6.3: Improving Verbal Communication

Learning Objectives

1. Demonstrate six strategies for improving verbal communication

Throughout the chapter, we have visited examples and stories that highlight the importance of verbal communication. To end the chapter, we need to consider how language can be used to enlighten or deceive, encourage or discourage, empower or destroy. By defining the terms we use and choosing precise words, we will maximize our group’s understanding of our message. In addition, it is important to consider the group members, control your tone, check for understanding, and focus on results. Recognizing the power of verbal communication is the first step to understanding its role and impact on the communication process.

Define Your Terms

Even when you are careful to craft your message clearly and concisely, not everyone will understand every word you say or write. As an effective group communicator, you know it is your responsibility to give every group member every advantage in understanding your meaning. Yet your presentation would fall flat if you tried to define each and every term—you would end up sounding like a dictionary!

The solution is to be aware of any words you are using that may not be familiar to everyone in your group, and provide clues to meaning in the process of making and supporting your points. Give examples to illustrate each concept. Use parallels from everyday life. Rephrase unfamiliar terms in different words. In summary, keep your group members in mind and imagine yourself in their place. This will help you to adjust your writing level and style to their needs, maximizing the likelihood that your message will be understood.
Choose Precise Words

To increase understanding, choose precise words that paint as vivid and accurate a mental picture as possible for your group. If you use language that is vague or abstract, your meaning may be lost or misinterpreted. Your document or presentation will also be less dynamic and interesting than it could be.

Table 6.1 lists some examples of phrases that are imprecise and precise. Which one evokes a more dynamic image in your imagination?

Table 6.1 Precisely What Are You Saying?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Imprecise</th>
<th>Precise</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The famous writer William Safire died in 2009; he was over 70.</td>
<td>The former Nixon speech writer, language authority, and New York Times columnist William Safire died of pancreatic cancer in 2009; he was 79.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clumber spaniels are large dogs.</td>
<td>The Clumber Spaniel Club of America describes the breed as a “long, low, substantial dog,” standing 17 to 20 inches high and weighing 55 to 80 pounds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is important to eat a healthy diet during pregnancy.</td>
<td>Eating a diet rich in whole grains, fruits and vegetables, lean meats, low-fat dairy products can improve your health during pregnancy and boost your chances of having a healthy baby.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are making good progress on the project.</td>
<td>In the two weeks since inception, our four-member team has achieved three of the six objectives we identified for project completion; we are on track to complete the project in another three to four weeks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For the same amount of spend, we expected more value added.</td>
<td>We have examined several proposals in the $10,000 range, and they all offer more features than what we see in the $12,500 system ABC Corp. is offering.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Officers were called to the scene.</td>
<td>Responding to a 911 call, State Police Officers Arellano and Chavez sped to the intersection of County Route 53 and State Highway 21.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The victim went down the street.</td>
<td>The victim ran screaming to a neighbor’s house.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Several different colorways are available. The silk jacquard fabric is available in ivory, moss, cinnamon, and topaz colorways.

This smartphone has more applications than customers can imagine. At last count, the BlueBerry Tempest has more than 500 applications, many costing 99 cents or less; users can get real-time sports scores, upload videos to TwitVid, browse commuter train schedules, edit emails before forwarding, and find recipes—but so far, it doesn’t do the cooking for you!

A woman was heckled when she spoke at a health care event. On August 25, 2009, Rep. Frank Pallone (Democrat of New Jersey’s 6th congressional district) hosted a “town hall” meeting on health care reform where many audience members heckled and booed a woman in a wheelchair as she spoke about the need for affordable health insurance and her fears that she might lose her home.

Consider Your Group Members

In addition to precise words and clear definitions, contextual clues are important to guide your group members as they read. If you use a jargon word, which may be appropriate for many people in your group, follow it by a common reference that clearly relates its essential meaning. With this positive strategy you will meet group member’s needs with diverse backgrounds. Internal summaries tell us what we’ve heard and forecast what is to come. It’s not just the words, but also how people hear them that counts.

If you say the magic words “in conclusion,” you set in motion a set of expectations that you are about to wrap it up. If, however, you introduce a new point and continue to speak, the group will perceive an expectancy violation and hold you accountable. You said the magic words but didn’t honor them. One of the best ways to display respect for your group is to not exceed the expected time in a presentation or length in a document. Your careful attention to contextual clues will demonstrate that you are clearly considering your group.

Take Control of Your Tone

Does your writing or speech sound pleasant and agreeable? Or does it come across as stuffy, formal, bloated, ironic, sarcastic, flowery, rude, or inconsiderate? Recognition may be simple, but getting a handle on how to influence tone and to make your voice match your intentions takes time and skill.

One useful tip is to read your document out loud before you deliver it, just as you would practice a presentation before you present it to your group. Sometimes hearing your own words can reveal their tone, helping you decide whether it is correct or appropriate. Another way is to listen or watch others’ presentations that have been described with terms associated with tone. Martin Luther King Jr. had one style while President Barack Obama has another. You can learn

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from both. Don’t just take the word of one critic but if several point to a speech as an example of pompous eloquence, and you don’t want to come across in your presentation as pompous, you may learn what to avoid.

Check for Understanding

When we talk to each other face to face, seeing if someone understood you isn’t all that difficult. Even if they really didn’t get it, you can see, ask questions, and clarify right away. That gives oral communication, particularly live interaction, a distinct advantage. Use this immediacy for feedback to your advantage. Make time for feedback and plan for it. Ask clarifying questions. Share your presentation with more than one person, and choose people that have similar characteristics to your anticipated group or team.

If you were going to present to a group that you knew in advance was of a certain age, sex, or professional background, it would only make sense to connect with someone from that group prior to your actual performance to check and see if what you have created and what they expect are similar. In oral communication, feedback is core component of the communication model and we can often see it, hear it, and it takes less effort to assess it.

Be Results Oriented

At the end of the day, the assignment has to be complete. It can be a challenge to balance the need for attention to detail with the need to arrive at the end product—and its due date. Stephen Covey, Covey, S. (1989). *The seven habits of highly effective people*. New York: Simon & Schuster. suggests beginning with the end in mind as one strategy for success. If you have done your preparation, know your assignment goals, desired results, have learned about your group members and tailored the message to their expectations, then you are well on your way to completing the task. No document or presentation is perfect, but the goal itself is worthy of your continued effort for improvement.

Here the key is to know when further revision will not benefit the presentation and to shift the focus to test marketing, asking for feedback, or simply sharing it with a mentor or co-worker for a quick review. Finding balance while engaging in an activity that requires a high level of attention to detail can be challenge for any communicator, but it is helpful to keep the end in mind.

Key Takeaway

- To improve communication, define your terms, choose precise words, consider your group members, control your tone, check for understanding, and aim for results.

Exercise \(\PageIndex{1}\)

1. Choose a piece of writing from a profession you are unfamiliar with. For example, if you are studying biology, choose an excerpt from a book on fashion design. Identify several terms you are unfamiliar with, terms that may be considered jargon. How does the writer help you understand the meaning of these terms? Could the writer make them easier to understand? Share your findings with your class.
2. In your chosen profession, identify ten jargon words, define them, and share them with the class.
3. Describe a simple process, from brushing your teeth to opening the top of a bottle, in as precise terms as possible. Present to the class.