

# Basic Communication Skills

---

Copyright Růžena Lukášová

## Listening

To communicate effectively does not only mean to speak well. It also means to be able to listen. However, effective listening is more than a mere registering of what is being said with an occasional nod.

There are four levels of listening:

- Non-listening - making no effort to listen
- Marginal listening - is easily distracted
- Evaluative listening - focuses on content but disregards the speaker's feeling
- Active listening - pays close attention and gives verbal and non-verbal feedback.

Should the communication be effective and successful, it is necessary to **really listen** to your communication partner, which means **pay attention, concentrate, try to understand – this is the meaning of the term active listening**. This skill is highly important for managers, at least for the following four reasons:

- managers will be able to prevent misunderstanding caused by overhearing important information;
- managers will be able to understand their colleagues' needs and problems, to know their opinions, experience and attitudes, i.e., to gain important information;
- this will help managers to establish a relationship with their colleagues;
- managers will be able to judge the personality and the current mental state of the persons they are speaking to and choose an effective way of negotiating accordingly.

It is not sufficient to listen attentively in order to establish a relationship. It is also necessary to **show** your colleague **that you are listening**. This means:

- **show interest and involvement** (verbal and non-verbal means) and
- **respond to what you hear**.

The verbal tools to show your communication partners that you are listening are:

- occasionally repeat what they have said

*"well, you are saying that ...", "if I understand well, you mainly want to ..."*

- occasionally summarize what they have said

*"well, if I understand well, you need the material soon, within a week at latest, but you also need it to be complete and well processed"*

- respond to your communication partner's feelings or opinions

*"I can see it is not easy for you", "I understand your situation".*

Non-verbally, listening will be indicated by:

- eye contact with the speaker;
- facial expression;
- leaning towards the speaker (if you are sitting), i.e., a responsive position;
- nodding, etc.

If managers really listen to their subordinates, if they want to understand and help, they follow the above mentioned rules naturally. They communicate non-verbally and respond to what is said unknowingly and automatically. However, an occasional repetition or summarizing of what the partner has said, sometimes referred to as paraphrasing, is a special communication skill, which you can learn and make use of when communicating with your colleagues.

Repeating or summarizing in a suitable way of what the communication partner has said brings several benefits:

- **you will verify if you understand each other** – the communication partner can respond by confirming the words uttered (*"yes, that's exactly what I meant", "yes, that is the problem"*) or correcting us (*"no, when I said ..., I meant ..."*) or adding information (*"yes, this is important ..., but I also want..."*)
- **you will establish a relationship with the colleague**

By repeating what the colleague said, the communication partner feels:

- he/she listens to me;
- he/she understands;
- he/she is interested in my problem and wants to help.

Thus a mere repetition of your communication partner's words will win you a lot.

## Asking questions

Questions can be divided into two basic groups – open-ended and closed-ended questions.

**Open-ended questions** start with "what", "how", "when", "why". Their formulation does not force the communication partner to answer with one word but a more detailed explanation can be given. Their point is that they invite the communication partners to have a conversation (or group discussion) and they bring a lot of information. Examples of open-ended questions are *"What is your idea of how we should proceed in this matter?" "How do you imagine we should cooperate?" "What is your opinion on this proposal?" "Why should this proposal not be accepted in your view?"*.

**Closed-ended questions**, on the other hand, only allow the partner to use one word or a few words, e.g. yes-no or specific information. These questions aim to get precise or specific information. They do not give any space for a real conversation to start; however, they are useful to make

communication partners' ideas on a problem solution more accurate, to verify information, to formulate specific conditions at the end of negotiations, etc. Examples of closed-ended questions are "What is the deadline for the proposals to be collected?" "Are you able to deliver the material by next Friday?" "What time do you need to prepare conclusions of the analysis?"

Both of these types have their advantages and disadvantages, depending whether they are used at the right moment and for the right purpose.

Open-ended questions are very useful when:

- you need to gain maximum information, especially about a conversation subject you are not much familiar with;
- you need to create a good atmosphere and build rapport;
- you do not know your communication partner and for a successful negotiation you need to learn about their character as much as possible.

Generally, open-ended questions are mainly suitable at the beginning of meetings because they are able to create a friendly atmosphere, they initiate conversation and open discussions. On the other hand, they are not very suitable for the ends of meetings because they do not lead to specific conclusions and thus reduce the efficiency of this negotiation stage.

By contrast, closed-ended questions are unsuitable at the beginning as they give an impolite impression if used at the beginning of a negotiation (your communication partner may feel as if interrogated), they do not create a pleasant atmosphere, do not initiate conversation and reduce the amount of information acquired. With a closed-ended question your communication partner will only use a specific answer to the question you asked and will not feel like elaborating on it. On the other hand, closed-ended questions are very useful at the end of negotiations as they verify mutual understanding and lead the conversation towards a conclusion.

Questions still have other functions during a negotiation:

- a good choice of questions will control the speech of a talkative or silent communication partner;
- questions establish a relationship as they are an indication of interest;
- by questions we can control the negotiation naturally (topics of conversation are not given by those who answer but those who ask).

## **Effective argumentation**

If you want your proposal to be accepted in the organization (solution of a problem, purchase of new equipment, change of procedures used, ...) or if you want to defend your view of a matter discussed, you need to convince your colleagues. Arguments are the tool to convince.

The purpose of argumentation is to justify your proposal or to make the others understand your requirements or views. However, it is not easy to make your arguments achieve this.

Three basic aspects you have to consider when preparing for a negotiation (where you expect argumentation will be necessary) are:

- choice of arguments;
- formulation of arguments;

- structure of the argumentation.

### **Choice of arguments**

The choice of suitable arguments is a prerequisite for your arguments to be interesting for the other party.

Try to think why your proposal should be accepted or why the others should acknowledge your opinion – you will surely find a lot of good reasons. However, not all reasons important for you are important for others. If you want to convince them, choose the arguments that **correspond to their needs and interests**. Your communications partners will be always more willing to listen to such arguments and they will find them more impressive. Therefore, do not emphasize what is important for you and do not underestimate what is important for them. Just the opposite, base your argumentation on what is interesting for the other party. The arguments that appeal to the needs the listeners do not have are not effective and can be even counterproductive.

### **Formulation of arguments**

The effectiveness of arguments does not depend on their correspondence to the needs and interests of the other party but also on the way they are formulated.

For example, when you are speaking about the advantages a purchase of a new device will bring to your organization and you are emphasizing its excellent features, your argumentation need not be impressive even if you choose a suitable set of features.

You say, for example, “this new copy machine works at x copies a minute” - it is a piece of information but your colleagues may feel it does not concern them. Of course, what you mean is that the time of copying will shorten to a half compared to the old copy machine, which will mean 45 minutes saved when copying materials for a meeting. However, unless you point out this benefit that follows from the speed of copying, your colleagues may not realize this. Therefore, you had better say: *“This copy machine works at x copies a minute which will mean for us that for example by copying materials for a meeting you will save 45 minutes.”*

If you only give information about features of products, services or proposed solutions:

- information recipients may not realize what benefit these features will bring;
- information recipients may not realize all benefits that follow from the features you emphasize;
- information recipients may interpret your argument in a way completely different from what you meant;
- you do not convince your colleagues, you only inform them.

Therefore, if you really want to convince your colleagues, tell them what benefits the proposed solution will bring them, what they will gain. The other party is usually not interested in the features of the proposed solution but much more what it means for them, what improvement it will bring, what they themselves and the organization they work for will gain.

## **Structure of argumentation**

Assuming that you have chosen your arguments well, i.e., you will not use ineffective or even counterproductive arguments, it is advisable to organize your arguments in a suitable way.

Although all the chosen arguments are “good” arguments, some of them are usually “stronger” and more impressive than the others. It is necessary to make a good use of the stronger arguments. Starting your argumentation with the strongest argument will gain the listeners’ attention but there are no means left to escalate their interest. Therefore, it is good to choose a good argument for a start but not the one which is your “ace”. Similarly, it is not advisable to end with the strongest argument without leaving a good argument “up your sleeve”. Even if you shake your partner’s former opposing opinion by your strongest argument, now you do not have any means to finish the process of convincing.

The quality of argumentation, as follows from what has been said, is an important prerequisite of the effectiveness of your reasoning. However, it is difficult to create effective argumentation without preparation. Preparing for negotiations and arguments (including premeditation on the needs, interests and way of thinking of the other party) is therefore the essential key to convincing anybody at work meetings.

### **Control questions**

1. List the features of active listening (how is listening manifested).
2. What is the benefit of listening for a manager?
3. Explain the sense of asking questions during communication.
4. Name the main types of questions, list the benefits of particular question types and say when they are suitably used.
5. List the main principles of the choice and formulation of arguments you have to meet should your reasoning be convincing and effective.