

Effective communication occurs when the sender and receiver of a message both understand the message the same way. Beliefs, expectations, hopes, and the other thoughts of both parties affect the interpersonal communication process. People often assume they have successfully delivered or understood a message when in reality they have not. Communication involves more than just talking. It also takes deciding what to say and how, listening, “decoding” signals—words and body language—and checking back on the accuracy of interpretation.

### **Communication Skills**

Like any skill-building process, learning to be a better communicator takes place in stages. When first learning to drive a car, people do not know all the necessary skills and how to apply them. Gradually, they become conscious of and increasingly comfortable with steering, navigating through traffic, and using the brakes, accelerator, clutch, and gas pedal. Eventually, most drivers do all of these things without even thinking about them; the skills come into play automatically. Similarly, managers who make an effort can use new communication skills without conscious intent. Three important communication skills are active listening, speaking, and using body language.

#### **Active Listening**

Listening is not the same as waiting for another person to finish talking so you can have your say. Listening for the message is as important to successful communication as sending it. Most people, however, give much less thought to how they listen than to how they speak. Active listening means committing to listen, staying focused on what a speaker is saying, and avoiding distractions from outside or inside such as thinking about what you are going to say in response. Managers and supervisors who practice active listening techniques are more likely to pick up what employees, family members, and others are trying to get across to them.

#### ***Suggestions for Better Listening***

- *Eliminate distractions.* Put down the book or newspaper. Turn off the radio, and shut off the computer. Show by actions that you are giving your full attention.
- *Listen with your eyes as well as your ears.* Looking at the speaker both allows observation of gestures and facial expressions and tends to increase interest in the speaker.
- *Keep responses to a minimum, but let the speaker know you are listening.* An occasional nod, “uh-huh,” or “I see” is an adequate signal.
- *Be patient.* Good listeners show respect by allowing the speaker to talk without being rushed, interrupted, or constantly pushed for additional detail.

- *Avoid jumping to conclusions.* Since listeners usually think faster than speakers speak, they often react early. Filling in the end of a sentence for a speaker is one indication of having jumped to a conclusion.

### ***Paraphrasing and Reframing to Improve Reception***

Two important techniques in effective listening are paraphrasing and reframing statements. Paraphrasing is putting the message heard into different words. Repeating it back to the message originator serves to check that information has been accurately received. For example, if a foreman says in an angry voice, “He acted like a total idiot,” one way to paraphrase it is, “You think that what he did was really stupid.” Paraphrasing can draw out underlying information and feelings.

Reframing is restating what a person has said but from a different perspective, usually removing emotionally charged words or accusations to put a neutral or more positive twist on it. One way of reframing the above statement is to say, “You believe our guys are capable of using their heads on the job.” Reframing can reduce tension and emotion in a conversation where two people are in conflict.

Paraphrasing and reframing are not the same as parroting, or repeating exactly what a speaker has said. Nor is restating the obvious, even in a different way, always helpful. If a cowboy is yelling and throwing things, it is probably not a good idea to say, “It seems like you are somewhat annoyed.” His behavior clearly indicates that he is furious, and your statement would probably come off as patronizing at best. It is probably better to simply start with “Look, I know you’re upset.”

**Which of the two replies after each statement is a paraphrase and which a reframe?**

**Statement: “You’re just trying to get rid of me!”**

- \_\_\_ “You think I’m going to fire you.”
- \_\_\_ “Your job is important to you.”

**Statement: “Your badmouthing is really inexcusable.”**

- \_\_\_ “You don’t like how I talked about you and your crew.”
- \_\_\_ “It’s important to you that people speak respectfully of other people around here.”

**Statement: “I’m fed up with your whining. If you would pitch in and help, we could get things done.”**

- \_\_\_ “You want me to stop complaining and offer some help.”
- \_\_\_ “I can see you’re upset. It sounds like you need more help.”

*(Answer: The first response in each pair is a paraphrase.)*

