



## **Most Frequently Asked Questions for Communication Skills**

### **Q. When communicating in a group setting, how do I keep the group engaged with what I am saying?**

- A. Watch the expressions and body language of those who are listening. Do they appear to be interested and involved? If not, work on varying the pace and volume at which you are speaking. Posing questions to the group is another way to draw them in and to invite participation. Addressing why the topic you're speaking about is important to the group is yet another way to gain their attention.

Other elements to be aware of in a group setting pertains to the physical elements of the setting. Is the room too hot or too cold? If the room is too warm, members of the group may become drowsy. If the room is too cold, members of the group may be focusing more on their own discomfort than on your topic. If there is a large amount of information to present, can the content be broken down into smaller sub-topics and can the setting be managed in such a way that there are opportunities for frequent breaks or changes in topics? Managing all of these elements can help to increase listener engagement.

### **Q. If I am communicating technical information to a group that may not have the technical knowledge, what should I do to make the communication as understandable as possible?**

- A. The first opportunity would come before you speak with the group. Is there a way to "warm them up" to the technical content by providing it to them in advance? During the actual meeting or other group setting, group members may be better able to understand the content if it is presented in more than one way. For example, if a technical process is to be explained to the group, it would be helpful to offer the process in an ordinal manner (1, 2, 3) as well as a flowchart or process diagram.

Slowing down and communicating the information with fewer words can help to create more clarity for the group members. Frequently pausing for feedback or questions from the group members can help to ensure understanding is taking place.

Making certain that group members have the content in a carry-away (handouts) or reach-back (weblinks for future review) manner will help to alleviate the fear of not being able to remember the content. This will help to free the group members to focus on understanding (as opposed to memorizing) the technical information.

### **Q. If I am communicating about a sensitive or controversial topic, are there any ways to help prepare the group to stay open-minded about it?**

- A. A technique called "pre-calling" (as opposed to recalling) may be helpful. In pre-calling, a speaker may call attention at the beginning of a communication to sensitive or controversial topics that everyone in the room is already aware of, but not talking about. This technique helps to relieve some of the pressure from the unspoken topic controversy.

Within the pre-call, the speaker may also make an appeal to the listeners' sense of self. "As reasonable people, I'm certain (or hoping) you'll all be able to maintain an open mind." Most people like to think of themselves as reasonable and a statement such as this can help the listeners to feel good about themselves by keeping an open mind.



Pre-calling can be made even more effective by following up the pre-call with information about how an outcome from the sensitive or controversial topic may be beneficial to the listeners or will serve the greater good in some way. Here, the speaker helps the listeners to answer the “WIIFM” (“What’s in it for me?”) question. Alternatively, the speaker can help the listeners to understand how the outcome from the controversial topic may serve the greater good (benefit children, teachers, communities, etc.).

One additional benefit of the pre-call is that it can provide an opportunity for the speaker to instill a sense of affinity within the listeners by communicating that perhaps they would feel the the same way, or take the same actions, as any decision-maker involved with the sensitive or controversial topic.

**Q. What does “active listening” mean?**

- A. Active listening refers to the set of skills a listener employs to better understand a speaker’s message. The skills include:
- Backtracking – to repeat back what the speaker has said, using his or her words, so he or she feels understood.
  - Paraphrasing – to feed back your interpretation of what was said. The feedback should include both the content of the message and an acknowledgement of the emotion, if any, the speaker is experiencing.
  - Clarifying – to ask questions to better understand a speaker’s message.

**Q. My \_\_\_\_\_ doesn’t listen to me. How do I get him/her to listen?**

- A. It may be helpful to consider several questions first. Is the behavior causing any real harm or difficulty? If not, perhaps it may be most helpful, in the long run, to “choose your battles” and choose to not devote energy and time to this issue. Likewise, if the person who isn’t listening is your supervisor, another superior in your organization, a parent, or other customer you may find it helpful to be tactful in how you address your need to be heard.

If you truly feel the issue is important enough to discuss, you may wish to find a time when the other person is in a receptive state and appears open to a discussion. You may wish to open the discussion with an acknowledgement of the behavior, a statement of how you feel when you haven’t been listened to, and then ask the the other person’s input as to why that may be happening. An example of this type of opening for a discussion may be:

“Hey Sandy, I noticed that when we’re talking, I don’t feel like I’m really being heard and I feel a little frustrated by that. What do you think is causing that? Am I not being clear?” (Be certain to maintain a positive tone during the conversation and don’t conduct the conversation if you are feeling angry.)

Offering that perhaps you’re not being clear may make it easier for the other person to accept responsibility for not listening, or perhaps share with you that they do have difficulty understanding you.