

Influence and rapport

“When you talk, you are only repeating what you already know. But when you listen, you may learn something new.”

Dalai Lama

LISTENING

When we give attention to our relationships as well as the tasks at hand, we create trust and collaborate more effectively. Listening is the primary gateway to co-sensing and co-creating the emerging future.

The world is full of grandiose leadership visions that were beautifully communicated – before they crashed and burned. Think Enron, Lehman Brothers, AIG. The problem was not a lack of vision. The problem was that the vision was completely out of touch with reality. The problem was a lack of listening.

Four levels of listening

Downloading

Listening from habit. In this mode, you are on automatic pilot, just reconfirming what you already know. You assume you already know what is being said, so you are in fact reinforcing old opinions and judgements.

Factual

Listening from outside. Now, you are opening your mind and discovering new information. By paying attention to what is novel, disquieting or different from what you already know, you are able to collect new data.

Empathetic

Listening from within. In this mode, you are opening your heart to see something through another person's eyes. Able to set aside your own agenda, you can focus on building an emotional connection. This in turn opens the listener and shifts attention from the listener to the speaker, enabling a deeper connection between the two people.

Generative

Listening from source. At this level, you are opening your will, meaning you listen in such a way that everything slows down and inner wisdom is accessed. In group dynamics, this can be referred to as synergy. In inter-personal communication, it can be described as oneness or flow.

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There are plenty listening techniques that will improve the rapport you create and the impact you'll have.

Listening techniques include:

- Building trust and establishing rapport
- Demonstrating concern
- Paraphrasing to show understanding
- Using non-verbal cues which show understanding such as nodding, eye contact, and leaning forward
- Brief verbal affirmations like "I see," "I know," "Sure," "Thank you," or "I understand"
- Asking open-ended questions
- Asking specific questions to seek clarification
- Waiting to disclose your opinion
- Disclosing similar experiences to show understanding

Examples of listening responses

It's often easier to learn by reading examples. Here are some examples of statements and questions employed with active listening:

Building trust and establishing rapport:

"Tell me what I can do to help."

"I was really impressed to read on your website how you place values at the heart of the organisations."

Demonstrating concern:

"I'm eager to help; I know you're going through some tough challenges."

"I know how hard organisational changes can be. How are you feeling at this point?"

Paraphrasing:

"So, you're saying that the uncertainty about who will be your new supervisor is creating stress for you."

"So, you think that we need to build up our patient relations efforts."



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Brief verbal affirmation:

"I understand that you'd like more frequent feedback about your performance."

"Thank you. I appreciate your time in speaking to me."

Asking open-ended questions:

"I can see that John's criticism was very upsetting to you. Which aspect of his critique was most disturbing?"

"It's clear that the current situation is intolerable for you. What changes would you like to see?"

Asking specific questions:

"How long do you expect your hiring process to last?"

Waiting to disclose your opinion:

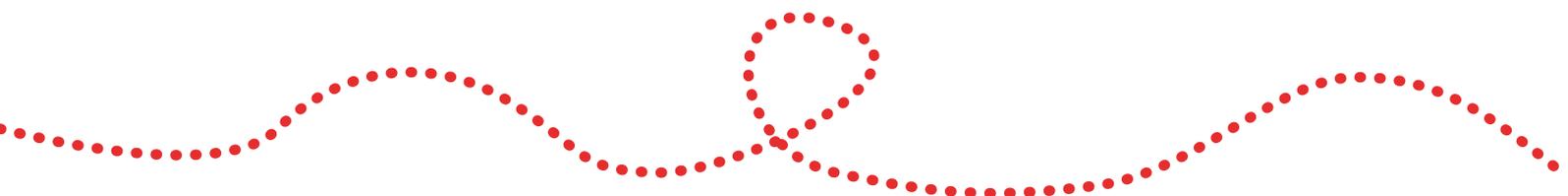
"Tell me more about your proposal to reorganise the team's processes."

Disclosing similar situations:

"I was also conflicted about returning to work after the birth of my son."

More active listening skills

- Validation
- Emotional intelligence
- Problem sensitivity
- Courtesy
- Professionalism
- Non-verbal communication
- Transparency
- Integrity
- Humility
- Pro-activity
- Accepting constructive criticism
- Creating and managing expectations
- Confidence
- Empathy
- Compassion
- Understanding
- Observation
- Attention to detail
- Vocal Tone
- Sensitivity to religious and ethnic diversity
- Self-awareness
- Situational awareness
- Interpretation
- Identify and manage emotions
- Understanding hidden needs of others
- Body language
- Facilitating group discussion
- Reaching consensus
- Collaboration



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"The things you say, the things you don't say, the things you do, or the things you don't do are always sending a loud message to those around you. What kind of a message are you sending? Is it a true reflection of who you are?"

Lindsey Rietzsch

NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

When we talk about 'communication', we often mean 'what we say': the words that we use. However, interpersonal communication is much more than the explicit meaning of words, and the information or message that they convey. It also includes implicit messages, whether intentional or not, which are expressed through non-verbal behaviours.

Non-verbal communication includes facial expressions, the tone and pitch of the voice, gestures displayed through body language (kinesics) and the physical distance between the communicators (proxemics).

These non-verbal signals can give clues and additional information and meaning over and above spoken (verbal) communication. Indeed, some estimates suggest that around 70 to 80% of communication is non-verbal!

Non-verbal communication helps people to:

Reinforce or modify what is said in words.

For example, people may nod their heads vigorously when saying "Yes" to emphasise that they agree with the other person. A shrug of the shoulders and a sad expression when saying "I'm fine, thanks" may actually imply that things are not really fine at all!

Convey information about their emotional state.

Your facial expression, your tone of voice, and your body language can often tell people exactly how you feel, even if you have hardly said a word. Consider how often you have said to someone, "Are you OK? You look a bit down." We know how people feel from their non-verbal communication.

Define or reinforce the relationship between people.

If you have ever watched a couple sitting talking, you may have noticed that they tend to 'mirror' each other's body language. They hold their hands in similar positions, they smile at the same time, and they turn to face each other more fully. These movements reinforce their relationship: they build on their rapport, and help them to feel more connected.

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Provide feedback to the other person.

Smiles and nods tell someone that you are listening and that you agree with what they are saying. Movement and hand gestures may indicate that you wish to speak. These subtle signals give information gently but clearly.

Regulate the flow of communication.

There are a number of signals that we use to tell people that we have finished speaking, or that we wish to speak. An emphatic nod, and firm closing of the lips indicates that we have nothing more to say, for example. Making eye contact with the chair of a meeting and nodding slightly will indicate that you wish to speak.

Learning the language

Many popular books on non-verbal communication present the topic as if it were a language that can be learned, the implication being that if the meaning of every nod, eye movement, and gesture were known, the real feelings and intentions of a person would be understood.

This, of course, is absolutely true.

Unfortunately interpreting non-verbal communication is not that simple. Non-verbal communication is not a language with a fixed meaning. It is influenced and driven by the context in which it occurs. This includes both the place and the people concerned, as well as the culture.

For example, a nod of the head between colleagues in a meeting may mean something very different from when the same action is used to acknowledge someone across a crowded room, and again when two people are having a social conversation.

Non-verbal communication may also be both conscious and unconscious. Facial expressions are particularly hard to control, because we cannot see ourselves to know what we are doing. We may, therefore complicate communication by trying to convey one message consciously, while in fact conveying quite another unconsciously.

Interpersonal communication is further complicated because it is usually not possible to interpret a gesture or expression accurately on its own. Non-verbal communication consists of a complete package of expressions, hand and eye movements, postures, and gestures which should be interpreted along with speech.



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Non-verbal communication in writing

Over the years, many people have argued that written words also contain non-verbal communication. Your handwriting can give clues about how you were feeling when you wrote a note, for example, and nowadays, your choice of font and colour also says something about you.

However, it is now generally agreed that these forms of non-verbal communication are pretty unreliable indicators of character. They convey far less information than the non-verbal communication that is part of face-to-face interactions.

The cultural context

The good news is that most of us learn to interpret non-verbal communication as we grow up and develop. It is a normal part of how we communicate with other people, and most of us both use it and interpret it quite unconsciously.

This can make it harder to interpret consciously. However, if you stop thinking about it, you will probably find that you have a very good idea of what someone meant.

The bad news is that non-verbal communication can be very culture-specific.

Examples of culture-specific non-verbal communication:

- The popular stereotype of Italians, involving big gestures, lots of hand-waving, and plenty of loud and excited shouting, may be a stereotype, but it exists for a reason. In the Italian culture, excitement is shown a lot more obviously than in the UK, for example. Non-verbal communication tends to be a lot more obvious. This can make it much harder for Italians to interpret non-verbal communication in the UK or USA, where it is more subtle. However, even in Italy, there are geographical variations.
- The thumbs-up gesture, which generally signals approval in English-speaking countries, is considered offensive in other countries, including apparently Greece, Italy and some parts of the Middle East.
- Making a circle with your thumb and forefinger like this means OK in Western cultures. It is used in particular by divers in this way. In Japan, however, it is reputedly the sign for money, and in Arabic countries, it is a threat.

It's worth being careful how you use gestures and body language!



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The importance of non-verbal communication

It is essential to remember that non-verbal cues can be as important, or in some cases even more important, than what we say. Non-verbal communication can have a great impact on the listener and the outcome of the communication.

WARNING!

People tend to have much less conscious control over their non-verbal messages than of what they're actually saying.

This is partly because non-verbal communication is much more emotional in nature, and therefore much more instinctive. If there is a mismatch between the two, therefore, you should probably trust the non-verbal messages, rather than the words used.

A lack of non-verbal message may also be a signal of sorts, suggesting that the speaker is carefully controlling their body language, and may be trying to hide their true emotions.

Types of non-verbal communication

There are many different types of non-verbal communication. They include:

Body movements (kinesics), for example, hand gestures or nodding or shaking the head, which are often the easiest element of non-verbal communication to control.

Posture, or how you stand or sit, whether your arms are crossed, and so on.

Eye contact, where the amount of eye contact often determines the level of trust and trustworthiness.

Para-language, or aspects of the voice apart from speech, such as pitch, tone, and speed of speaking.

Closeness or personal space (proxemics), which determines the level of intimacy, and which varies very much by culture.

Facial expressions, including smiling, frowning and blinking, which are very hard to control consciously. Interestingly, the broad facial expressions that show strong emotions, such as fear, anger, and happiness, are the same throughout the world.

Physiological changes, for example, you may sweat or blink more when you are nervous, and your heart rate is also likely to increase. These are almost impossible to control consciously and are therefore a very important indicator of mental state.

