

# ***Co-operantics***

## ***Communications Skills***

### **Communication is a 2-way process**

Communication can be described as a 2-way process of sending and receiving messages, however the messages we send may not have the meaning we intended when they are received.

Messages are sent and received through a 'channel'. The channel can be the air between us, a page of a book, a newspaper, magazine, letter, report or other document, headphone or a computer or smartphone screen.

Any obstacle to receiving the intended message can be called 'noise', and can occur in the sender, in the receiver or in the channel.

In the sender or receiver (i.e. the people) the 'noise' might be:

- **differences in language, education, age,**
- **gender, culture or personality**
- **unchecked assumptions**
- **prejudice**
- **lack of awareness of different needs**
- **medication, drugs or alcohol**

In the channel, examples of 'noise' could include:

- **actual physical noise**
- **poor page layout**
- **typeface too small, too weird, distracting**
- **too many different typefaces**
- **poor screen design**
- **printer ink cartridge running out**
- **illegible handwriting**
- **volume too low/too high**

So the essence of being a good communicator is to reduce 'noise', wherever it occurs – in the sender, in the receiver or in the channel.

### **1. Reducing 'noise' in the Sender**

If you have the job of sharing information, whether speaking during a meeting, sending an email, writing a report or participating in a telephone conference, the issues are the same. Remember that in order for as many people as possible to hear what you want to say, you need to think about what possible 'noise' there might be which could prevent your listeners or readers from hearing or understanding what you mean.

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In order to do this, think about the message you are sending. It should be **structured, clear, concise and congruent**. You should take responsibility for your message by using 'I' or 'My'.

- **Structured:** think about what you want to say, trying to plan it so your message has a logical beginning, middle and end.
- **Clear and concise:** use simple, straightforward language; avoid ambiguity and keep the message as short as possible.
- **Congruent:** know your audience and choose language, examples and illustrations appropriate for them. Also your body language should correspond with your message - for example, be careful not to smile inappropriately if your message is a serious one

If you are speaking to a large group, check that everyone can hear you. A good way of reducing misunderstandings is to let your audience know that you welcome questions, comments and feedback. If you are giving instructions to a small group, you might want to ask them to repeat what you have told them in their own words.

Written instructions can be useful back-up but only give them out after you have finished, otherwise people will try to read them while you are speaking and they won't be listening. In a written document, if you use acronyms or jargon, provide a glossary.

## **2. Reducing 'noise' in the Receiver**

To ensure that you have understood, it's helpful to ask questions or, if appropriate, repeat what you have heard back to the speaker in your own words to check you have heard correctly. If you're not sure that you understand, ask for written notes, a glossary or an explanation of acronyms. Many people, perhaps especially the talkative, find it difficult to listen. The Greek philosopher Epictetus said "*We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak*" – interpreted once by a talkative young co-operator as: '*Big mouth needs Big ears*'.

Active listening can make listening more effective and thereby eliminate noise. For example, we are often thinking about our response to what someone is saying before they have finished speaking, so we are not giving them our full attention.

### **Active Listening Exercise**

- In pairs (a speaker and a listener), take it in turns to speak for 2 minutes on any topic. The listener should practice active listening. The rules for active listening are:
  1. **Pay 100% attention** to the speaker
  2. **Do not speak**, except for statements mirroring what the other person has just said, with the aim of checking that you have understood
  3. **Use body language** to indicate that you are listening.
  4. **Make eye contact** (but not to the extent that it feels unnatural).
- After 2 minutes, swap roles
- Finally, feedback by sharing how it felt

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For the speaker it may have felt uncomfortable speaking for 2 minutes without being interrupted. It rarely happens in day to day life. For the listener this might be a revelation. This exercise can be used in a communication training session, in a difficult meeting to ensure that everyone feels they have been heard or by a third party facilitating a situation of tension or conflict in the workplace.

### **3. Reducing 'noise' in the Channel**

The channel is the means by which the message is transmitted. There are a variety of different ways in which 'noise' in the channel can prevent a message being understood.

- Physical discomfort – e.g. heat, cold, draughts, thirst, hunger, uncomfortable chairs – can all affect concentration and so constitute 'noise'. If you need to pass on information verbally, choose a place and time where you will not be interrupted or drowned out by external noise, and arrange seating so that everyone can see and hear you
- If the channel is a paper or electronic document, paying attention to layout will reduce 'noise'. Good design with plenty of white space and a clear typeface helps to minimise noise. Diagrams, illustrations and cartoons can often convey your meaning more effectively than words
- The internet is a tool that can be used by everyone – whatever their ability or disability – to access information so it's important to use recognised standards for website design so that, for example, people with impaired eyesight can use screen readers to access the information. <sup>1</sup>W3C1 is an organisation which has developed these standards for websites. It is devoted to making the benefits of the Web available to all people, whatever their hardware, software, network infrastructure, native language, culture, geographical location, or physical or mental ability.
- In order to save on transport costs and reduce carbon footprint, some co-operatives arrange meetings via phone (teleconferences). To communicate clearly in this setting people need to identify themselves, speak in turn and not all speak at once. The facilitator or chair of the teleconference controls who speaks by inviting contributions and ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to speak.

### **4. Reducing 'noise' created by cultural or gender differences**

**Cultural differences:** The expression 'cultural' can be interpreted in different ways. Here we mean a set of shared attitudes, values, goals and practices characterizing a group of people. Different cultural backgrounds can create significant 'noise' in communications – being aware of them is the first step to diminishing their power as obstacles to effective communication. We cannot expect to be aware of all the aspects of other cultures that might become obstacles to communication, but we can ensure that everyone in the co-operative is aware of the impact that such differences can make on communication.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 <http://www.w3.org/>

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Some examples of noise created by cultural differences:

- **gestures** – a thumb and index finger making a circle means OK in the USA, money in Japan and is an insult in Brazil
- **eye contact** can be offensive in some cultures but indicates reliability and honesty in the UK
- **personal space** – may be greater or lesser in different cultures

**Gender differences:** Gender differences in communication styles can become obstacles to effective communication. Deborah Tannen<sup>2</sup> says that men and women typically use different conversational rituals and styles – and that when these are not recognised for what they are, misunderstandings can arise. Women’s conversational rituals include apologising, or adopting a self-deprecating tone in order to maintain equality or offer reassurance.

Women are often told not to apologise, as it can be seen as putting oneself down, though for many women (and some men) saying ‘I’m sorry’ isn’t meant as an apology, it’s a ritual way of restoring balance to a conversation, an expression of understanding or caring about the other person's feelings.

When an apology is offered as an acknowledgement that something has gone wrong it is often the first step in a two-step routine whereby saying ‘I’m sorry’ means taking half the blame, and expecting the other person to take the other half.

Admitting fault can be experienced as taking a one-down position, so when both share the blame it is a mutual face-saving device – a courteous way of not leaving the apologizer in the one-down position. However, if one person doesn’t understand the ritual, and accepts the apology, the other will be left feeling resentful and frustrated.

Like all conversational rituals, ritual apologies tend to work when both parties share assumptions about their use. Conversational styles common amongst men include banter, joking, teasing and playful put-downs. Men will try not to end up in a ‘one down’ position in any conversation, which can sometimes be experienced as hostility.

Deborah Tannen makes the point that no one style or ritual is better. Problems will arise when styles differ and when rituals are not recognised. She does not suggest that women or men change their conversational styles or rituals, only that we recognise them and become more flexible.

## **5. Reducing ‘noise’ by being assertive**

Assertiveness means knowing your own mind and standing up for yourself, without imposing your views and opinions on others. It is more likely to lead to effective communications since it is another way of minimising ‘noise’.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/tannend/bio.html>

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### **Body language**

It's important to be aware of what messages your body is conveying. This awareness is part of being assertive.

	<b>DO</b>	<b>DON'T</b>
<b>Breathing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· deepen your breathing and calm yourself prior to a confrontation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· forget to breathe!</li> </ul>
<b>Posture</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· have an upright posture</li> <li>· make sure you are at the same level (i.e. both standing or both sitting)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· slouch</li> <li>· stand too near or too far away from the other person</li> </ul>
<b>Eyes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· keep your gaze relaxed</li> <li>· maintain eye contact*</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· avoid looking at the person you're speaking to</li> </ul>
<b>Mouth &amp; voice</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· relax your jaw</li> <li>· smile if it is appropriate to do so</li> <li>· speak clearly and slowly so you can be heard</li> <li>· watch the tone, inflection and volume of your voice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· whine, shout or mumble</li> <li>· convey sarcasm through the tone of your voice</li> </ul>
<b>Gestures</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· use gestures that help you express what you want to say</li> <li>· make sure your body language is congruent with your words</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· cover your mouth with your hand</li> <li>· play with hair or jewellery</li> <li>· put your hands on your hips or fold your arms</li> <li>· shift from one foot to the other</li> </ul>

### **6. Giving criticism assertively**

Being assertive can really help us in difficult situations such as giving or receiving criticism. Talking to a colleague about their unsatisfactory work is difficult, many of us shy away from it or let it build up until we make a remark which is angry or resentful. It's better to deal with the situation assertively. The first step is to check that your goal is clear in giving the criticism. It is not just an end in itself. The aim is to change some aspect of the way your colleague carries out their job. Let's take the example of a colleague whose job it is to bring you monthly accounts. He is never on time with them and you have to keep chasing him up. The aim is to get him to change his behaviour and to bring you the accounts on time.

**Rights:** You have some rights in this situation. You have the right to expect people to perform their work adequately. They have rights too. They have the right to expect you to behave in a way which doesn't put them down, attack them or make them look small. Their mistakes do not give you the right to behave aggressively.

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1. **Be specific** about the change you want. Raise the problem at the time. Try not to let it build up. Choose a suitable time and place away from other colleagues: *“Ted, I’d like to talk to you about the accounts”*
2. **Talk about behaviour you can see.** Express your criticism in a factual form: *“I notice your accounts are three or four days late each month”* Don’t make personal statements which could be seen as an attack such as *“You’re so sloppy”* or *“your attitude is too laid back ...”*
3. **Make sure you are speaking for yourself by using ‘I’.** In this way you are speaking about your own feelings and perceptions, you are not attributing blame, you are being direct and honest and you will build better relationships with the other person.
4. **Get a response to your criticism.** This is about getting agreement. Ted might not agree. Use phrases such as *“Do you agree?”* or *“Have you noticed this?”* or *“Is that the way you see it?”* or *“Why is this happening?”*
5. **Ask for suggestions** to bring about the change you want. *“How could you improve this situation? What changes could we make?”*
6. **Summarize** the suggestions to be carried out: *“So, we’re agreed that in future you’ll...”*  
Following these steps means you’re more likely to get the change you want. You have been assertive and it’s more likely that you’ll get a response which isn’t aggressive or passive from your colleague.

#### **Receiving criticism**

When receiving criticism it helps to behave in an assertive way as well. The following steps will enable you to take criticism without allowing it to become a personal attack and your response will be more considered and will help repair or maintain a good relationship with the other person. The first step is to work out whether the criticism is justified. It might be justified, unjustified or just a put-down. You may need to think for a minute before you reply.

**If it’s justified** For instance, you have arrived late too often. Whatever it is, you know it’s true and it does apply to you. It helps to use negative assertion. Negative assertion means acknowledging the truth in what your critic is saying: *“Yes, I have been late quite a few times recently”*. In doing this, you’ll feel less defensive and more accepting of yourself.

**If it’s unjustified** You’ve received some criticism which is completely untrue. You could say *“That’s really not true”* or *“I don’t accept that”*. But say it with conviction, without apologising. Make sure your body language expresses certainty, not doubt.

**If you’re not sure** There might be some truth in it, but it’s an exaggeration. You could ask for more information: *“You say I’m always late. Could you clarify when I have been late?”* If the person is vague or incorrect, you might say *“Well, I have been late twice this month (acknowledging the truth), but it’s not true to say I’m always late.”*

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**Put-downs** If you're feeling put down by a remark, the assertive way to deal with it is to say that you feel put down, and what your reaction to it is. For example, you've been told in a jokey way that you have no sense of humour. You might say: "*I find what you say hurtful*" and add "*I'd like you to stop*". Sometimes you only realise afterwards that something was a put-down. It's assertive to confront the person later in the same way as above.

***A useful reference on everything to do with assertiveness is Anne Dickson's 'A Woman In Your Own Right', Quartet 1982.***

### **My Rights**

I have the right to be treated with respect as an intelligent, capable and equal  
human being

I have the right to express my feelings

I have the right to express my opinions and values

I have the right to say 'yes' or 'no' for myself

I have the right to make mistakes

I have the right to change my mind

I have the right to say I don't understand

I have the right to ask for what I want

I have the right to decline responsibility for other people's problems

And I know that other people have these rights too!