

DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Effective communication skills are fundamental to success in many aspects of life. Many jobs require strong communication skills. People with good communication skills also usually enjoy better interpersonal relationships with friends and family. Effective communication is therefore a key interpersonal skill and learning how to improve your communication has many benefits. However, many people find it difficult to know where to start.

Communication is a two-way process. It involves both how we send and receive messages. Receiving includes both how we take in the message (reading or listening, for example), and the ‘decoding’ of the message. Improving communication may therefore also involve either or both elements. However, many of the most common issues actually lie in receiving rather than sending messages.

There are generally four main areas of communication skills that most of us would do well to improve. These are listening, non-verbal communication, emotional awareness and management, and questioning.

One of the most common areas to need improvement is listening. We all have a tendency to forget that communication is a two-way process. We fall into the trap of ‘broadcasting’, where we just issue a message, and fail to listen to the response. Quite a lot of the time, we are not really listening to others in conversation, but thinking about what we plan to say next. Improving your listening skills is likely to pay off in improvements in your relationships both at work and at home.

What, however, is listening? Listening is not the same as hearing. Learning to listen means not only paying attention to the words being spoken but also how they are being spoken and the non-verbal messages sent with them. It means giving your full attention to the person speaking, and genuinely concentrating on what they are saying and what they are not saying. Good listeners use the techniques of clarification and reflection to confirm what the other person has said and avoid any

confusion. These techniques also demonstrate very clearly that you are listening, just like active listening.

Much of any message is communicated non-verbally. Some estimates suggest that this may be as much as 80% of communication. It is therefore important to consider and understand non-verbal communication particularly when it is absent or reduced such as when you are communicating in writing or by telephone.

Non-verbal communication is often thought of as body language, but it actually covers far more. It includes, for example, tone and pitch of the voice, body movement, eye contact, posture, facial expression, and even physiological changes such as sweating. You can therefore understand other people better by paying close attention to their non-verbal communication. You can also ensure that your message is conveyed more clearly by ensuring that your words and body language are consistent.

The third area of communication is awareness of our own and other people's emotions, and an ability to manage those emotions. At work it is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that everything should be logical, and that emotion has no place. However, we are human and therefore messy and emotional. However, an awareness of emotions, both positive and negative, can definitely improve communication. This understanding of our own and others' emotion is known as emotional intelligence.

Emotional intelligence covers a wide range of skills, usually divided into personal skills and social skills. The personal skills include self-awareness, self-regulation and motivation. The social skills include empathy and social skills. Each one of these is broken down into more skills.

Questioning is a crucial skill to ensure that you have understood someone's message correctly. It is also a very good way of obtaining more information about a particular topic, or simply starting a conversation and keeping it going. Those with good questioning skills are often also seen as very good listeners, because they tend to spend far more time drawing information out from others than broadcasting their own opinions.