LESSON 4: COMMUNICATION

communication	*transference*
decodes	*transmitted*
empathy	*self-awareness*
encodes	*self-motivation*
feedback	*self-regulation*

PURPOSE

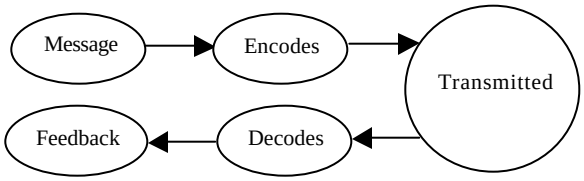
It's not what you say, but what you do. This statement highlights the philosophy that actions speak louder than words. You are a model for others. They watch what you do and, if they admire you, will imitate your actions. Communicating is sending a message through a process that allows the receiver to understand the message as you intended. Many things affect this process. In this lesson, we will be learning about the process of communication, the barriers to that process, the power of emotional intelligence, and the process exchanging feedback.

INTRODUCTION

Even though your actions speak louder than the words you use, words still influence others. To be effective, there must be an understanding of what is heard and alignment of actions with what you are saying. Effective communication is important in our lives. It is the number one cause of interpersonal conflict and we spend over 70 percent of our waking hours communicating through some means (writing, reading, listening, speaking).

Communication is defined as the transference and understanding of a meaning. Note the two words **transference** AND understanding. It is not enough to just send a message. For the communication to be successful, it must be understood. This is no easy task.

THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS



First, someone has something they want to say, a **message** to be sent. Then the sender **encodes** this message. That means the sender puts it into some symbolic form to be transmitted. Once the message is encoded, it is **transmitted** through some medium. This could be written, spoken, non-verbal gestures or expressions, paper, television, audiotape, etc. The receiver then **decodes** the message. He/she must put the message in some symbolic form that they understand. Finally, through **feedback**, the sender determines whether the message was received as intended.

Sounds easy, doesn't it? Well, it is much more complicated than that, and that is why most communication is not understood and often creates conflict. There are many hidden barriers affecting the process.

For example, the encoding and decoding process is greatly affected by the sender and receiver's skills, attitude and knowledge. His/her skills in reading, writing, listening and reasoning influence what is said, how well it is said and with what meaning it is sent or received. We have discussed earlier in Chapter 1 that attitudes can affect your behavior. When you are communicating, your attitude can affect the tone of your voice, the words you choose to use, and the readiness to listen. Finally, your knowledge about the topic has an impact on

how well you can communicate about the message.

Additional barriers exist. We often filter what we say. Meaning, we drop things out of the message based on what we think the listener needs to know or wants to know. We choose what to say. We listen selectively. Meaning, we listen for what we want to hear. We are overloaded with information to the point of not knowing how to organize or use all this information. We might be defensive or apprehensive about the message and not want to hear what is being said. Languages, accents, and jargon affect what we hear and what we think it means. Is it any wonder we have difficulty being understood?

You will be building your skills around communication in speaking and writing techniques in other lessons. One barrier we want to discuss now is one's emotions and how they interfere in the communication process. We are going to explore Emotional Intelligence. Emotional Intelligence is the ability for one to monitor their emotions, and use information about those emotions to guide one's thinking and actions.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Our emotions are real. They create a need to "react" in a situation that faces us. When faced with a dangerous situation it is the brain quickly telling the rest of your body that something is not right and it is time to either run away or stand and fight. Emotions cannot be checked at the door and forgotten until the day is over. If you have a disagreement with your parents before school, the emotions around that disagreement are influencing your behavior the rest of the day, possibly the week. They will influence what you hear, what you say, and how you behave. They will become barriers to understanding or sending a message.

People who have a high degree of emotional intelligence have a greater degree of influence. Their behaviors reflect they are aware of what the emotion is that is present, understand why that emotion is there and are able to separate the emotion and the reaction so they can manage the emotion rather than the emotion managing them.

There are five competencies or skills to managing your emotions: self-awareness; self-regulation; self-motivation; empathy; and effective relationships.

Self-awareness is the ability to "feel" the emotion and understand where it is coming from. Read the list below. What would you be feeling if you were in the following situations?

- A slow line at the video store.
- Making a presentation in class.
- A surprise birthday party.
- Being told on Friday that you cannot go to the ballgame on Saturday.
- A phone call from an old friend.

Different emotions can happen in similar situations. The slow line may not be a problem if you are not in a hurry. However, add to that situation that you have only a few minutes to get home on time or your parent will be grounding you for a week.

Now that you have identified the "feeling" that is going on inside you in those situations, think about the consequences those feelings might bring. For example, the slow line and your need to be home on time, could bring about your making comments to the people in front of you if they are not ready to ring up their purchase. Or it might make you moody and be abrupt with your friends who are waiting in the car for you.

The emotion will drive different "actions" or consequences. You need to know what the emotion is (fear, frustration, anger, disappointment) and why it exists (what consequences the situation might bring, therefore how you might react to the emotion).

Self-regulation is the ability to control that emotion. Do not ignore or push aside the emotion, but to recognize it and deal with it effectively. Taking a pause between the emotion and your reaction to it. And more important, identifying what you are telling yourself at that time — self-talk.

What you tell yourself goes immediately to your subconscious where it increases or decreases your anger or other emotions. Repeated negative self-talk leads to exaggerated and irrational thinking. Have you ever said these things to yourself?

- They always take me for granted.
- I'm always late.
- No one ever helps me.
- No one ever listens to me.
- It will always be this way.
- Everything I do is wrong.
- I never get a passing grade.

Now think about why you say those things to yourself. For example, if you are always late, why are you late? Are you only late at certain times? Be more specific about your being late. Once you have identified why you say those things to yourself, you can begin to identify the emotions around the reasons you are late which is driving the behavior to be late. It could be that you are not getting to bed early enough to get a good night sleep. It could be that you are not prepared for that class. It could be that you don't like that particular teacher. Whatever the reason, once you have identified it, you can change the self-talk from "I'm always late" to "I am late because I do not get enough sleep." The next question would be why don't I get enough sleep? Because I don't start my homework until after dinner. What can I do to start my homework earlier so I can get a good night sleep. You see it is a series of questions getting to the root of the problem, which is creating in you an emotion that is driving negative self-talk and negative behaviors.

Self-motivation is the ability to change the way you think about things in order to get them done. There are things about our lives, school, family, and community that we don't enjoy doing. But they must be done. Learning to connect to those things in a positive way is a big part of emotional intelligence. Can you identify a few things about school that make you feel uncomfortable or bored? Now answer the next two questions. Why are these things important? How might you think about these things differently so that you can take greater satisfaction in them?

Empathy is the ability to share your feelings with others more openly so they will open up and trust you, improving communication overall. Think of someone you are close to. Someone you tell everything to. Do you trust that person? Do they trust you? Then think of someone you tell very little to. What is your trust level with them? Each relationship will build a different trust level. However, it begins with you. The greater the trust, the more open the communication. The more open the communication the greater the trust. Kind of like the story, which came first the chicken or the egg?

There are four levels of communication:

- Superficial ("hi" "how you doing")
- Fact ("It is raining")
- Thought ("I think you are good at that")
- Feeling ("I feel you don't care about your homework")

With some people, you never get past the first two levels. To open the trust and communication you will want to reach the fourth level.

Finally, effective relationships are about what occurs from your ability to be self-aware, to self-regulate and self-motivate and to create empathy with others. It creates an enthusiasm, which is contagious. It is about finding those things you love about what you are doing and creating such an energy level around those things that dealing with those things you don't like can be easier. Earlier we thought about things you did not like about school. Now think about things you like best in school. What makes those things so appealing?

The communication process of sending and receiving a message is successful when the message is understood. Many barriers exist that get in the way of our message being understood. Our behaviors speak louder than our words. Our overall communication is increased by our ability to engage in our emotions, rather than keeping them at bay. Emotional Intelligence allows us to become aware of the emotions, regulate their consequences, find ways to motivate ourselves to complete tasks we may not like to do, feel empathy with others and build effective relationships — increasing the likelihood that the message sent is the message received.

EXCHANGING FEEDBACK

The next topic for this lesson is feedback. Although it is seen as the final loop back to the sender, it is present throughout the process. How and when to give feedback is important to the process. Having a high degree of emotional intelligence increases the effectiveness of providing and receiving feedback.

Feedback is something we give as well as receive. Whether the gift is welcome or not depends on knowing when and how to share our reflections so that others accept, value, and seek out our point of view. When we give feedback in a caring and skillful way, we open a window on the world.

In the give and take of effective feedback, you need the skills to create a zone of safety in which honest and constructive information can be exchanged. Those who are people smart are adept at inviting others to give them constructive feedback. They are also talented at getting invited by others to give them feedback. They are able to give feedback that is constructive and enlightening.

Many of us have had bad experiences with feedback. Perhaps we were on the receiving end of too much criticism from people in authority (parents, teachers, supervisors), or felt put down by peers when we were most vulnerable. However, we can structure the feedback process in ways that create a sense of safety for ourselves and for others.

In order to receive feedback we need to let others know that we want it; that we are receptive to hearing both the positive and negative story. To avoid being overburdened by too much feedback we need to be specific in our request for feedback. Specify why you want the feedback, what areas you want feedback in, and how much feedback you want. Read the following example of how to ask for feedback.

"Sarah, the more I'm learning about leadership, the more I'm coming to understand that receiving feedback is important to making me a better leader specifically, listening to others ideas. I really want to make a difference in our unit and I want to understand how my behavior affects the team. I'd like you to help me with this

by sharing your honest opinions with me. Would you be willing to do that?

"You can help me today by answering two questions. What are some things I do that make it easier for you to convey your ideas, and what is one thing I could do differently?"

Compare the previous request for feedback to this one:

"Sarah, the team leader told me I needed to get some feedback from others about my listening skills. I listen to others don't I?"

Getting feedback from only one source could lead you down the wrong corrective road. Getting the feedback and agreeing with it are two separate things. That is why you want to broaden your circle of feedback sources. Your Success Profiler is a good tool to use to receive feedback from any sources around the same questions. Also posing the same questions to a number of people can validate what you are told. If most of the people you ask have similar input, you can assume there is some validity in their comments. Even if you are uncomfortable with it.

If you are not ready to receive feedback (or if someone else is not ready to receive your feedback) you will most likely deny, discount, or defend yourself instead of listening to it. To be invited to give feedback entails four key behaviors: You need to ask for permission, share rather than insist, time your input, and check others' perceptions.

By asking permission to share feedback, you can set the stage for your input and assess the recipient's readiness to listen. Some ways to seek permission might be:

- Is this a good time for you to hear some feedback about…
- Would you be open to hearing some input about…
- I have some input on how you handled… Would you like to hear them?
- May I share some reactions with you about…

Finding the right time and the right level of receptivity will enhance the likelihood the feedback will be heard. That is the same for you as the receiver. If it is not a good time for you to receive feedback, let them know that and agree to a better time and place.

Share your feedback in a form of a hypothesis rather than to insist that it is a fact. There might be a reason behind the behavior you were not aware of. By not insisting you are right, you help your recipient trust you and feel safe. Here is an example:

Sarah has accepted your offer to share some feedback about her presentation to the class. You had noticed that Sarah was speaking very fast and seemed to be cramming in too much information into the presentation. You ask: "I was wondering if you felt pressured to cover every aspect of the topic in your presentation?" When Sarah agrees that this was the case, you ask: "If you could only address three main points, what would they be and why?"

The timing of the feedback is essential to it being heard. Feedback is most effective when it is immediate. Old stuff is not relevant. Memories fade quickly. Whenever possible go for an instant replay while the behavior in question is fresh. However, being sensitive to the circumstances is important as well. Providing feedback in public can be embarrassing. Think through the impact that the time and setting will have so you can

reduce distractions and increase the usefulness of your input.

Checking the recipient's perceptions about your feedback is a final closing point to the feedback process. Ask them how they felt about what you said, was there agreement or disagreement, was your input helpful or confusing, and/or does the person need more information? It helps to use effective listening skills like paying attention to people's words and body language and clarifying the meaning of their reactions. If there has been miscommunication or feelings have been hurt, often clarification can help the situation.

Feedback is most useful if it is constructive, concise, and specific. People are more open to positive feedback than negative. If you can tell them what they are doing right, they will most likely listen and repeat the behavior in the future. Informative feedback includes specific behaviors, is limited, and provides suggestions.

Global statements are not correctable. Specific behaviors are. Compare these two statements:

Global: You have an attitude problem.

Specific: You sounded rather impatient at the team meeting today.

Behaviors lead us to some conclusions about personal values that can be misinterpreted. Be sure you avoid being personal and dig deep to find the behavior that needs to be challenged. Look at the following examples:

Personal: You are sloppy and disorganized.

Behavior: There is a lot of clutter in your locker. How do you find what you need?

Personal: You are lazy.

Behavior: You often procrastinate, don't finish the task, and return late from breaks. Why do you think you do this?

Personal: You are well organized.

Behavior: You are consistent in your prioritizing of assignments, setting deadlines and keeping materials readily available.

In each of these examples, the specific behaviors convey more information than the personal statements. People can hear the message more easily, can see the behaviors you are speaking about and are not confronted with labels that provide no direction — either good or bad.

Have you ever been confronted with a list of things you do wrong? You might start off with a high degree of listening, but after a while, it gets difficult. Keep your feedback focused on the main point.

Show your concern for the recipient's growth by suggesting ways they can build on their strengths and overcome deficits. Your suggestions should be specific, realistic, positive, and tactful.

Example: "You often interrupt when others are speaking. When you do that to me, it makes me feel you do not value what I have to say. I think you would be a more effective team member if you practiced better listening skills. Would you be willing to work on this during the next team meeting? When you feel yourself ready to speak before the other person is finished, could you take a deep breath and hear them out? If you would like, I can sit next to you and if you begin to interrupt someone, I can gently tap your arm so you are aware of your behavior."

When you follow-up on your feedback, the recipient feels you care. In the example you just read you could continue the feedback process after the team meeting by asking:

"I saw you really working at this today. You caught yourself the first time and stopped, apologized and took a deep breath. When I tapped your arm, you were able to sit back in your seat and let the team talk through the problem. By the end of the meeting you seemed much more comfortable in waiting your turn to speak. You also did a great job summarizing what others had said. How did it feel to you when you were able to stop yourself and let the others finish? Was it helpful to have me tap your arm? What would you like to do next?"

If you were not at the meeting you could follow up by asking them:

"How did the meeting go? Were you able to practice your deep breathing? How did that work for you? What do you think you need to do next?"

Feedback is an important part of the communication process. Emotional intelligence is an important part of feedback. Being able to manage your emotions and to give and receive informative feedback reduces many of the barriers to effective communications.

* * *