

Principles of Constructive Communication

By Dave Wakeman for the Program and Project Community of Practice (PPMCoP)



You may feel like you are a good, strong communicator and that you are always communicating your message in a clear and effective manner. But, studies show that isn't always the case. In fact, in survey after survey, executives and managers list poor communications as one of the challenges they face in themselves and in the workers that they are recruiting.

As members of the diplomatic community, the need for strong communications skills is even more important because you aren't just dealing with verbal cues and language barriers. In your work, you must overcome the verbal or language barriers that exist between cultures and you must also worry about cultural differences that include accounting for rank, gender, religion, and so forth.

Because even the best communicators know that they must continuously work to ensure that they are communicating effectively with their audience, here are three key principles that anyone can use to make sure that they are effectively communicating.

The Foundation: Listening Effectively

The foundation of effective and constructive communication begins with listening effectively. Too often people enter a conversation with the idea that they have to get their points across no matter what. And, when being so forceful in the need to get their points across . . .the person forgets the most important skill in being a constructive communicator: listening.

Effective listening can be broken down into three key points:

- Be attentive
- Keep an open mind
- Question for clarity

You need to incorporate all three of these tools into your communication toolkit to ensure that you are effectively listening. Here is why this is important . . . when you listen effectively, you focus on what the other party is actually saying and may pick up on cues and themes that you would miss in the rush to always quickly follow up someone else's points with your own. And, by asking questions to clarify, you not only make sure that you understand completely what the speaker is saying, you give positive validation to them by being willing to listen to their ideas . . . even if they are opposed to your own world view.

Be Specific in Your Thoughts

One challenge that almost everyone has is in communicating with enough specificity that they get their point across. In developing the habits of constructive communications, it is important that you focus on being specific in your communications for several reasons.

First, when stating challenges and issues too broadly, these issues become too large to be manageable. Second, there isn't any room or direction to make improvements because the challenge has been framed in an unproductive manner from the outset.

To communicate with specificity, you should consider the following points as guidelines:

- Give your audience the most specific information you can realistically provide;
- Be clear in your communications, focusing on saying things in the clearest and most concise manner, eliminating jargon, acronyms, and other words that might act as a challenge to the listener.

Look for Commonalities in Problems

One challenge to effective and constructive communication is that the parties involved in a discussion feel like they are coming from entirely different realities. And to achieve some movement on issues it is important that you look for ways to find commonalities between your challenge and the other person's challenge.

You will be able to find common ground in your communications in several ways such as:

- Asking questions to clarify an opinion or position;
- Explaining your position based on your understanding from your questions, listening, and research;
- Approaching each situation with the working assumption that no matter what at the heart of the challenge there is some mutual interest and be willing to have the courage to find it.

Conclusion

Constructive communication begins and ends with the willingness to listen to the other party. Listening is the foundation that will allow you to be specific in your counterpoints and will allow you to find common ground with your audience. And, the more that you listen, the more likely you are to find the key that unlocks a constructive communication environment, which ultimately will lead to stronger relationships . . . in diplomacy, in business, or in your personal life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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