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**Practical Approaches to
Communications**

Jack Byrd, Jr.

Author

July 2009

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By Jack Byrd, Jr.

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Published by the Interactivity Foundation
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Printed in the United States of America
Interactivity Foundation
P.O. Box 9
Parkersburg, WV 26102-0009

www.interactivityfoundation.org

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Section 1: Communications to Gather Information

Interviewing

Interviewing is a critical communication skill that is rarely taught. As a result, people tend to model their interviewing approach from public interviews they have seen on TV. Unfortunately TV interviewers are typically horrible.

The purpose of an interview in a business context is to gather information. Often the information being gathered is very sensitive, and persons being interviewed may not want to be open in their comments. Getting accurate information in such cases requires some skill. Outlined below are some proven approaches to becoming an effective interviewer.

1. Develop a list of questions/issues you want to explore. These should be written down but not directly used in the interview. See item 5 below.
2. Select the best place for the interview: Ideally you will be able to conduct the interview in person in a location where the interview will not be heard by others. The location should also be one where there are minimal disruptions. Comfortable seating is also desired if possible.
3. Start the interview: Begin the interview with some general ground rules.
 - Indicate that you will be taking notes, but you will not identify specific comments with any person you interviewed.
 - Tell the person you will stop taking notes at any time that they request. Often these points in time are when extremely sensitive information is being shared.
 - Tell the person you have a set of issues you want to explore but that you would like to have these unfold naturally.
4. Start your questions with a comfortable beginning: A good first question will be one that asks about the person's history with the organization (e.g. years of service, job responsibilities, etc)
5. Transition from the starting point to one of your questions. The best way to select a question is to build off of something the person has just said. That way the question puts the person at ease because they can simply add to a previous comment.

When done correctly the entire interview can move from one discussion topic to another in a natural fashion. You should know your prepared questions well enough that you don't have to refer to them as you are going through the discussion. In fact the words used in asking the question will often be very different than the words you used originally.

6. As you are taking notes, put a symbol beside what you think are important points. These symbols will be helpful in doing interview summaries.
7. When a person triggers an interesting point that you want to follow up on, make a marginal note of a follow up question. Often these questions are the most useful ones in the interview.
8. Use exclamation notes (!!) to the side of your notes to indicate points in the interview when the person seems to be the most emotional about the topic.
9. Toward the end of the interview ask the question: "What question did I not ask that you think may be relevant?" This way you can probe issues of interest to the person that you may not have covered.
10. Conclude the interview by telling the person what you will be doing with their comments.

Development Exercise

- Conduct an interview of a person using the guidelines from this note.
- Give information on the interview including who you interviewed, the information you were seeking
- Provide information on what you found out from the interview
- Assess your performance in the interview

Active Listening

It's ironic but the communication skill we use the most is the one that is rarely taught. We are in listening situations more than in any other communication situation. Consider the table below.

Communications Skill	Frequency of Daily Use	Frequency of Time Learning the Skill
Speaking	2	3
Listening	1	4
Reading	3	2
Writing	4	1

We focus a lot of time teaching writing skills, but this is the communication skill that is used the least.

Before you can improve your listening skills you need to understand the barriers that limit your listening. Exhibit A contains sample barriers that many people face. Take a few minutes and evaluate the barriers that you confront.

Active listening is an engagement between the speaker and you that achieves the following results.

- You are able to summarize what was said.
- You are aware of the speaker's feelings.
- You convey to the speaker that you are interested in what was said.

Active listening follows a three-step process that goes by the acronym CPR.

- Clarify is used to gain additional information that you might need in order to better understand what is said.
- Paraphrase is to let the speaker know you're listening and that you understand the content of what was said.
- Reflect feelings is to acknowledge the speaker's feelings about the topic - to validate how the speaker's feel about the topic or issue.

Exhibit A

BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE LISTENING

What I Do	Sample Barriers
<input type="checkbox"/>	Allow background noise to affect listening.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Allow daily events or interruptions to affect listening.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Have prejudice or negative attitudes toward the person speaking.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Don't make enough eye contact (which should be made 80% of the time) with the person speaking.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Lack interest in what is being said.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Become defensive when the other person criticizes me.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Want to tell 'my' story before the other person is finished.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Interrupt the speaker before s/he is finished.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Respond emotionally to what is being said.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Let the speaker's voice quality of speed influence me.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Let someone else distract me.

The keys to practicing clarification are as follows:

- Ask open-ended rather than close-ended questions.
 - Close-ended questions are designed to produce simple, factual answers.
Was that a good movie?
 - Open-ended questions are designed to provide more information.
What did you feel about the movie?
- Ask questions that give you more information. Pretend you are going to repeat the information to someone else and you need to get all the facts straight.
 - How long was the movie?
 - Who were the actors?
 - Was there any violence?

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- Connect the information you just heard to something you already know about.
 - Is the movie like *Independence Day*?

The keys to practicing paraphrasing are as follows:

- Restate what you think the person just said.

"Let me see if I got this right. You want me to..."
- Summarize what seem to be the key points.

"It seems like you are emphasizing these points..."
- Do not overuse paraphrasing. Paraphrase when you really want to be sure you've heard correctly.

The keys to reflecting feelings are as follows:

- State how you think the speaker is feeling.

"You don't seem to agree with me."
- Provide an interpretation of what was said.

"You must really like the movie, judging by how emotionally you spoke about it."

You may be wondering how to use these three concepts in listening. Here are some ways you can become a more active listener using the CPR concept.

- Clarifying is generally preferable to paraphrasing.
- Don't reflect feeling by providing exaggerated sympathy. This reinforces the speaker's problem, and can make the speaker feel worse.
- When you ask a clarifying question, seek additional information. Don't just ask a question for the sake of asking a question.
- Don't precede a clarifying question with a threatening statement.

In addition to the CPR approaches, there are some additional ways to become a more active listener. These include:

1. Use body language that indicates you are listening.
 - Lean forward (slightly).
 - Sit erect.
 - Nod your head a few times to encourage the speaker.

2. Use facial expressions to communicate positive expectations.
 - Smile (when appropriate).
 - Relax your mouth.
 - Have an alert expression.
3. Don't judge the speaker by the speaker's appearance or your impressions of the speaker.
4. Don't jump to conclusions by just listening to the start of what the person is saying.
5. Eliminate ping-pong conversations in which you and the other person try to 'one-up' each other.
6. Make eye contact with the speaker.
7. Consider what is not being said as well as what is being said.
8. Listen as if you were someone else. Pretend you need to pass on the information to someone else.

Active listening requires skill development and practice just as other communication skills do. The guidelines shown here should be able to help you in your development of active listening skills.

Developmental Exercise

- Use CPR approach in a conversation. After the conversation, try to record as you can what was said. Use this format.

You: *How are you doing?*

Friend: *Not very well.*

C → You: *What's the matter?*

Etc.

Point out where you used CPR by placing a C by where you asked for clarification, P for when you paraphrased, and an R beside where you reflected feelings.

- Assess how well you used the approaches outlined here in your daily interactions with others.

Non Verbal Communications

No matter what we think or feel, we express it nonverbally. Some of us either express it (or suppress it) better than others. Generally, the higher the status of an individual in a group, the more controlled and subdued his/her nonverbal behavior becomes, whether in a social gathering or in the workplace.

The chart below will show how much of your communication is done non-verbally.

■ Verbal (words alone)	7%
■ Vocal (including tone of voice, pitch, inflection, grunts and other sounds)	28%
■ Nonverbal (gestures, body positions, etc.)	65%

The simple truth is that more communication takes place through nonverbal cues such as gesture, posture, position, and distance than through any other medium.

Since we are not always fully aware of our posture, movement, facial expressions, and gestures, we are continuously communicating aspects of what we feel and think without even knowing it. And what about the other person? How much of what they are really saying do we actually miss? We can develop a deeper understanding of other people – and even of ourselves – by acquiring knowledge and skills in nonverbal communication.

In order to read nonverbal messages effectively, you need to group the gestures into clusters. In other words, read the entire message by accurately matching the gestures with (or against) the verbal and vocal content. Look for congruence between verbal and nonverbal signals. Research shows that nonverbal signals carry about five times the impact of the verbal message. If I'm telling you with words, "I'm happy," but my nonverbal behavior consists of a furrowed forehead, tight jaw, darting eyes, and flared nostrils, you can almost bet I'm lying.

One more thing. When attempting to read nonverbal cues, consideration should be given to cultural background and area of origin. Subtle differences between city and rural dwellers can cause confusion. It is also true that attempting to read gestures of individuals of different nationalities and ethnic origins can result in misinterpretation.

Nonverbal messages are also influenced by how close we stand to other people when we talk. You probably been uncomfortable when someone gets too close to you. Typical communications zones for Americans are as follows:

■ **Intimate Zone** – 6” – 18”

This zone includes significant others, children, close personal friends, etc.

■ **Personal Zone** – 1 ½’ – 4’

This is the zone we use for social and friendly gatherings.

■ **Social Zone** – 4’ – 12’

This generally applies to individuals we don’t know well, or to someone we’ve just met, such as a new employee.

■ **Public Zone** – more than 12’

Personal zones differ among individuals and cultures. Many rural people have very large personal zones. They may fully extend their arms when shaking hands to keep you at distance. Many other cultures (and even large city dwellers within the U.S. A.) have very small personal zones. It is our responsibility to read their nonverbal and respect these personal zones.

Gestures are another form of nonverbal communication. You will often hear about the meaning of gestures but you should be careful to interpret the gesture in conjunction with verbal and vocal messages. Don’t automatically think that a gesture means what is indicated below:

Hand gestures

- Open palm: truth, honesty, allegiance, and submission.
- Folded or hidden palms: holding back the truth, not being open or honest.
- Rubbing palms together: expressing positive expectations.
- Hands clenched together: gesture of frustration, holding back a negative attitude.
- Steepling hands: confidence, superiority, know-it-all attitude (raised=talking; lowered=listening).

Hand-to-face gestures

- Often mean doubt, uncertainty, lying, or exaggeration.
- Mouth guard: an attempt to suppress deceitful words that are being said. Done while talking, it can indicate that s/he is lying.
- Nose touching: a sophisticated version of the mouth guard.
- Eye rubbing: “See no evil.” To block out deceit, doubt or lies, or to avoid looking into the face s/he is lying to.
- Ear rub: “Hear no evil.” The listener may not like what is being said and could use this gesture to suggest s/he would like to interrupt and speak.
- Neck scratch: scratching below the earlobe or on the side of the neck is a sign of doubt or uncertainty or irritation.
- Fingers in the mouth: person is under pressure – may need reassurance.
- Rubbing the back of the neck: the ‘pain-in-the-neck’ gesture.

Cheek and chin gestures

- Hand supporting head: expresses boredom.
- Closed hand resting on cheek, especially with the index finger pointing upward: the listener is having negative or critical thoughts about the speaker or subject.
- Chin stroking: thinking/evaluating, used in the decision-making process.

Head gestures

- Head nod: agreement, unless it exceeds three nods. If more than three nods, the person is only pretending to listen or simply giving 'nod service'.
- Head up: neutral attitude.
- Head to one side: shows the listener is interested.
- Head down: negative and even judgmental.
- Both hands behind head: confident, dominant, or even superior attitude.

Arm Barriers

- Arm crossing: an attempt to block out the impending threat or undesirable circumstances. Nervous, negative, or defensive attitude. Disagreement, feeling of uncertainty or insecurity. Caution: The person could just be cold!
- Reinforced arm-cross: with clenched fists – a hostile or defensive attitude.
- Partial arm-cross: one arm crosses the body to hold or touch the other arm to form a barrier. May be new to the group or lacking in self-confidence.
- Disguised arm-cross gesture: more sophisticated than the latter. The arm swings across the body as in the partial arm cross, however, one hand touches a bracelet or watch, handbag or shirt cuff. An attempt to disguise nervousness.

Leg barriers

- Crossed legs: a signal that a negative or defensive attitude may exist.
- Leg clamp and leg lock: the position above, accompanied by locking the leg into place with one or both hands and using them as a clamp may express a tough-minded, stubborn individual. This individual may have a hard-and-fast attitude in an argument or debate.

Aggressive and readiness gestures

- Hands on hips: ready, aggressive.
- Thumbs tucked into the belt loop: men use this gesture to stake their territory or to show that they are unafraid.
- Unbuttoned and open coat: open to communication, ready.
- Sitting on the edge of the chair: readiness, intense interest.
- Leaning forward with hands on either knees or gripping the chair: about to terminate the conversation or go on to something else.

Additional gestures

- Lint picking: disapproves of opinion or attitudes of others but feels constrained from giving his/her point of view.
- Grasping the lapel: show signs of superiority (especially with thumbs up).

You can use gestures to get an early idea of a person's response to what you are saying. When you get good at reading the nonverbal messages, you can adjust your message to turn a no to a yes.

Positive or openness signals

Any one or more of the following can signal *yes* or *maybe*.

- Straightening up the desk when you enter
- Firm, warm handshake
- Sits up, sometimes forward
- Arms uncrossed, open, sometimes on the desk
- Relaxed hands, more open, less fist-like, not flat on desk
- Face and mouth (slightly open), not obstructed by hands
- Relaxed facial muscles (especially the jaw)
- Any casual personal action, like tying a shoe, loosening a belt, etc.
- Eyes open and relaxed, clear, pupils large
- Smiles and laughs at humor
- Moves away objects on the desk that are between you and him/her
- Sits relatively still, swivels only to face or follow you
- Legs crossed or casually open
- Mirroring the speaker
- Opens jacket, loosens tie
- Light touch (pat on back, etc.)
- Nods head in agreement (not more than three times)
- Slightly moistens lips

Negative or defensive signals

Any one or more of the following can signal *no*.

- Sits dead center, close behind his/her desk
- Leans way back, clasps hands or crosses arms
- Sits erect with arms flat down on desk or folded
- Swivels away from you in his/her chair while you are talking
- Swivels directly back at you (on the attack) when you've finished speaking
- Short abrupt handshake
- Avoids eye contact
- Points pen or finger at you
- Uses hands as masks and shields to hide face and mouth
- Hands closed, almost fists

- Eyelids narrow, pupils pinpointed
- Lips and mouth tight, set, dry
- Fidgets and plays with things on desk
- Tightens jaw muscles
- Forehead furrowed, eyebrows knit
- Forearms held up, a shield or obstacle between you
- Uses shields, such as desks, furniture, fences, to 'protect' him/herself
- Nods the head more than three times

In summary, you may want to recall these points.

- Whether we like it or not, we are constantly communicating through the use of gestures, posture, position, facial expression, and distance.
- The higher the status of an individual in a group, generally, the more controlled and subdued is the nonverbal behavior.
- Researchers have concluded that people use nearly a million nonverbal cues and signals.
- The first important element in understanding nonverbal communication is gestures.
- Gestures come in clusters. You cannot effectively interpret nonverbal signals without assembling them to form a complete picture.
- The most common error made while attempting to read nonverbal messages is to isolate a single gesture from a cluster of gestures.
- In order to read body language effectively, it is necessary to group the gestures into clusters, i.e., keep nonverbal in proper context.
- Nonverbal signals carry about five times as much impact as the verbal message.
- Attempting to read gestures of individuals of different nationalities and ethnic origins can result in misinterpretation and even disaster.
- To accurately read the entire message of an individual, it is necessary to match the gestures with (or against) the verbal and vocal content.
- Nonverbal cues communicate a person's feelings and how that person is coping with those feelings.
- Reading nonverbal communication is one of the most important skills of effective listening.

Ancient Chinese Proverb: "Watch out for the man whose stomach doesn't move when he laughs."

Developmental Exercise

- Prepare an analysis of nonverbal messages in three different situations you encountered.
 - A social situation
 - A situation involving a potential conflict
 - A professional situation (meeting with a boss, co-worker, professor, etc)

Questioning Skills

We need to ask questions in just about everything we do. On the job, the ability to ask questions can be critical in order to get honest answers. Described below are some techniques you can use to ask good questions.

1. Ask for Illustrations

Ask the person to provide an example of their own regarding the topic that you are discussing. This will assist you in helping the person be more objective.

Example: “With teams meeting all of the time, we are running into several problems with production.”

“Can you give me an example of a production problem that has been caused by team meetings?”

2. Ask Both Open- and Close-Ended Questions

Depending on the type of information that you are looking for, ask both open and closed questions.

Open Questions

Solicit a longer more detailed answer – usually an explanation

- Allows the person the opportunity to express concerns and opinions
- Requires the person to describe a situation in detail (cannot respond yes or no)

*Examples: How would you handle that quality problem?
What do you think is causing our problem with scrap?*

Closed Questions

Elicit direct, short responses – usually a yes or a no

- Helpful in directing the conversation as needed
- Useful in keeping the conversation short and to the point

*Examples: When did you realize that there was a quality problem?
Did you know that there was a problem with scrap?*

3. Use Volunteer Questions

Use volunteer questions to allow any member of your team to answer without calling on a specific team member. This offers you one of the best ways to tell whether team members have understood a concept or idea that you are describing.

Example: "I have just described my idea for scheduling tomorrow's work today. Can anyone give me an addition idea for scheduling?"

4. Call on Specific Team Members

Call on a team member directly to draw quiet or inattentive individuals in to the discussion. Also, use this technique to draw on the experience of a specific individual.

Example: "Don, I know that you have had some experience in working with maintenance on this type of problem. What are your thoughts on this?"

5. Pauses

- Pauses create silences.
- Pauses can be effective in allowing individuals to think without interruption.
- Some individuals are uncomfortable with pauses and may continue to provide additional information by talking to fill the silence.

6. Verbal and Nonverbal Prompts

- The use of verbal prompts such as "Uh, huh," "Umm," "I see," "Really?" and "Oh," can be extremely effective ways to encourage individuals to continue speaking.
- Nonverbal prompts serve the same purpose, especially in conjunction with the verbal prompts. Effective nonverbal prompts are
 - Nodding the head (Be careful not to nod too many times; this can give the impression that you are not really listening.)
 - Looking at the person
 - Turning your body position toward the individual

You can also get misleading information if you ask questions inappropriately.

Inappropriate Questioning Techniques

1. Don't ask leading questions.

Try not to ask questions in which you are leading a team member to an answer.

Example: "Wouldn't you say this is the way we should be approaching the problem, Dave?"

More Effective: "Dave, what are your thoughts on this approach to the problem?"

2. Don't combine two or more questions.

Try not to follow up a question with other questions. This can be confusing because the person may not know which question to answer.

Example: "Is this an example of good work practices and how can we use this concept?"

More Effective: "Is this an example of good work practices?"

Answer

"How can we use what we learned here?"

Answer

3. Don't repeat questions.

Try not to repeat questions. Pause between questions before you rephrase or repeat the question.

Example: "Can anyone give me an example of a quality issue? Anyone – an open question? Anyone?"

More Effective: "Can anyone give me an example of a quality issue?"

Pause

"Earlier we discussed quality problems. Can anyone give me an example of one thing we need to improve?"

Pause

"We've talked about training as a quality issue. Can anyone give me another quality issue?"

4. Don't ask tugging questions.

Try not to ask tugging questions if someone has given an incomplete reply. They provide no help to the team member.

Example: "Can anyone describe a quality issue? (Answer) "Yeah . . .but what does that have to do with quality?"

5. Don't judge the person.

This includes approval/disapproval of the other person or what they've said, or evaluation from ones' own frame of reference.

- a. Criticizing – Negatively evaluating the other person – their responses, attitude, or behavior (putting them down).

Example: "That's just plain stupid. You should know better than that."

- b. Name calling – Inappropriate labeling or stereotyping (putting them down).

Example: "They're just a bunch of idiots over there."

- c. Analyzing – Playing amateur psychologist. Time is spent looking for hidden motives rather than listening to what's being said, and rather than remaining objective.

Example: "I've seen this before. I know how they're going to respond."

- d. Evaluative praising – Praising the other person in an attempt to manipulate them into changing their behavior.

Example: "You've always been so helpful in the past. You're not going to let me down now are you?"

6. Don't send solutions.

This includes giving advice. This can cause additional problems by not allowing the person to effectively deal with the original problem.

- a. Ordering – Forcing the other person to act or respond. Possible results: resistant and resentful, or compliant and submissive.

Example: "You're just going to have to give me your thoughts."

- b. Threatening – Implying that punishment is likely if there is not compliance.

Example: "You know what can happen if things don't improve down there, don't you?"

- c. Moralizing – Implies the other 'should' act in a certain manner. It imposes beliefs, feelings, and perceptions on the other person.

Example: "How do you think this is going to go over with the plant manager?"

- d. Rapid fire or inappropriate questioning – (Similar to combining two or more questions) A form of manipulation. Pushing the other person.

Example: "Well? What's it going to be? Huh? Come on. Answer me!"

7. Don't avoid the concerns of others.

This involves ignoring the real issues or missing the point.

- a. Diverting— Changing the focus from the other person to self. Reasons include
- discomfort with the topic
 - insensitivity to what the other person has said

Example: "Well, that's not important now. Let's just stick with the issue."

- b. Logical argument— Can negate the other's feelings. Logic is of little importance when an individual is under stress. Also, logic is an interpretation and is not necessarily objective.

Example: "Now don't get defensive, Bill. You've seen it with your own eyes and you know it's the truth."

- c. Reassuring— A form of emotional withdrawal. Not really wanting to accept the emotional concerns or demands of the other person.

Example: "Everything's going to be fine. Just do what I say and then we can discuss these other issues."

Developmental Exercise

Identify a situation where you needed to get an honest answer.

- Describe the situation
- Document as accurately as you can the questions you asked to get the answer.
- Assess your questioning skills.

**Section 2:
Communications to Deal
with Difficult Situations**

Communications and Conflict

Conflicts are some of the most difficult communications situations. Should the communications go the wrong way; the result can be the long term destruction of personal relationships. Should the communications be constructive, the conflict situation can result in real progress.

There are different communications approaches that people use to deal with conflict situations.

- **Fight it out and let the strongest win and decide what to do.** This is usually not a good communications strategy. The loser will most likely be resentful. Then, the conflict will just continue. The fight in this case probably won't be a physical fight. But harsh words may be used. In many cases, the person who has the more powerful position in the organization will generally win the conflict.
- **Ignore the conflict and maybe it will go away.** This communications strategy just avoids the conflict without resolving anything. The problem will most likely reappear if you use this approach. This strategy may be the most frustrating. The persons who need to deal with their differences never get together to work out their problems. Eventually the conflict will surface, and the problem will be much worse.
- **Make a joke and hope that humor will reduce the conflict.** This communications strategy also avoids the problem and makes the problem likely to reappear. But it also presents another problem. The humor could be harmful to the situation. The other person may think that you do not take the situation seriously or that you are making fun of them.
- **Talk about the conflict and resolve the problem.** This is the best communications approach to use. It is hard to do but it has the best results. You will learn how to use this approach in this lesson.

In the ideal case, the conflict will lead to a rational and reasoned resolution. In order for this to happen, there are a number of conditions that must be met to resolve conflict.

- The participants in the conflict agree that the present situation is not tolerable.
- The participants in the conflict are willing to discuss the conflict as a problem to be solved rather than as a personal confrontation.
- The participants in the conflict agree to follow a deliberate, objective conflict resolution process.
- The participants in the conflict agree to practice active listening and agree to consider the interests and needs of all participants and the organization they are a part of.
- Everyone involved in the conflict agrees to participate in the resolution process.

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Even if the above conditions are met, the conflict won't resolve itself. There needs to be a communications strategy in place to work from the conflict to a resolution.

1. Bring together all of the participants.
2. Ask the participants if they agree to the conditions for successful resolution of conflicts.
3. Develop a list of objective statements that are background to the conflict that everyone can agree with.
4. Develop a limited number of expectations for resolving the conflict. – What do people really want?
5. Ask each participant to suggest a way to resolve the conflict. – Try to get these to be specific situations.
6. Evaluate how each suggestion meets the expectations set out in step 4.
7. Identify the suggestion preferred by most participants. – This will take some ongoing give and take.
8. Modify this suggestion to meet the needs of all participants.

The key to this conflict strategy is to keep the tone of the communications at a civil level. Ultimately the resolution of the conflict needs to have a rational basis. Conflicts are not resolved when the participants felt bullied into a resolution.

Developmental Exercise

- Review a conflict situation that you have experienced. Provide brief details on the conflict. Then review each condition. Were they met? Give explanations.
- Describe a conflict that you have recently experienced
 - Who was involved?
 - What was the issue?

Try to apply the steps in the conflict resolution process to resolve the conflict. Give the instructor a description of what happened. Use the steps in the process as the headings in your description.

Speaking Up

Have you ever been in a situation that turned out badly, and you have the nagging feeling that you should have said something to have prevented this? Most of us have. We have a natural reluctance to speak up when we see something we don't like. Speaking up is a very important job skill. You are expected to speak up when you believe that something is wrong.

You will also be in situations where others want your opinion. Frequently this situation is a meeting. Others are stating their opinions, but are you reluctant to say what you think? That's a common concern for many people who tend to be shy or lack confidence.

Also think about the times you have had a new idea but were reluctant to share it with others. Again confidence may be an issue but maybe you just don't know how best to speak up.

Some of the reasons we don't speak up are given below.

1. We aren't given an opportunity. – This may be more of a perception than a reality since opportunities are always there.
2. We are scared to speak up because of reprisals. – This could be an issue in health/safety, environment, and quality concerns.
3. We don't feel comfortable expressing our opinion. – This is common especially for new employees.
4. We don't care what happens. – If this is the case, you have other serious problems.
5. We aren't quick enough, and it isn't until after the initial conversation that our concerns arise. – There are still ways for you to share your ideas.
6. We don't know who to speak to. – In all cases, ask your boss or a more senior employee.

In most of the cases outlined above, not speaking up is more of a personal failing than an organizational issue.

If you are uncomfortable with speaking up, there is a simple approach that you can take to work through what (if anything) you should say.

1. Assess the situation
 - Does the situation warrant you speaking up?
 - To whom should you voice your thoughts?
 - Are you the person who should be speaking up?

2. Assess the appropriate method and tone for speaking up
3. Decide what you are going to say.
4. State your opinions and take appropriate action.

Let's work through the following situation using the process.

You are a new employee in a company that manufactures a fiber-glass product. On the first day on the job, you notice that the skin on your arms has broken out in a rash. You ask a fellow employee about this situation and you are told:

"I had a similar problem, but I just wear long-sleeved shirts to work."

While you can also wear long-sleeved shirts, you're concerned that the atmosphere is harmful.

Here's how the strategy outlined above may work in this case.

- Assess the situation
 - The situation warrants action. The rash may be a symptom of a more serious problem.
 - Concerns should be expressed to a supervisor or safety person
- Assess the appropriate method and tone for speaking up.
 - The method for communication should be orally at first.
 - The tone should be one of concern but not alarm until more is known about the situation.
- Decide what you are going to say.
 - Describe what happened to you and your fellow employee.
 - Ask that the situation be looked into.
- State your opinions and take appropriate action.
 - Express your opinions in a sincere but nonthreatening way.
 - Ask for some assurance of action.
 - If no assurance of action, elevate your concerns to a higher level of the organization.

Although you are expected to speak up, you don't want to become one of those people who speak up so often or so carelessly that no one pays any attention to you.

Outlined below are some guidelines for you to follow to keep from becoming “Chicken Little”,

- Keep your comments to what you know are facts. If you aren’t sure of the facts, make this clear.
- Express your thoughts without exaggeration or overstatement.
- Don’t threaten those who you are speaking to.
- Keep an open mind. There may be other points of view.
- Be willing to be a part of the solution. When you describe a problem, have an idea of what can be done to solve it.
- Speak up on important issues, not every little irritant.
- Let others have a chance to speak up. You don’t always need to be the first person to express an opinion.

Speaking up is something we do with our family and friends, the challenge is to translate this experience to a professional environment.

Developmental Exercise

Over the next two weeks, demonstrate that you can speak up in a situation. Answer the following questions.

- Why did you decide to speak up?
- Who did you speak to?
- What tone of voice did you use?
- What were the key points that you made?
- What resulted from your speaking up?

Providing Corrective Feedback

One of the most difficult challenges that we face is telling a person you are not happy with their performance. We just don't like these confrontations. Providing corrective feedback, however, is a critical communication skill.

There are some guidelines you can use in providing corrective feedback that leads to the result you want.

- Be Specific about undesired/poor performance

The more specific you are about the poor performance, the more powerful your feedback is in eliminating the performance.

- Be specific about the desired performance

When you know what performance would have been more appropriate, you can take steps to convince the performer to shift from undesired to desired performance. This may require some training or demonstrations.

- Don't correct when angry

When you are angry, you may blame the person unfairly. You are less likely to successfully replace poor performance with a desired performance.

- Provide corrective feedback in private

Don't do the feedback in public. This rule is often violated if the person providing the feedback is angry.

- Provide immediate feedback

Your feedback will have more meaning and be more powerful if it is provided soon after the poor performance. Don't wait for the performer's next 'mistake' to correct the performance. But also want to be sparing in your feedback. Correcting every little problem can lead to other issues.

- Share the source of information

Unless the information about poor performance is subjective (e.g., based on gossip), state how you came to know about the performance. **Note:** If your information about poor performance is subjective, try to obtain data that is more objective. (For example, if there is a rumor that someone is leaving work early, make direct observations to verify the information.)

- Assess employee's knowledge of work and expectations

One useful question is, "Could the individual do the behavior if his or her life depended on it?" If the answer is no, the individual does not have the proper

knowledge or skills to perform the task. In this case you will need to correct the behavior and provide appropriate training. If the answer is yes, then corrective feedback alone may be used.

■ Influence on others

When you tell the individual how you and others were affected by the poor work performance, you clarify the impact of the behavior on others, which strengthens the information you are providing.

■ Make follow-up plans

Discuss the desired performance. Make action plans with the individual, and make sure there is agreement on how the progress toward desired work performance will be monitored. This is one of the toughest features to accomplish.

■ Catch the person doing it right the next time

To encourage correct performance and eliminate poor work performance, make sure you 'catch the person doing it right' the next time and provide positive feedback.

In general, providing corrective feedback is an opportunity for you to help the other person. If done properly, the feedback session will result in clearer expectations of what is needed. These sessions can also be useful in developing stronger personal ties to the other individual because you show that you care.

Developmental Exercise

Describe a situation where you gave corrective feedback to another person. Assess whether you followed each of the principles described above. Describe how the feedback was received. Describe whether the feedback led to an improvement.

Handling Criticism

No one likes to be criticized. But when we reflect back on important moments in our life, they were often the result of someone's criticism. Criticism can be crucial to anyone's professional development. There will be very little improvement without criticism.

Your harshest critics are often those who care about you the most (e.g. your family, a close friend). It's more difficult for someone who doesn't know you well to be a critic, especially when you act inappropriately to criticism.

The first step to handling criticism is to understand when criticism is meant to be helpful and when it is harmful.

Criticism is helpful when it

- Contains an improvement suggestion
- Is not personal
- Is honest
- Is tough
- Is hopeful

Criticism is harmful when it is

- Meant to lower your self-esteem
- Behind your back
- Dishonest
- Demoralizing

You can turn criticism into a positive experience when you follow the approach described below:

1. Respond to the criticism by thanking your critic and indicate that you will try to do better. Ask for your critic's suggestions.
2. Wait for a period of time (e.g., one day) to reflect on what you heard. – This will allow you to view the criticism more objectively.
3. Develop a plan to address the criticism with specific actions to be taken. – This is when you break out of your denial.
4. Review your plan with your critic. This helps develop a sense of ownership with your critic.
5. Carry out your plan.
6. Give your critic periodic progress reports. – This shows that you really want to make an improvement

The essential element in any approach to accepting criticism is to acknowledge that the criticism was meant to help you.

Developmental Exercise

- Describe an example of criticism that you received that was very helpful to you. What did you do about the criticism? How has the criticism helped you?
- Describe criticism that you received that was harmful. Why was the criticism harmful?
- Use what you have learned in this note to reply to criticism that you received. Answer these questions.
 1. What did you do wrong in the eyes of your critic?
 2. Who provided the criticism?
 3. What suggested improvement did your critic have?
 4. What was your immediate response to the criticism?
 5. What actions did you take as a result of the criticism?
 6. How did you communicate changes that you made to your critic?
 7. What improvements do you feel have resulted from your actions?

Responding to Dissent

One of the most difficult experiences of any person has is responding to a disagreement with something you are saying. The common strategy for responding to dissent is to argue the point being made. Often the argument can become heated and lead to hard feelings. Even when the arguments are amicable, there may be very little accomplished.

The appropriate way to respond to dissent is as follows:

1. Ask for clarification on the concerns being expressed. Write these down. Ask follow up questions to see if you can get a better sense of the disagreement.
2. Provide a short summary of the key aspects of the disagreement to narrow the range of issues of concern.
3. Acknowledge those aspects of the disagreement where you feel you can make accommodations. See if your accommodations are satisfactory.
4. Where accommodations can't be easily made, state your reasons for your position. Ask the person for ideas of how your concerns might be otherwise addressed.
5. Work through the remaining disagreements in a rational way. The best way to do this is to make up a chart that shows pros and cons of the various positions.

The approach outlined above is designed to work through the dissent in a reasoned manner that diffuses the conflict and focuses it on practical solutions.

Developmental Exercise

- Describe a situation where you have encountered dissent and followed the guidelines from this note.
- Describe in specific detail what you did
- Assess the effectiveness of your communications in this case

Section 3: Communications to Convey Your Insights

Communicating Ideas

As our nation moves to knowledge – based economy, your ability to sell your ideas will become increasingly important. You may have great ideas, but if you can't sell these your performance evaluation will suffer.

Outlined below are some general perspectives on communicating ideas.

- New ideas are critical for modern organizations. Without new ideas, organizations decline and jobs are threatened.
- Everyone needs to contribute ideas.
- The key to communicating ideas is quiet confidence. The successful idea communicator does not have to be a good public speaker. You also don't need to be a natural salesman. But you do need to display self confidence.
- You shouldn't wait for special situations before you contribute ideas.
- Ideas are sold in a two step process.

Communicating – informal sharing and developing of the idea.

Presenting – making a formal presentation for approval

Communicating ideas can be difficult for a new college graduate because you probably have not had a lot of experience in doing this. The following perspectives on how new ideas are presented may help you understand the environment you will encounter in selling your ideas.

- Most ideas are communicated one-on-one or in small group meetings.
- The best speaking style for presentation ideas is informal and casual.
- The content of an idea is more important than the way it is communicated.
- Few visual aids are used.
- Once the idea is initially accepted, the presentation format becomes more formal.
 - Visual aids are used.
 - The audience is larger.
 - The presentation style is more formal.

In general there is an approach that you can use to present your ideas.

1. Provide context for your idea. Give background that lets others understand how you came to your idea.
2. Describe your idea with major points first. Cover details if asked for them.
3. Communicate your idea with quiet confidence.
 - Don't downplay your idea by saying, "This may be a dumb idea."
 - Don't oversell your idea by saying, "This is a great idea."
 - State your idea simply by saying, "I have an idea that I would like you to consider."
4. Accept the additions of others.
 - Every good idea can be made better.
 - Don't ignore suggestions. Write them down.
5. If others reject your idea ask, "What better idea do you have?"
 - Don't let people reject your idea without giving you an idea of their own.

The essential thing about presenting any idea is to "push the first domino." You won't be successful in selling your ideas unless you make the first step in sharing your idea with others.

Developmental Exercise

Present an idea to someone or some group. Document what you did and what happened.

1. What was the problem you were addressing?
2. What were the major points you made in communicating your idea?
3. How was your idea received?
4. What improvements would you make for presenting an idea?

Participating in a Meeting

A lot of work in organizations takes place in meetings. There are a number of things to learn about your role in these meeting as a young profession.

First, be respectful of where people sit. Professional are like students in a classroom. They have a favorite place to sit. Before you sit down, ask others where they suggest you sit.

Next draw a picture of the meeting table. Record people's names where they sit. This is a good visual way to remember names and even what was said.

Take notes. You don't need a transcript but just key points being made. Taking notes will help you accomplish two things:

- They will help you stay focused on what is being discussed
- They will help you think through your own thoughts

Record your own thoughts. Just make simple one line descriptions. You may want to put a ♣ by these thoughts so you can refer to them when you speak.

Wait for an opportunity to contribute. You don't want to be the first to speak. But you also don't want to make people call on you. You may have some unique perspective because of your new position with the organization. You may be seeing the issue with fresh eyes and by virtue of this; you may have something interesting to add.

At first you may be surprised by the tone of the discussion in a meeting. Many meetings can become very heated. In some organizational cultures, it's common to see people go at each other. Don't be fooled by these heated exchanges. Once the meeting is over, the individuals who were having a heated discussion will be making plans for a golf game. You will need to adjust your style to the culture of the organization. You can't be intimidated by how others respond to each other. But you need to be yourself also. Don't try to imitate the attack style of others, if that's not your style.

Another organizational style issue is how prompt people are in attending meetings. In some organizations, you won't dare show up late. In other organizations, people are more casual about when meetings start. As a young professional, you can't afford to be late.

Finally, at the conclusion of the meeting, review any follow up actions of the meeting, review any follow up actions with others. This is a good habit to get into in all cases, but it's especially important for a young professional.

Developmental Exercise

- Practice the suggestions outlined in this note for one meeting you attend.
- Describe the practices you used and assess your own participation in the meeting.

Communicating Up the Ladder

Most professionals have multiple people they report to. In all cases you will have a boss who you report to (Functional Leader). This is the person who will make pay raise and promotion recommendations. You will also have people who you work for in the course of your professional life. These persons may be called clients, project team leaders, or have other titles. (Clients) you are doing work for these people in your professional capacity.

In the course of your regular work week you may have more contact with your clients than you do with your functional leader. In fact you may not even see your functional leader for a while if you do a lot of traveling.

Here are some tips on what you should do to keep all people you work with informed.

1. Prepare a progress report each week to let everyone know what you have done (functional leader and client)
2. Have a regularly scheduled face-to-face meeting with your functional leader to let him/her know how your work is being accepted.
3. Communicate any special situations that occur
 - Comments you receive that are significant
 - Reactions to proposals – good and bad
 - Information on insights that you have developed
 - Summaries of data you have collected that you think are insightful
 - Descriptions of ideas you are considering
4. Whatever you communicate go beyond just the factual statements. Give background for the factual statements and support materials.

As a rule of thumb, when in doubt whether information should be communicated, err on the side of communicating.

Developmental Exercise

- Identify a situation where you could have performed better with respect to communicating up the ladder
 - Describe the situation
 - Describe what you should have done
- Identify a situation that falls under #3 above. Communicate this situation and to the appropriate person.

Ensuring Communications are Understood

Communications are a two-way process. You can be certain of what you communicated, but how can you be sure what you communicated was understood by the receiver?

The assurance of your message being understood begins with the message and the manner of delivery. Here are some general guidelines for assuring that your message is clearly communicated.

- Communicate just one message at a time. Don't confuse the receiver with multiple messages and make them sort through them.
- Express your message in clear language. Don't try to "sugar coat" tough messages. Don't try to embellish the message.
- Use the appropriate media. Detailed messages need to be written. Oral messages should contain minimal content. Both formats may be useful as reinforcements.
- Give an example to support your message. People learn from examples as much as they do words because examples create visual images.

You can evaluate whether your message is being understood by one or more of the following:

- Ask the receiver: "Tell me what you just heard."
- Ask the receiver to do something in response to the message. This will at least give you the assurance that the message was received. The quality of the response should be a good indicator of whether the message was properly received.

All of us can improve on our ability to make our messages better received. You can accelerate your ability to communicate by informally asking others how they might suggest you improve your message delivery.

Development Exercise

- Practice the approaches outlined in this note for a particular message you want to deliver. The message in this case can be to a friend.
- Make an assessment of how you think you did in communicating the message.

Speaking Objectively

One of the challenges in communications is to be objective about what you say. All of us are prone to exaggeration or biased statements. But there are other aspects to speaking objectively. The acronym NORMS is a great way to remember the criteria for speaking objectively.

<i>Objective – Communications</i>	<i>Subjective – Communications</i>
<p>Not a biased interpretation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Not affected by personal biases or feelings.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Is a personal interpretation and affected by personal biases.
<p>Observable</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Based on behaviors or outcomes that can actually be seen, heard, touched, smelled, or tasted.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Based on events that aren't observed directly.
<p>Reliable</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Based on observations (two or more people can independently agree on what happened).	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Based on unreliable accounts of an event. Two or more people can't agree on what happened.
<p>Measurable</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Based on behaviors or outcomes that can be measured (e.g., frequency, cost, timeliness, quality).	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Based on immeasurable traits or attitudes.
<p>Specific</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Based on a precise definition of what the individual did or what was accomplished (e.g., how frequently, who, what, where, when).	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Based on nonspecific instances of behavior and exaggerations of what happened (e.g., "he always" or "you never. . .")• Is a subjective estimation of the work performed?

Speaking objectively is an acquired skill just like writing or making a presentation.

Think about cases where you have been frustrated, confused, or even angry about a statement someone made that wasn't objective. Now imagine how people feel when you have done the same thing.

Speaking objectively is especially critical in the following situations

- You are giving directions
- You are providing feedback
- You are making the case for a course of action

Developmental Exercise

- Analyze another person's comments to you with respect to the NORMS criteria
- Develop a plan for speaking objectively. How will you improve your skills?

Giving Directions

Have you ever been frustrated by bad directions you have been given. Writing good directions is a skill that must be learned.

The steps involved in developing good directions are as follows:

1. Identify who will need to use the directions. You need to know about the person's prior knowledge with the subject and the person's overall comprehension level.

The directions that you prepare should be written for the lowest level of familiarity and the lowest level of comprehension.

2. Develop a detailed description of every step that needs to be done. This needs to be done at a fine level of detail.

Bad Directions: Attach the two parts of the handle.

Good Direction: Attach handle part A (look for the letter on the inner part of the handle) to part B (look for the label). Use a ½ inch flat head Phillips screw.

3. Provide visual indicators to support the description (photos, diagrams, other visual cues)
4. Provide cautions. These are things that a person might do that are known to create problems. Example- Warning: don't over tighten the handles- stop when the turning becomes snug.
5. Provide indicators of what could have gone wrong.
Example - If the one handle doesn't rest in to the other handle, you have the wrong parts.

Giving directions is not a one-step process. Generally there are three steps

Telling

We first tell someone how to do something. In some instances telling someone how to accomplish a task is enough.

Verbally prompting

Sometimes telling isn't enough. Sometimes we need to take it a step further and have them follow the directions as we observe them. Then we verbally prompt them when we see problem.

Modeling – showing

What happens when telling and verbally prompting is not enough? We made need to teach the directions by modeling, the directions.

Physical guidance—prompting

This occurs when it is necessary to actually move the person through the proper action. Example: the swing of a baseball bat. This helps the individual get accustomed to the 'feel of the motion'. The more proficient and competent an individual becomes, the less physical prompting is needed.

Developmental Exercise

Prepare written directions for locating your transcript on the University's computer system. The audience is a first semester freshman.

Section 4: The Personal Side of Communications

Communications Etiquette

Communications is one of the most important human acts. As with any human act, there are expectations for communications etiquette. People who don't meet these expectations will find difficulties in their professional and personal lives.

Some of the communications areas where rules of etiquette are most prominent include:

1. **Acknowledge communications:** When someone communicates with you, respond in a way that indicates you heard the message and will act appropriately. In some cases, the response will simple be a thank you.
2. **Provide follow up on previous communications:** When you have had a communications, there is an expectation of something being done. You take the action as communicated. The remaining thing to be done is to communicate what has been done.
3. **Be respectful in all communications:** There is never a time when you should be disrespectful of those you communicate with - even if you are responding to communications that were disrespectful to you.
4. **Communicate new information to those who need the information:** Whenever you obtain information that is generally not known by others, provide people with this information. The key is to think of who needs to know the information and what parts of the information would be useful to these people.
5. **Communicate through the appropriate media:** Tough sensitive issues should be communicated in person. Information that is primarily factual can be communicated electronically. Communications that require discussion don't work well electronically.
6. **Communicate through channels:** You should rarely communicate directly to those above your functional leader or client unless approved by the person above you. The only time when skipping of your boss might be appropriate is when there is an ethical or similar issue where your boss is uninvolved.
7. **Use the correct titles:** You need to learn how to address different people. Some will have titles. Some will prefer to be addressed formally (Mr., Ms).
8. **Be careful on who is copied:** you need to think carefully about who should also get copies of what you are communicating. You want people to know what is going on but you can overdo this as well. In many organizations, there is a standard practice for this.

In general, communications etiquette rests on one basic principle: accept the responsibility to let others know what you think is important.

Developmental Exercise

- Practice the concepts presented in this note on one specific communication
- Describe in full detail what you did
- Assess the effectiveness of the communications

Adjusting Your Communication Approach to the Receiver

People are different in many respects. Rarely do we think of people being different with respect to how they prefer their communications. There are four distinctive types of people with respect to communications.

1. Give it to me straight – This type of person doesn't want a lot of preliminaries. These people want you to get to the point quickly. They don't want a lot of justification. They just want to be assured that you are confident in what you are saying. They also want concrete suggestions on what to do. When they ask questions, they want direct answers.
2. Let's Talk – These people want to be very comfortable with what you are saying. They like a lot of background especially as it relates to what others feel about the subject. They don't want to move too fast so they would like to know what others have done in similar situations. They don't want to be hurried so take your time in communicating to these people.
3. I Need to Know More – These people want to focus on how you came to the information you are presenting. They are interested in detail, but they really want to be comfortable with the approach that you took. They will want to think through consequences with you if you are communicating a need for action. Be prepared to do a step-by-step description of what you did in communicating with these people.
4. Let's See What the Manual Says – These people want to be sure that what you are suggesting is permitted. When you communicate to these people, you need to be certain to assure them that everything being proposed is within their scope of control according to the "book". These people may have more of an interest in the policy of what is being proposed than the actual content itself.

These are four very different ways of communicating to these different types of people. What do you do when the same message needs to be delivered to a mix of these types? The general rule is to focus the message on the principal decision maker but try to have the information that others will be seeking.

Developmental Exercise

- Describe someone you know who fits each of these descriptions

Meeting People

Have you ever had this experience: You meet someone and you immediately forget the person's name? Or what about this experience: You meet someone, and you are at a loss for what to say.

Some people find it very easy to meet new people. They have a way of establishing a quick rapport with the people they meet. Others find themselves struggling to connect with new people. If you are one of the people who find it difficult meeting other people, here are some things you can do.

If possible write down the names of people you meet. In a business setting you will generally have writing materials. Ask for correct spelling. If you don't have writing materials, ask for a business card. Most of us remember names better when we see them written down.

If you're uncomfortable starting a conversation, you should ask the person questions about their job, their experience or related questions. Often these questions can trigger a very useful conversation leading to important information about the person. If the meeting is in the person's office, you might ask questions about items you see in their office.

Remember it's easy to have a conversation with another person when the other person is doing most of the talking. Gradually you will feel comfortable in talking to the person since you have established some understanding of each other.

Developmental Exercise

Use the approach suggested in this note the next time you meet someone. Assess how well the approach worked. What changes would you like to make in your approach to meeting people?

