Leadership in Action
A Leadership Curriculum for College Students

Listening & Speaking Clearly
Workshop Guide

Module 4

University of Wisconsin-Madison, Purdue University, & University of Illinois
Listening & Speaking Clearly

Workshop Guide

Objectives

Participants will be able to
1. Learn to recognize their own and others' communication habits;
2. Learn techniques to become better listeners and speakers;
3. Learn why listening and speaking clearly are important for leadership.

Materials Needed

- Flipchart & markers
- Marshmallows or gum, enough for each participant
- Trash bags for marshmallows or gum
- Copies of the following materials for each participant:
  —“Communication Skills Self Assessment”
  —“Communication Skills Improvement Plan”

Workshop Outline

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Icebreaker – 10 Minutes – “Telephone”

Give the following instructions to participants.

“Telephone” is a game in which participants stand in a circle or line and pass a message from one person to the next. For example, your group stands in a circle, and I read a message to the first person. The message is read quietly so that others cannot hear it. Then the first person whispers the message to the second person, who whispers it to the third person, and so on. The last person repeats the message out loud. Group members then compare the final message, as reported by the last group member, to the original message given by the first group member.

Possible messages include: “The student council representative communicated a clear and concise rationale for requesting discretionary funding”; or “The leader’s lengthy speech on the ethics of medical research left the senators sleeping soundly in their seats.”

Do one round in the normal fashion and one round having students stuff their mouths with marshmallows or gum.

Introduction – 5 Minutes

A key question for this workshop is: How can we improve our listening and speaking skills?

Communication is a complex concept. Many factors influence how a message is understood. As we just saw in the icebreaker, messages can change a great deal as they pass from one person to another. Communicating effectively becomes even more difficult when we are unable to listen or speak clearly. This module focuses on the verbal and nonverbal aspects of listening and speaking.

The messages a person communicates to others while listening and speaking can affect his or her ability to lead. Communication can be something as simple as a street sign or a hand gesture. It can also be something as complicated as translating peace negotiations from one language to another. Successful communication involves a mutual exchange in which every person involved—whether listener, speaker, or both—constructs a shared understanding of a concept, a process, a plan, a vision, a mission, and so forth.

Activity – 10 Minutes – Communication Skills Self Assessment

Ask participants to complete the “Communication Skills Self-Assessment” activity sheet. The intent of this assessment is to “prime” the participants, to get them thinking about communication and their communication habits before they are asked to participate in a group setting.

After participants are finished with their self-assessment, ask them “What makes someone a good listener?” Write their responses on the flipchart. Then ask the participants “What makes someone a good speaker?” Again, write their responses on the flipchart.

A good discussion may develop. If it does, allow the participants to engage and exchange ideas. If a good discussion does not develop, initiate a discussion with questions such as: What sort of messages might a listener communicate to a speaker?; How might the context in which communication is taking place affect good listening and speaking practices?; How is nonverbal communication on the part of the listener different from the nonverbal communication of the speaker?
Note to facilitators: As facilitator, your job is to organize and summarize the group’s ideas following the discussion. Therefore, it is essential that you have thought about your own ideas about good listening and speaking skills and have several ideas to improve each skill.

Summarize the discussion, and make the following points if they were not already raised.

- Communication is a complex, interactive process that involves a mutual give and take between speakers and listeners.
- Communication requires skill in sending and receiving messages.
- Many misunderstandings can arise when ideas are not attended to or when they are communicated in a vague or unclear manner.
- The speaker and listener(s) exert reciprocal influences on one another as the interaction moves along.
- The context in which communication occurs has an effect on the verbal and nonverbal cues we attend to and use. For example, when working in groups, good eye contact may alert a fellow group member that you are listening to him or her. However, when participating in a telephone conference, you may have to ask probing questions or summarize the speaker’s content to communicate that you were listening. In addition, the level of interactivity between a listener and a speaker can change depending on the context of the communication. For example, discussing an idea at a student organization meeting is more interactive than listening to a prerecorded radio address. In addition, talking to a colleague on the telephone involves a different type of interaction than presenting a research project at a conference.
- During interactions, listeners and speakers exert a reciprocal influence on one another through nonverbal cues. Nonverbal communication on the part of the listener, such as eye contact, tells the speaker that the listener is engaged. Nonverbal communication on the part of the speaker influences how the message is perceived and ultimately understood.
- Good communication skills can improve the quality of our interactions with others and therefore affect our leadership abilities.
- Communication skills can be learned. The best way to improve them is to practice.

**Topic Discussion – 20 Minutes**

When talking about the qualities that make a person an effective leader, communication skills are always an important part of the discussion. Developing good listening and speaking habits will help you become a better leader. In the first part of this workshop you developed a list of qualities, characteristics, and skills of good listeners and good speakers. The list is long and allows us to see the complex nature of communication. How do we make sense of it all so that we can improve our listening and speaking skills in order to become better leaders?

Two ways to organize our thinking about communication include understanding the components of sending and receiving a message and cataloging important skills or strategies people can practice in order to become better communicators.

Leaders engage in a great deal of interpersonal communication that takes place face-to-face, usually one-on-one or in small to medium-size groups. What are some of the factors that affect how messages are sent and received in interpersonal situations?

Allow time for participants to respond. Write the responses on the flip chart. The participants are likely to respond with a list that consists of words like “talking,” “listening,” “gestures,” “facial expressions,” etc.
Once the participants have given several responses, point out that there are three primary aspects of interpersonal communication that affect how a message is sent and received, and ultimately understood: (1) verbal, (2) vocal, and (3) visual.

The verbal part of the message includes the words that are used. The vocal element is intonation, projection, and resonance of the speaker’s voice. The visual component is what listeners see when paying attention to a speaker, such as facial expressions and body language. Good interpersonal communicators send consistent messages across all three components of communication.

Mixed messages occur when one part of communication is inconsistent with another. For instance, if I were standing here saying the words, “I am really glad to be here,” yet vocally, I sounded completely unenthusiastic and did not smile, you might question whether or not I meant what I said.

If you, as the instructor, are so inclined, it may be effective to “perform” the above example.

A professor at UCLA conducted some research to look at what happens when someone sends mixed messages (Decker, 1999). The study identified which aspects of communication were most believable when there is inconsistency among the verbal, vocal, and visual elements.

The results showed that when a person sends a mixed message, only about 7% of the people receiving the message believed the verbal message, or the actual words that were said; 38% of the people believed the message that was being communicated vocally, or the way in which the person was speaking. The majority of the people, 55%, thought that the most believable message was what was being communicated visually, or by the speaker’s body language and facial expressions.

When the verbal, vocal, and visual elements of communication are consistent, all of them work together. The excitement and energy of the voice work with the animation of the face and body to reflect confidence in and conviction about what is said.

The three primary components of interpersonal communication suggest skill sets and strategies that leaders need to develop in order to accurately understand others and precisely convey their own messages. Four skill sets are especially important: listening, eye communication, body language, and self-expression. This discussion of some of these skills is adapted from The Art of Communicating, by Bert Decker (1996).

**Listening Skills**

Listening is active; it requires discipline, concentration, and practice. Active listening is a skill to help you understand what messages other people are sending. In his book, Listening Made Easy, Robert Montgomery describes six basic listening techniques that form the acronym LADDER. Let’s examine these.

• Look at the person who is speaking, and maintain eye contact.
• Ask questions when you do not understand. This allows the speaker to expand on his or her ideas and shows your interest.
• Don’t interrupt. Allow the speaker to fully express his or her ideas. When he or she finishes, pause a moment before responding.
• Don’t change the subject. If you intend to be a good listener, you must be sensitive to the speaker’s agenda.
• Be aware of your emotions as you listen. Don’t react so strongly to the speaker’s message, voice, or appearance that you are unable to appreciate what he or she is saying. Be aware of the speaker’s emotionally charged words. If you react emotionally to such words, you may develop listening “dead spots” and miss the speaker’s meaning.
• When you respond to the speaker by using your eyes, body language, and voice, you show empathy and understanding. Eye communication and body language provide the speaker with feedback and lets him or her know you are tuned into what is being said.

There are many obstacles to good listening. One of the reasons we do not listen well has to do with the rate at which our brains process information. Our brains can process words much faster than a person can speak. This means there is a lot of mental time for our minds to wander. Another problem is that people’s attention spans are very short. We listen for a short time, and then our mind starts to wander. A third reason we can have difficulty listening is the lack of education in listening. The amount of education we receive in communication skills is inversely related to how much we use those skills. We receive the most formal education in writing and reading, yet we use these skills the least. We use listening—which is taught the least—the most often.

**Eye Communication**

Eye communication is possibly the most important skill in your interpersonal communication toolbox. Your eyes are the only part of your central nervous system that can directly connect with another person. Do not assume that “eye contact” is enough. Good eye communication involves more than a fleeting glance.

1. **5 Seconds for More Effectiveness**
   
   When we talk with another person and are excited, enthusiastic, and confident, we usually look at them for 5 to 10 seconds before looking away. This is usually what is most natural in a one-on-one situation.

2. **Beware of the Eye Dart**
   
   The problem many of us have when we feel pressure is to glance at anything but our listener. Our eyes tend to dart from place to place. This conveys nervousness and undermines our credibility.

3. **Beware of Slow Eye Blink**
   
   It is equally disconcerting to develop a habit of slow-blink. This is when a speaker might keep his or her eyelids closed for up to 2 or 3 seconds. It conveys the message, “I really don’t want to be here.”

4. **Find a Comfortable Place to Look**
   
   In one-on-one conversations, eyes tend to move around the face, but most of us tend to rest our eyes in one place. You may look at the left eye, the right eye, between the eyes, or the bridge of the nose. Any resting place near the eyes is acceptable. It is not acceptable to look anywhere else, like at the floor or over the other person’s shoulder.

**Body Language**

Another visual aspect of interpersonal communication is how you use your body. How you hold yourself physically can reflect how you hold yourself mentally. The way you hold yourself has a significant impact on how others regard you. There are two keys to posture that will improve the way you communicate.

1. **Stand Tall**
   
   Poor upper body posture often reflects low self-esteem. Even if that is not the case, other people will likely see it that way until they have enough information to change their opinion. Some people are usually hunched over because they grew fast as teenagers and did not want to stand out. Others never considered posture to be important, and slumping in childhood and adolescence has extended into adulthood. Whether you are standing or seated, keeping the upper body erect is one of the basic keys to better posture and more effective body language.
2. **Use the Ready Position**

   The second part of posture that often gets neglected is the lower body. One of the most common posture patterns is going back on one hip with your weight on one foot. This can unconsciously say, “I do not want to be here.” Other variations are rocking from side to side, going back and forth on your heels and toes, or pacing. To combat these negative habits, use the “ready position.” This means leaning slightly forward, so you could bounce up and down on the balls of your feet, with your knees slightly flexed. When seated, you should lean slightly into the listener. You should feel like you could stand to your feet quickly if you need to.

**Self-Expression**

   There are several simple guidelines to improve the effectiveness with which you express yourself.

1. **Use First-Person Pronouns**

   You should use a first-person pronoun if you are speaking of yourself, your thoughts, or your feelings. “I,” “me,” “my,” and “mine” clearly indicate you are the source of the communication, you take responsibility for what you are saying, and you are trying to share with others some of your thoughts and feelings.

   Example: Isn’t the weather terrible? It seems to have everyone feeling down.

   Restated: I don’t like this terrible weather. It really has me feeling down.

2. **Use Feeling Expressions & Factual Expressions**

   Self-expression can take two forms: feeling expression and factual expression. Each type of self-expression provides its own kind of information.

   A feeling expression usually includes emotional words such as “feel,” “like,” “sad,” “happy,” “mad.” These expressions are useful for communicating information regarding how a person feels. Factual expressions, on the other hand, are useful in transmitting information regarding facts, ideas, and information with a minimum of emotional content.

   If you are talking with someone about today’s session, what would be a feeling self-expression?

   Allow two or three participants to respond. Responses might include comments about whether or not they enjoyed the session, how they felt about their abilities as a communicator, or how well they liked the instructor and fellow participants.

   What would be a factual self-expression you might use?

   Allow two or three participants to respond. Responses might include comments about the date of the training, the agenda, who was there, etc.

   You can see how communicating about the same experience using either of two distinct styles of self-expression sends very different messages. Usually it is best to vary your self-expression. Alternate factual with feeling expression, and combine them when appropriate.

3. **Use Appropriate Tense**

   Effective self-expression should take an appropriate tense. You use the past tense to express something that has already happened. Past-tense expressions are helpful as “lead-ins” to relate the past to the present. Present-tense statements express thoughts and feelings that are occurring right now. Thoughts and feelings stated in the present tense have a directness that gets the point across. The goal is to use the tense that will make the most effective statement for the situation.
4. **Learn to Be Comfortable with Assertiveness**

There are certain times in interpersonal communication when assertiveness is both necessary and effective. Some people are hesitant to be assertive because they do not understand the differences between being assertive and being aggressive. The definition of an assertive person is someone who stands up for his or her rights without violating the rights of another person. Aggressive people don’t really care about the rights of others. Assertiveness is a very important part of both communication and leadership.

- Use direct eye communication and confident body language. Assertive people know how to use eye communication and body language to communicate that what they are saying is important.
- Consider the needs and feelings of others. Assertive people value everyone’s needs and feelings. They state what they want in a way that takes into account what other people need. Assertive people are concerned with everyone’s feelings and needs, including their own.
- Expect self-accountability. Assertive people hold themselves and others accountable, believing everyone has a responsibility to speak up and to ask for what they need.

Research supports the notion that good communication is central to effective leadership. Awamleh and Gardner found that a “strong” style of content delivery is an important factor in perceived leader charisma and effectiveness. A “strong” style of delivery includes increased eye contact, increased use of facial expressions, and increased vocal variety. Other variables, such as the content and organizational performance, matter; however, delivery is the most important. Brooks, Church, and Fraser investigated the effects of eye contact. They found that people who sustain eye contact are seen by others as possessing leadership qualities. In a related study, Bucy found that nonverbal communication by leaders influence people’s perceptions. Specifically, the appropriateness of a leader’s nonverbal response to emotion-arousing situations affects the type of attributions people make about the leader.

**Activity – Practicing Communication Skills – 20 Minutes**

Divide the participants into groups of three. In this exercise, each group member will have the opportunity to practice listening and speaking skills. Each member of the group is to prepare and deliver a 2-minute presentation on a topic of his or her choice. Group members will take turns a) delivering their short presentation, b) being an active listener to a group member’s presentation, and c) observing.

Give the participants 5 minutes at the beginning to organize their thoughts on a topic of their choice that they will present to one of the other group members. The presentations should be about 2 minutes in length. Then there should be a minute for questions from the listener. The third person in the group should simply observe both the presenter and the listener, looking for effective communication in each. At the end of 3 minutes (2 minutes for the presentation and 1 minute for questions), the group members should switch roles.

**Reflection, Application, & Summary – 15 Minutes**

It is essential that participants leave this session with an idea for how they can improve their communication skills and that they understand the relationship between communication skills and leadership. Use a discussion format to address these issues.

Ask the group the following three questions:

1. What can a person do to improve his or her listening?
2. What can a person do to become a better speaker?
3. How can a person use nonverbal cues to enhance communication?
Summarize their answers, and move on to the relationship between good communication skills and leadership. Below are some suggested questions.

- How is communication related to leadership?
- Why are communication skills important for leadership?
- What might a leader do that requires communication skills?
- How can self-awareness enhance communication skills?
- What is one communication strategy you want to use more often or improve?
- What feedback have you received from others regarding the way in which you communicate?
- What impact might good listening skills have on a working relationship?
- Why is it important for leaders to speak clearly?
- What effect might good speaking skills have on how people work together?

Ask participants to complete the “Communication Skills Improvement Plan.”

Communication can take many forms, and leaders must develop their skills in all areas of communication. This workshop focused on listening and speaking. Although we did not discuss written communication, good leaders must be able to express themselves accurately and appropriately in writing. As you practice your listening and speaking skills, you should consider taking the time to assess your writing skills and to learn to use various modes of writing effectively.

Communication is complex and dynamic, involving verbal and nonverbal signals from speakers and listeners. Communication affects the relationships among and between individuals and groups, making it inseparable from leadership. Strong communication skills can be developed through practice.

References


Web Resources


“Speaking Skill,” Guidelines for a Language and Culture Learning Program http://www.sil.org/LinguaLinks/languagelearning/OtherResources/GudInsFrALnggAndCltrLrnngPrgrm/SpeakingSkill.htm
Communication Skills Self-Assessment

Think about how you currently communicate. Then answer the questions below.

What do you do to show people you are listening to them?

What do you do to try to communicate a message clearly?

Do you have any gestures or other nonverbals that you use often?

What message do you try to send other people about yourself, and how does that message come across in your nonverbal communication?
Communication Skills Improvement Plan

Think about the communication skills you need to be successful as a leader. Then answer the questions below in relation to listening, speaking, and nonverbal communication skills.

What communication skills do you perform well?

- Listening
- Speaking
- Nonverbal

What communication skills do you want to improve?

- Listening
- Speaking
- Nonverbal

How do you plan to improve your communication skills?

- Listening
- Speaking
- Nonverbal
About Leadership in Action

Leadership in Action is a multi-state leadership development program for college-age students. It was funded in part by an USDA/CSREES HEP Challenge Grant, 2005-2009 to the University of Illinois, Purdue University, and the University of Wisconsin – Madison. Undergraduate students from those universities participated in a 21-month program during which the workshop modules were developed, used during the two cohort programs, reviewed, and revised.

We intend that students who have been trained in conducting effective workshops use these materials for leadership workshops with various student organizations. The materials can be used separately for individual workshop sessions, in any combination for a short-term program, or in their entirety for a long-term program.

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