

Are you *really* a good communicator?

Thinking about your communication with others is an important skill to continuously develop. Tania Coke shares some tips.



The terms “active listening” and “emotional intelligence” have become common-place in organisational life. Many of us have attended communication skills or conflict management training courses and pride ourselves on our interpersonal skills. But it’s one thing to listen actively and speak with emotional intelligence during role-play in the training room. It’s a very different thing to do it in the heat of the moment in real-life conflict situations.

In this article, we invite you to reflect afresh on what it means to be a good communicator, before or during a courageous conversation. We challenge you to make a realistic assessment of your communication skills, and we ask what can be done to narrow the gap between the theory and practice of good communication.

What is ‘good communication’?

How shall we define good communication? Often we assess communication skills in terms of tangible outcomes, for example what agreements were reached as a result of the conversation. For this article, we are not concerned with these tangible outcomes. We are concerned with the quality of communication itself and the effect on the relationship between the people involved.

Communication can be thought of as a two-way process of transmitting and receiving information between people. The information we are mainly concerned with is to do with thoughts and feelings, which includes observations, opinions, ideas, intentions, preferences, needs, beliefs, values, suggestions and emotions.

So what does it mean to transmit and receive this information well?

The transmitting mode of communication

Let’s start with the transmitting mode. In our model, the good communicator transmits information with a certain intention. The intention is not to deny other people’s thoughts and feelings, but to share their own with the intention of nurturing relationship and building mutual understanding. In choosing what information to transmit, they therefore focus on the information that they think will most help the other person to understand them. For instance, they will typically try to convey not just *what* they think but *why* they think it and why it *matters* to them.

The good communicator is also aware that there are various channels through which we transmit information. In the typical workplace conversation, there are three main channels of communication at our disposal. We can express ourselves through words, the way we use our voice (pitch, intonation and volume) and through our body (physical posture, facial expressions, gestures and actions). The good communicator pays **attention** to what s/he is expressing through these three channels and makes choices accordingly.

The receiving mode of communication

In the case of receiving information, we can distinguish between intention and attention. The good communicator pays attention to what the other person is transmitting through their words, voice and body. Although we are equipped with excellent faculties (eyes, ears, cognitive processes, etc.) to receive this information, our ability to do so gets derailed in many ways. We may have certain assumptions, preconceptions or prejudices about the other person that cause us to block out what they are actually saying. The good communicator is able to acknowledge information that goes against these preconceptions, enquire into that information and even, where appropriate, change their opinions on the basis of new information. Another reason we may lose attention is when we have an agenda that dominates our awareness to the exclusion of all else, for example: *"I have to leave in five minutes - how can I end the conversation?"* Or we are so busy trying to solve the problem that we are no longer paying attention to what the other person is expressing.

Good communication requires the self-awareness to recognise these agendas and put them on hold when necessary, in order to remain open and attentive to the other person. Good communication can also take the form of reflecting back to the other person the information that you have received, in order to test out your understanding and let them know that you are paying attention.

Like in the transmitting mode, the intention of the good communicator whilst in receiving mode is to nurture relationship and build mutual understanding. They are not scanning for the information that will best prove their point, but rather trying to understand what is most important to the other person and why.

Assessing your communication skills

The model of good communication outlined above may seem somewhat achievable in the training room. But what about in our real lives, amid the stress of the working day, or in situations of heated workplace conflict? To help you assess your communication prowess, we have prepared a list of questions for reflection. Think of a recent conversation with someone with whom you want to communicate well, and ask yourself the following:

TRANSMITTING

1. What do you remember about what you said, how you said it, your posture and gestures?
2. Based on the above, what impression of you do you think the other person came away with?
3. Did you tell them something you care deeply about or was it a superficial conversation?
4. Is there anything you wished you had said, or asked, or done, that you didn't?

RECEIVING

5. What do you remember about what the other person said, how they said it and how they behaved physically?
6. Based on this, what impression of them did you come away with?
7. What seemed to matter to them most during the conversation?
8. Did they say or do anything that particularly impressed/delighted/annoyed/upset/surprised you? Did you tell them or reflect it back in some way? Why do you think it had that effect on you?
9. Were you aware of having any particular agenda, preoccupation, preconception or assumption during that conversation?

The theory and the practice

When it comes to communication, the gap between theory and practice is vast. Caught up in the web of deadlines, pressures, fears and longings of real life, it can be fiercely difficult to remain self-aware, attentive, open-minded and authentic. The occasional listening or communication skills workshop is unlikely to make any real change to our practice. Luckily, each day is bound to bring its own training opportunities. You can use the questions above to reflect on any important conversation or meeting you have had, review your performance and identify ways to improve. Another idea is to team up with a friend or colleague at work, observe one another during meetings and give one another feedback on your communication skills. Through daily awareness and practice, we can start to narrow the daunting gap between the theory and practice of good communication.