

Effective Communication – One to One and Whole Groups

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Effective communication is a two-way process. This is especially important in discussions that seek to explore ideas, feelings, aspirations and views. Thus for both tutors and students, listening and providing feedback are just as important as speaking clearly and asking questions. The objective of all communication should be an effective exchange of understanding.

This checklist concentrates on two key areas:

- questioning skills
- listening skills

Questioning Skills

There are two main types of questions: *open questions* which are designed to open a conversation or discussion; and *closed questions* which are used to summarise or confirm what the other person is saying.

Open questions

The aim of open questions is to extract information from the recipient. They usually begin with what?, who?, why?, when?. They can be softened with phrases like 'Think about' and 'Tell me about...' Open questions cannot be responded to with a yes or no answer.

Examples of open questions include:

- What especially pleased you in the tutorial session this week?
- Which teams have you most enjoyed working with this year?
- What are your study plans for the next couple of years?

Closed questions

Closed questions are used when you want a yes or no answer or a specific piece of information. They are best used to summarise what the other person has said, or to check your understanding of it. Too many closed questions prevent a meaningful dialogue or discussion occurring.

Examples of closed questions include:

- Are you pleased with your results?
- Do you want to study two units next year?
- Can I help you?

Each of the previous closed questions can be converted into an open question:

- Have you any ideas about improving your results?
- How could you manage two new units next year?
- How can I help you?

Probing questions

There is a third type of question that can be used to follow up on matters that have already been raised and to obtain more detail. Probing questions are designed to link a discussion on a particular topic, to get to the crux of the matter, or to clarify information.

Examples of probing questions include:

- Could you tell me more about...?
- What do you mean when you say...?
- What effect has that had on...?

There are three common mistakes in asking questions:

1. Asking too many questions at a time, leaving the other person confused about what you want to know or which question to answer first
2. Suggesting answers in the question, thereby encouraging the other person to choose one of your possible responses rather than provide their own answer
3. Continuing to talk after a question has been asked. In this case the other person cannot respond and you cannot listen to the answer if you are talking over it.

Listening skills

Listening effectively is a subtle skill. Sometimes people don't hear what is being said; they only hear part and ignore the rest, or they hear a phrase or word that they focus on and the rest of what is said is distorted or perhaps not heard at all. We also 'listen' through our own psychological 'filters' or mind sets, which can lead to assumptions about what is meant, rather than what is actually said.

Listening, because it appears to be a passive activity, is a difficult skill to teach and learn. It involves concentration and a conscious effort to understand what is said and what is not said.

Active listening techniques:

1. Look interested. Show encouragement through your body language by facing the speaker; keeping eye contact (but not staring), leaning forward slightly, and maintaining an open and receptive posture.
2. Do not interrupt or try to impose your views while the other person is talking

3. Try to stay objective. Avoid making quick judgements or assumptions.
4. Inquire with questions to gain an understanding of what is being said.
5. Test your understanding by paraphrasing or summarising. Examples of paraphrasing include:
 - What you seem to be saying is...
 - What I think we've talked about is...

By paraphrasing you are also giving the other person, in an assertive manner, an opportunity to clarify their message.

6. Use pauses to encourage a response. Many people continue talking to avoid awkward silences; however this can rapidly become a one-way conversation. Pauses allow people to think about ideas or suggestions, or gather their thoughts or gain composure.
7. Be aware of non-verbal behaviour. Remember that what is being said is only part of the message. The tone, body language and the pace of the conversation or discussion all contribute to the message.
8. The listening process involves looking for visual cues about what the other person is thinking or feeling. It is just as important to be aware of your own body language as this will impact on how the other person responds to you.