Communications

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Communications
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You are the speaker. Whether you are reporting on a committee meeting or teaching new ideas to a group, your job is to communicate.

But the weight of getting the message across isn't entirely on your shoulders. It also depends upon your listener.

How fast and how far your organization moves depends upon how well its members communicate with each other. How can you be a cohesive, active group without talking to (and listening to) your fellow members?

(Remember that people communicate not only by words, but also by tone of voice, facial expression, and movements of other parts of the body. Often the messages sent are conflicting. If this is happening, what the person is communicating through "body language" is what he really means.)

In communications, there is a message transmission line. It may be a line of sight between speaker and audience or a telephone line.

There is usually "noise" on this line. The noise may be a crackling on the telephone line, static on the radio, a too hot room, an uncomfortable chair or any distraction that interferes with the message.

There's another problem with sending a message. When people speak, they assume the audience is listening. That may be a mistaken assumption. It has been estimated that the average, white collar worker listens with about 30% efficiency. Seventy percent of what is said goes in one ear and out the other.

Listening effectively means throwing out some bad habits. The following are nine reasons why communication channels are not always open at both ends.

Evaluation, judgement

If a person can overcome this bad habit, conquering the remaining barriers is relatively easy.

How many times, when a person speaks, have you said to yourself, "this guy is a bore" or "I'm not interested in what he has to say"? Or you give the speaker the benefit of the doubt and wait until he makes a statement with which you disagree. You then formulate arguments in your mind to refute the speaker. From that point on he could tell you the location of the lost gold mine and you wouldn't hear a word of it.

People judge before they understand. If there is not understanding there will be misunderstanding.

Jumping to conclusions

Sometimes people hear words the speaker did not say. They jump to a conclusion because they think they know what the speaker is going to say. They respond in their minds to what they think they heard instead of what was actually said.

Mental laziness

People quit listening if the subject is difficult to understand. If
the subject is of interest but the speaker does not explain the difficult material the audience stops listening.

The response is similar if the speaker is telling you more than you want to know.

Closed mind syndrome

Or: Don't talk to me; my mind's made up.

Sometimes talking to groups can be like talking to a stone wall. This syndrome is particularly evident in controversial issues. People on both sides of the issue have taken firm positions.

They may believe so firmly in their positions that your new evidence bounces off them. Or they may be afraid to change their minds after making their position public, afraid of the accusation of poor leadership.

Lack of attention

Lack of attention in itself can be one of the most deadly barriers to good communications.

We speak at a rate of about 125 words per minute but we think at a much more rapid rate. With the extra time, the mind goes off on tangents of its own.

The cure lies in listening to the tone and manner in which the words are spoken. It gives the mind something to do, and the meaning of what is being said will be clearer.

Some responsibility lies in the hands of the speaker to keep the attention of the audience. Pictures and graphs serve this purpose well.

Semantics

The same word can have different meanings, or different words can be used for the same meaning. Everyone has experienced breakdowns in communications as a result. Much of this problem comes about because we hear the word out of context. Usually the rest of the presentation will reveal the meaning of the word.

We hear what we want to hear

Everyone has been taken by a sharp salesman who knew how to pump egos. People hear what they want to hear and hear it so loudly that the real message isn't heard at all.

If the board of directors say your organization has had an incomparable year, you better be sure they don't mean it was the worst.

Excessive talking

Some people tend to become carried away by the sound of their voice. Everyone has been to a meeting at which the speaker had a captive audience and went on and on.

When we encounter such speakers we listen for cues to indicate when the speaker will stop, not for the content of his talk.

Fear

Often we are afraid to listen; we are afraid we might hear something we don't like.

The person who is afraid to listen is insecure. It isn't that he has the closed mind syndrome; he just feels more comfortable with the familiar.

Failure to listen is a habit. Critically examining our own bad listening habits is the first step to better communications within the group.

The next step is improving our speaking skills.
If you want somebody to "get your message," there are several strategies you can employ successfully.

1. Know exactly what you want to say, and then say it. And then, stop saying it.

Of course, you must use tact and be considerate when involving the feelings of your listeners. If what you are going to communicate might hurt, stop. Think it out.

Can you re-word your message? A public meeting is no place to ridicule or shame another person. Nor is a private conversation, for that matter. Deal in facts, not personalities.

Assuming your message is non-threatening, say it honestly, directly, and simply.

2. Know your audience. Use words they are familiar with. Speak in their language.

If the group is too big for you to know all of them, pick a person who seems to be a representative member of the audience. Speak to him.

3. Look (and listen) for feedback. Watch the reactions of your listeners. What is their body language communicating back to you? After you've given your message, give them a chance to talk to you. Their questions and comments will tell you if you did a good job of communicating.

The very first thing your organization must work at is communication within itself. Individually and as a group, you must work for two goals: eliminating bad listening habits and sharpening your speaking and talking techniques.

Then, when you're all on common ground, listening and talking to each other as equals, you are ready to move ahead and work for the organization and community good.

Information in this section was obtained from Jud Morris, The art of listening, Industrial Education Institute 1968, Boston MA; and W. David Downey, "Agro Pac, Developing leadership in action," Purdue University.