
COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN CONFLICT: LISTENING AND SPEAKING EFFECTIVELY

All communication involves both sending and receiving skills, or speaking and listening skills. By the way we speak, or send messages, we clarify our thoughts, needs, interests, feelings. By the way we listen, or receive messages, we gain clarity on the thoughts, needs, interests, and feelings of those with whom we communicate. Many people are adept at one or the other kind of skill; the real challenge is to remember and use both in conversations. This page offers specific skills which can be practiced to enhance both our listening and our speaking.

A. Speaking skills

1. Purpose statements:

This skill involves making a clear statement about my intended/planned actions so that others do not unknowingly work against them. Purpose statements supply information about my aims and helps others to understand what I am about.

Purpose statements help others to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings and to respond more readily because they can determine what they can or cannot do to help you achieve your aim.

Sample beginnings for purpose statements: "My purpose is...", "I intend to...", "I'm hoping to...", "What I'm trying to accomplish is...", "I'm going to...".

2. Preference statements:

This skill involves making a clear statement about my own desires or preferences and avoids voicing them as demands or forcing others to guess what they are.

Through preference statements, we give clear information about ourselves to others, taking any vulnerability off them and onto us. Preference statements help to eliminate assumptions and guesswork, and open the way for negotiations.

Sample beginnings for preference statements: "I would like...", "It would please me if...", "It would be helpful to me if...", "It may not be possible, but I would like...", "If I had a magic wand, I would...", "If it were just me...".

3. Impact statements (also called I-messages):

This skill involves speaking from my own voice, making clear statements about the impact of a situation on my own feelings and performance.

Impact statements allow for confronting others' undesirable behaviors without judging or accusing them because the focus is maintained on one's own experience and resulting feelings.

Sample pattern for impact statements: "When....happens, I feel.....because.....", "I feel.....when you.....because....", "When you (undesirable action, then (result) happens, and I feel (emotion)".

Example: "I feel angry when you don't get the log written up promptly because I depend on the log for specific details when I am writing an article, and so I can't complete the article to send it out in a timely fashion for folks back home to feel connected with what's happening here."

B. Listening skills

1. Paraphrasing, or restating:

This skill involves focusing fully on the speaker, and restating in your own words a brief message that includes key facts and feelings shared in the speaker's own message.

Paraphrasing shows that you are trying to understand. It shows respect for the speaker. It allows the speaker to feel heard and to continue his/her story without being sidetracked by a question or response. It can also help the speaker to clarify his/her own thinking. Restating also slows down the communication process and thus reduces the intensity of any conflict as issues are clarified.

Example: "I just want to throw the cell phone across the street – it keeps ringing and ringing with interruptions and the delegation is arriving tomorrow. It's not fair that I have to answer all the calls. At this rate I'll never get the handouts finished and be ready for our action."

Sample Paraphrases - "You feel really pressured by the work here and frustrated that you don't have enough help to meet a major deadline."

Tips to remember: keep the focus on the speaker (so you believe..., you're saying..., Let me be sure I understand you. You feel...); use your own words (don't simply repeat theirs); keep your paraphrase short and concise; try to catch both content and feeling in your paraphrase; try to use a comparable intensity to the speaker (if they are shouting, give evidence of that intensity without shouting yourself).

2. Agreement statements:

This skill involves finding and acknowledging points of agreement, even in the midst of disagreement with the speaker.

Agreement statements offer support and identify common ground that can serve as a foundation for continued dialog. Agreement statements help to avoid adversarial positions in conversation.

Sample beginnings for agreement statements - "I agree that...", "I can see that...", "There's no doubt in my mind that...", "You've got a good point when you say...", "You're right that..."

Tips to remember: Do not allow your statement to become "Yes...but..." as that negates or devalues the agreement you've expressed.

3. Open responses:

The skill of seeking additional information and expressing openness to hearing the perceptions and needs of others can be helpful, especially if the speaker may be critical or in disagreement with your own perceptions and needs.

Open responses take the vulnerability off the speaker and onto the one requesting additional input. Thus they offer support and show interest in understanding the other.

Sample beginnings for open responses: "Please say more about...", "I'm confused about...", "Give an example so I can understand more clearly...", "Spell out a bit further what you have in mind to..."