what is being said. Remember that you are not engaging in a debate, but rather attempting to understand the other person’s viewpoint.

Another barrier to active listening that frequently occurs at work is that the person speaking is of lower status than the listener. While we would all like to believe this is not true about ourselves, the facts are otherwise. Our supervisors and leaders usually receive our attention because what they say can affect our job situation positively or negatively. It is more difficult to listen attentively to someone who reports to you, particularly when you have a lot of other work to complete. It can be even worse if the person speaking is in a different department or is unknown to you. Unfortunately, we may respond to communications from clients with a lack of attention as well. Despite our best intentions, we may also harbor biases and prejudices about certain populations that get in the way of listening to them. The best way to guard against these tendencies is to stay aware of our own biases and to feel deeply that each person has inherent worth, just as Carl Rogers taught.

Becoming skilled in active listening techniques will not solve every problem you encounter as a manager. You will still need to work with employees who are not performing well. Some employees may expect you to understand them using ESP, so they don’t need to explain to you what they are thinking. This is a challenge. Over time, however, using active listening will make your job easier because you will at least understand what your coworkers want to tell you. This will go a long way to making every day smoother because your colleagues

will learn to trust that you will listen to them before you make decisions that affect them. Your colleagues will have seen you seeking to understand their views first before you take action. Even if they don't agree with your final decision, they will be more likely to follow your lead because their ideas have been heard.

MANAGING YOUR EMOTIONAL SELF

Related to the need to be a skilled active listener, and thus to understand what other people want to communicate, is the need to manage your own emotional self. While the idea of emotional intelligence is currently heatedly debated on both conceptual (Eysenck, 2000; Locke, 2005) and methodological (Brody, 2004) grounds, managers need to understand their own emotions (as they occur) and be able to handle them appropriately. Managers and leaders are frequently put into positions where conflict is either raging or bubbling under the surface. Frequently, tough decisions must be made. The outcomes of these decisions can have severely negative repercussions for some people—staff members might be laid off or fired, client services reduced, or programs eliminated entirely.

Even if you have used active listening to its fullest, sometimes people are going to be very distraught and angry. They may yell at you, threaten you, or start other unpleasant or even dangerous situations. It is at times such as this that your ability to notice how you are feeling (angry, frightened, irritated, afraid, withdrawn, and so on) is vital. Strong emotions can result in an “emotional hijacking” (Goleman, 2006) where your feelings literally avoid the rational parts of your brain and affect your “primitive brain” directly. Such a hijacking can cause you to invoke the “flight or fight” response, which motivates you to run away or to lash out. Hormones and adrenaline are immediately released by your body, which then stimulate action without thought. While this type of reaction is important if one is about to be attacked by a predator, it has less use in a nonprofit office. Being unable to take control back after an emotional hijacking can be quite damaging to your career and have negative effects for your organization.

In this type of situation, being able to note and classify your emotional state allows you to re-route your hijacked brain so that your thoughts go through the rational parts of the cortex, and allows you to regain the ability to think logically about how to respond to the perceived danger you face. It may be that you are not threatened nearly as much as you first thought. Taking the time to calm down enough to think again will usually save considerable amounts of time later on as you will not need to retrace your steps or attempt to undo hasty actions.

Once the emotions are noted, they have less power to control you. You can also take four additional steps when confronted with an emotionally difficult situation at work. First, take control of yourself. If you are not under control, you won't be able to assist others. One way to manage yourself is to breathe deeply and slowly, forcing oxygen into your system (which is good for thinking) and preventing you from rashly taking action. In situations like this, it is better to take slow steps, even taking a step back mentally, than to jump ahead quickly without thinking things through. Second, you can also take a few moments to think about how you would like the situation to end and the steps you can take to achieve that preferred end. Third, by engaging your active listening skills, you can determine what your colleague wants from the situation. This act will take time and also help pacify the other person to some extent. Finally, you can try to interject some humor into the situation. This must be genuine humor, and preferably self-deprecating, rather than a sarcastic or snide sort of joking about the other person. While not always an easy thing to do, finding a way to comment on something funny about yourself or the situation relieves tension and allows for a peaceful resolution. Many times, a mild disagreement can escalate into something much worse, a situation that causes lasting damage to relationships and job performance. These few simple acts on your part can keep communication open.

As a leader, you will at times need to manage your team and their feelings in group (rather than one-on-one) situations. You must be clear about your own feelings, as noted earlier, and

you can use similar techniques to bring about good results in meetings. One of the more important elements of communicating during group sessions is to be clear about what others in the group are thinking and feeling. Often, when there is conflict within a group, or as options are being discussed, frustrations arise if participants do not feel they are being heard. You need to ask for clarification and use your active listening skills in these situations. You should also ask questions and be willing to challenge ideas that are put forth so that pros and cons can be brought out ahead of any decisions. In addition, it is wise to have the group discuss issues such as what are “best case” solutions, and what alternative solutions are acceptable. By separating out these two levels of results, solutions meeting different needs or views can often be found. By modeling what you expect from others, you will help create a higher functioning group. In the end, your final decision probably will not make everyone happy. Still, if the process is open and people have a chance for meaningful participation, you can usually retain good working relationships.

A final way to keep emotional hijacking from occurring is to take the surprise element out of the situation. It may not be that your fight-or-flight response is related to the actual topic (as conflictual as it might be) but rather that your emotions are aroused because of the suddenness or unexpectedness of the issue arising at that moment. It is often appropriate to take a step back and request a short break or to schedule a separate meeting time for topics with high emotional loads. You will have time to consider what you want to accomplish with the discussion, as will everyone else involved. By lowering the stress levels for yourself and others, better decisions will be made.

If you have introduced the concept of emotional hijacking to your coworkers and explained how our emotions can bypass our logical thinking processes, leading to unnecessary escalation of responses to issues, everyone on the team can be on guard to keep the whole group or a member of the group from succumbing to this common problem. It can even turn into a group practice that a certain phrase can be used to signal to people that they may need to check and monitor their emotional situation. When used in this way, the power of the group is enhanced and individuals within it can be nudged by colleagues to become more self-aware and productive.

STORYTELLING

Humans have used stories and storytelling since we developed the ability to communicate. It continues to be a primary means for helping people listen and remember important messages (Heath & Heath, 2007). Listening to carefully crafted stories has been shown to create changes in the listener’s brain chemistry, increasing both cortisol (which focuses attention) and oxytocin (which improves the ability to empathize and create feelings of care) (Zak, 2011).

Excellent stories have advantages for communicating ideas because they have a clear narrative and so are easy to follow, they are concrete, they are credible, they contain a surprising element, and they pack an emotional jolt. Even mediocre stories that have just some of these elements help people retain key, simple points that help them act in desired ways (Heath & Heath, 2007). Stories are seen to be more captivating, conversational, outwardly focused on the audience, entertaining, compelling, textured, and real than typical organizational communications (Hoffman, 2011).

Different types of stories exist for different purposes. Simmons (2007) describes many types of stories that are useful to achieve different types of goals. We look at four here. The first, “Who I am,” is useful when you want to get across your values and the kind of leader or person you are. You open yourself up a bit to allow those around you to see who you are. This type of story is important in job interviews, for example, when interviewers might ask you to describe a time when you overcame an obstacle, or approached a new situation. Political candidates have a well-rehearsed story of “Who I am” so they can connect with the electorate, particularly as they start wooing new sets of voters.

A second type of story is called the “Why I am here” story, and can be related to the first type. When you are a leader, people working with and for you want to know not only who you are, but also why you are in your current position. You’ve chosen to be a part of an organization, in fact, to be a leader within it. People rightly want to have insight into what you want to accomplish.

Teaching stories are the third type Simmons (2007) discusses. For millennia, the parables of Jesus, such as the Good Samaritan, or the parables of Aesop, with the story of the Boy Who Cried Wolf, have become shorthand ways of communicating the right way or the wrong way to live. If you can encapsulate “best practices” for your organization in a teaching story, you can be sure that the message will get through.

The fourth type of story communicates a vision. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech is such a story, but so is John Kennedy’s speech about sending a man to the moon and returning him safely. When you and your organization can develop a story of where you want to go, such inspiration will help you keep going through even massive difficulties. In Chapter 6, you will read about the value of an organizational vision. Remember that your vision is only a set of words unless you can get people to act to achieve it. A vision story provides just the means to make the vision “sticky”—easily remembered and thus capable of being worked toward (Heath & Heath, 2007).

When you have an important message to deliver to your coworkers, a story might be the best way to begin. When using storytelling in this way, you need to prepare—few of us are able to speak extemporaneously in an effective way (although we can get better with practice). Good stories, even very short ones, often have the following features in common:

1. A protagonist in a situation
2. A challenge (internal and/or external)
3. A resolution to the challenge
4. Moral or application

The first three features together are called the *dramatic arc*. Longer stories have more challenges that need to be dealt with, and have smaller resolutions and setbacks along the way, leading eventually to the ultimate showdown and climax to the story. In the end, something has changed, whether it is the situation, the protagonist, or both. When stated plainly, this becomes the moral of the story. Sometimes it is left up to the listeners to determine the moral for themselves, especially if the story is left unfinished as part of a current situation or as a way of stimulating engagement in the decision-making process.

Naturally, you will need to speak and write in other ways as well, for example, when communicating a set of facts or options that are being considered. Even here, however, you can incorporate a look at challenges, emotions, and successes in narrative forms that will hold your audience’s attention and stick in their heads. Once you begin communicating with stories, you will find that people remember what you have to say and you have more of an impact (Simmons, 2007).

One of the beneficial aspects of storytelling is that you are forced to determine what point you wish to make before you can effectively communicate it. We have all been in conversations with people who want to tell a story that is lacking a dramatic arc, rambles endlessly, and has no point. As you begin to use stories in your work life, remember to describe a person or situation, the challenges to be faced, the difficulties in overcoming obstacles, and the benefits that ensue when the deeds are successfully accomplished.

SUMMARY

This chapter has described three areas of interpersonal communication skills that leaders need to master. The first, active listening, allows you to learn what others think and make good use

of their knowledge because you are listening for meaning. You will be able to make better decisions with a broader set of facts and emotional understanding by listening actively. Becoming skilled in emotional management and emotional intelligence was the second topic. Learning to take charge of your emotions in the service of your work and organization represents an important aspect of leadership. If you are not in charge of yourself, you are really not in charge of much at all. Finally, we presented information about storytelling, and the benefits it can bring to your ability to communicate about yourself, the organization's view of best practices, and the future you are working towards.

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HELPFUL TERMS

Active listening—a type of listening that seeks to understand the meaning behind words rather than just the words themselves.

Emotional hijacking—a situation where your feelings are strong enough to overcome your rational thought process.

Emotional intelligence—the concept that there exists a set of skills that allow people to understand their own and others' emotions, help them regulate their emotions, and help them plan and achieve goals in their life.

Teaching story—a type of story that has an explicit moral or lesson that will help listeners behave in the desired manner after hearing it.

Unconditional positive regard—a term associated with the work of psychologist Carl Rogers, meaning acceptance of a person as a person, even when you may not agree with his or her behavior. It is a way for the manager to point out and seek to correct employee mistakes or errors without the employee feeling less worthy as a person.

Vision story—a type of story that communicates the preferred future that you or your organization is working to achieve.

Why I am here story—a type of story that communicates your reason for being in the position you are in and what you hope to accomplish.

Who I am story—a type of story that communicates who the storyteller is by revealing personal values, beliefs, and history. It is very useful in allowing others to become comfortable with you as a person because they feel they know you and can perhaps more easily trust you.

EXERCISES

1. In-Basket Exercise

Directions

For this exercise, pretend you are Becky Jones, Communications Director for your organization. Your boss, the CEO of the entire agency, needs your help. Using the ideas presented in this chapter, craft a 3 minute presentation with PowerPoint slides (or other visual aids) or a speech (without visual aids) that will give the CEO something “compelling, entertaining, and (hopefully) lucrative” as he requests.

Memo

Date: September 1, 20XX

To: Becky Jones, Communications Director

From: Shawn O'Malley, CEO, Youth Services of Eastern Oklahoma

Subject: Message for End of Year Fundraising Kickoff

In two weeks, I will provide the closing talk to the End of Year Fundraising Kickoff Dinner with some of our best donors. Usually, I list off the goals and objectives we set at the start of the year and how we've done in accomplishing them so far. In the past few years, I have found that we are not getting the financial benefits from these events that are expected by members of the board and what our agency needs. I've looked in the mirror and found what I think is the reason for this lack of success. Frankly, I have given boring speeches, but I don't know how to make them better.

This year, I am asking for your help to take the usual list of goals, objectives, and results and turn it into a compelling, entertaining, and (hopefully) lucrative communication with our best donors. Here are the facts—I would like to hear back from you with your draft by next week.

I know people like to hear how their money is spent, so I have gotten this information for you. So far this year, we have served 147 youth (85 boys and 62 girls). We have served over 132,000 meals, washed sheets nearly 7,000 times, administered 219 prescriptions, and bought 46 pairs of glasses, 93 dresses, 151 pairs of pants, 289 shirts/tops, 308 pairs of shoes, and many dozens of socks and pieces of underclothing. Our cleaning supplies budget is \$12,000. Office supply purchases have topped \$14,000, due mainly to the need to upgrade the computers we have in the residences and offices. Luckily, we were able to get a good price on those from the local Best Buy store. Grounds-keeping with all this snow we had last winter has run over budget, and stands at \$7,450. Utilities are also high this year, costing about \$21,000 so far. We are hoping for a mild winter this year.

The economy of the state has been poor this year, with the economic downturn lingering in its effects. Unemployment is at 12%, job losses are in the thousands in our area, and natural disasters are sucking potential donors dry. Our foundation supporters have reduced funding by 15% over the past three years, and government reimbursements are running six months behind. Our total income for the year is down 4%, after previous dips of 1% and 6%.

We anticipate that we will exhaust our cash reserves within six months and be forced to do something drastic to continue serving the same number of clients. We are not likely to be forced to close our doors next year, but the future after that is rather grim.

Typical client 1: Sally, a 12-year-old girl who has been abused for a period of 10–12 months by a family member. Parents have relinquished rights. Adoption for this type of client is rare. She is under our care and protection for perhaps the next six years.

Typical client 2: Nicodemus, a 16-year-old boy who is looking at the end of his time with us in less than two years. He came to our facility after being orphaned a year ago and attempting to live on the streets. He wants to be independent but doesn't have strong social or living skills.

Here is our mission, for your easy reference: "We protect children and youth from abuse and neglect by providing a safe, caring residential alternative when needed."

As the largest provider of services to youth in the eastern Oklahoma area, we strive to ensure that no child is left in an unsafe situation for more than 24 hours. We do this through three emergency shelters, one residential facility, and 43 staff members. We also provide parent-training programs to prevent problems before they begin. We don't turn children away, calling on an extensive network of emergency foster care parents when other resources are full or otherwise unavailable to meet the needs of impacted children.

See what you can do with this information, will you?

2. How Was Your Day?

Sitting with a partner, tell the story of what you did this morning to get to school or work on time. Don't make anything up, just stick to the facts. Complete this task in two minutes or less. This is the sort of typical "how was your day?" approach to conversation and communication. Listen to your partner's story. Now, take a 10-minute break and revise your story, keeping in mind the following prompt: What obstacles did you face to get to or school or work (internal or external)? How did you address each issue? Were you successful or not? What lessons can you draw from this experience? Retell the story of your morning.

3. Emotional Self-Management

Think of a situation at work or school where you were quite irritated or angry and you let it show. Discuss with a colleague or two what happened and what you did. If you were to find yourself in a similar situation, how could you apply some of the tools for emotional self-management? Do you think they would be effective in this situation?

4. Active Listening

Active listening is very helpful in many workplace situations. Working with the same person you talked with in Exercise 3, pretend that you are that person's instructor or supervisor who witnessed the situation. Role-play how you would work with your colleague to resolve the situation.

ASSIGNMENTS

1. The concept and measurement of Emotional Intelligence (EI) is controversial. Some authors say that it doesn't really exist as an "intelligence." Write a four- to five-page paper discussing the main arguments about the validity of EI as a concept. Which side of the argument do you believe is correct? What are the implications of your position as a nonprofit manager?
2. The idea of active listening is derived from the work of psychologist Carl Rogers. Unconditional positive regard is another concept he developed and embraced. Write a short paper (four to five pages) of the pros and cons of Rogers' work as it applies to being a manager or leader in a nonprofit organization. Which techniques, if any, would you like to incorporate into your management and leadership style?
3. Storytelling is an art and a profession. There are storytelling events and workshops across the country. If possible, attend one to gain a deeper understanding of this ancient craft. If you cannot attend one live, locate a book or other training aid about storytelling. Write a review of what you saw, heard, or read, and how you can apply the principles to your own life, particularly your life as a nonprofit leader and manager.