

# Communication

**Contents.** This “one pager” contains information about the following communication topics:

- Attending
- Open-ended questions
- Paraphrasing
- “I” messages
- Gentle confrontation

## Purpose

- To communicate effectively, and to be perceived as communicating effectively

There are two roles in communication: the Sender sends a message; the Receiver receives it and returns with a response.

There are two tests for effective communication: (1) the Receiver understands the message that the Sender intended to send; and (2) the Sender’s message is congruent with the outcome she/he wants to achieve, and understood by the Receiver.

In terms of the Satir Interaction Model, when communication is effective:

- The *intake* that the Receiver receives is what the Sender sent (verbal, tone, facial and body language)
- The *meaning* that the Receiver interprets is what the Sender intended
- The *significance* that the Receiver attaches to this is “OK”
- The *response* that the Receiver returns to the Sender is congruent and consistent with what the Sender expects

## Doing This

### ATTENDING

- Receiver is looking at the Sender; eye contact is made and kept, as comfort indicates

In our experience, many people are uncomfortable eye-to-eye, and in some cultures, this is a sign of disrespect; the Sender needs to be sensitive to this

- Receiver’s body is facing the Sender, and is comfortable

In our experience, many people prefer side-to-side always or in some contexts; the Sender needs to be sensitive to this

- Receiver is focused on the Sender and what the Sender is saying (verbally, tone of voice) and doing (facial and body language); Receiver is not doing anything else, is not looking elsewhere, is not listening to anything else
- Receiver's facial and body language are "appropriate" to what the Sender is saying
- Receiver responds occasionally (e.g., with a nod, or a short "... and then what?") to indicate her/his "engaged listening" actively to the Sender

### *Why do this?*

This lets the Sender know the Receiver is actively engaged with the conversation. This helps build and keep the "flow" of the discussion going, which makes more information available to both the Sender and the Receiver. This also demonstrates respect and honor of the Sender by the Receiver.

## OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

- Sender asks a question of a Receiver where the answer is descriptive, not simply a selection from a (typically small) finite set of responses (such as "yes or no")
- Such a question often begins with: "how do you ...", "would you please describe ...", "what do you think about ...", and so forth.

### *Why do this?*

This lets the Receiver know that the Sender would like to hear a descriptive response, get more information than just a simple "yes or no" or other finite answer could provide. These types of questions make the information visible and accessible to both the Sender and Receiver, information that can be used in problem definition and problem solving.

In other words: the Sender controls the process and direction of the interaction; the Receiver determines the content of the interaction.

## PARAPHRASING

- Receiver echoes, in her/his own words, the content and the feelings behind what the Receiver heard the Sender say

Paraphrasing the content reflects the Sender's words (intake, meaning); paraphrasing the feelings reflects the Sender's emotions (significance). Paraphrasing the words and the emotions should also reflect the Sender's facial and body language.

### *Why do this?*

This is another technique for attending, and it lets the Sender know the Receiver is "tracking" along with her/him. It honors and affirms what the Sender is saying and feeling.

It also provides an opportunity for the Receiver to check her/his understanding of the communication, such as validating the intake ("did you say ...?"), the meaning ("did you mean ... by that?"), and the significance ("that ... sounds like it makes you feel ..."). This provides the opportunity for the Sender and Receiver to clear up any miscues at the earliest possible time.

All in all, paraphrasing helps keep the conversation going, and encourages more information to be shared.

**"I" MESSAGES**

- ❑ Sender speaks from the first person, and speaks about the intake, meaning, or significance to her/him

Messages encoded as "you" messages can often sound "blaming," as though the Sender is trying to place responsibility for the information on the Receiver. Messages encoded as "she/he/it/one/they" messages can often sound "super-reasonable" or "irrelevant," as though the Sender is trying to disassociate her/himself from the information or any impact the information may have.

For example, the "you" message, "Can't you follow the standards correctly?" could sound like the Sender is blaming the Receiver for not following the standards. The "it" message, "These standards are for everyone to follow." could sound like a philosophical or super-reasonable fact-of-life. However, the very specific "I" message, "I see here, on line 15, that the quality standard was not followed; and it is important to me that it is followed." provides the Receiver with a wealth of clear information, and to which the Receiver can formulate some appropriate response. This is not to mean that the standard on line 15 will always be followed; however, it does mean that the issue is known, and the impact to the Sender is known.

The Sender needs to beware of "encoded 'you' messages," "you" messages disguised with an "I" at the beginning. For example, "I don't think you are paying attention" is really "You are not paying attention" in disguise.

Often, such a message is a "projection" of some thoughts or feelings from inside the Sender, and it has nothing at all to do with the Receiver. In this example, the Sender might be projecting, "You did not respond the way I expected you to respond, so obviously, that must mean you are not paying attention." So, one real message here, from the Sender to the Receiver, could be, "I didn't get the response I was expecting; could we check to see if I made my request clear to you?"

***Why do this?***

Using "I" messages allows the Sender to share her/his views, thoughts, and feelings, and reflect the intake, meaning, and significance from her/his view. An "I" message keeps the ownership of the information with the person who is saying it: the Sender.

An "I" message shares the Sender's strength and power; it can also show the Sender's vulnerability and willingness to take a chance, to take risks, which itself can be a strong and powerful thing to do.

**GENTLE CONFRONTATION**

- ❑ The Sender describes the behavior or result she/he receives from the Receiver, describes its effect on her/him, and describes the feelings she/he has in response.

The Sender's initial description of the behavior or result (intake) is done with no judgements, no labels, no emotional or value-laden words; it is a paraphrasing of the intake.

The description of the effect (significance) asserts what the Sender feels about the intake; it is an "I" message that makes a clear separation between what was heard, seen, or observed and how the Sender ("I") feels about it.

The connection of the item with the Sender's feelings (meaning) describes the impact the intake has on the Sender; it is an "I" message that sets the stage for collaborative problem solving.

For example, "When you didn't give me a status report on that task ... I was concerned ... because then I had to drop what I was doing to get the necessary information ..." Intake: I received no status report; significance: I'm concerned; meaning (in this case, the meaning translates into a response): I had to do some extra work.

Another example, "When you tell me I'm not listening ... I get angry ... because I don't know how to demonstrate any better that I'm listening to you ..." Intake: you say I'm not listening; significance: I'm angry; meaning (in this case, the meaning translates into not knowing how to respond): I don't know what to do.

### *Why do this?*

Gentle confrontation lays the foundation for effective communication. This is especially true in those situations (like the two above) where there is some "bad news" to share. It is equally true in the case when things are working well, as follows:

"When you get me your status reports on time each week ... I feel very happy ... because I can get the summary written and sent to our boss on time, and start addressing some of the other issues that are in our way ..." Intake: you get me status reports on time; significance: joy; meaning: I can do what I need to do and then work on other issues important to us.

At each step, the Receiver gains insight into possible errors in the communication. Again, this is especially true in the case of "bad news." At the first stage, where the Sender describes her/his intake (the behavior or result the Receiver provided), the Receiver learns how the Sender has "decoded" the Receiver's message (i.e., that behavior or result). At the second stage, where the Sender describes her/his feelings about the intake, the Receiver learns how significant the intake was to the Sender (positive, negative, neutral). At the third stage, where the Sender describes the impact of the intake, the Receiver learns if the meaning she/he intended was the meaning the Sender took. Here is an example (real life):

"When you said 'You sure did a great job!!!' (the Sender said with special emphasis) ... it sounded cynical to me ... and I was extremely hurt ... because I worked very hard on that task for you ..." The Receiver thought the Sender's emphasis on "You sure did a great job!!!" sounded cynical, so the Receiver checked with the Sender of this gentle confrontation, using paraphrasing, "It sounds like you thought I was being sarcastic in my praise ... is that right?" (The Sender nodded.) Thus, it became crystal clear to the Receiver that the "You sure did a great job!!!" message had failed miserably; the Receiver had intended it very sincerely, yet the Sender had not heard it that way at all! Once this information was visible, the Receiver now was able to work with the Sender to correct the interpretation (in this case, by providing specifics about what a "great job" meant), and after some give-and-take, the situation was mended.

**Other Ideas**

- Communication is a process that moves an idea from one mind to another, keeping that idea intact.
- Two minds are necessary in the process; there is no such thing as "mindless communication."
- The meaning of communication is the response it elicits.

**Related Activities**

- Congruence

**References**

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