

Communication Skills - What They Didn't Teach You In Chair School: A Brief Review

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Stimulus and Response

The following Stephen Covey quote is an important guide in communicating well: *“Between stimulus and response is a space. In that space lies our power and our freedom to choose our response. In those responses lie our growth and happiness.”*

By using the concepts and skills we practiced at the University of Washington, we can expand the space between the stimuli in our lives and our responses to those stimuli. In this expansion, we can be more consciously aware of our and others' emotional habits and typical thinking patterns. This awareness will increase our freedom to choose our responses rather than be a victim of them and in so doing we will have the opportunity to listen more affectively, and increase our effectiveness and influence.

As a human being, as a faculty member and as a department chair or dean, the more agile we are in our relationships the more choices and options we have. These increased options enable us to do our work more effectively and to more successfully navigate the myriad relationships we encounter daily. The better we are at understanding the people in our departments, the variety of relationships therein and our department culture, the better our leadership will be.

To facilitate increasing the space between stimulus and response interpersonally, we explored the following:

- Architecture of Gathering
- Non-verbal Communication
- Verbal Communication
 - Open and Closed Questions
 - You and I Statements
- L E A D E R is spelled L I S T E N
- When it comes to people – the way to problem solve is not to
- When it comes to people – the long way around is the short way home.
- Emotional bank accounts, the sandwich model and relationships
- Anger is a secondary emotion

Each of these concepts and skills is briefly summarized in the following pages.

Practice

Practicing will help uncouple old patterns and establish new habits. Our neuro-pathways need the repetition practice provides in order to install new patterns, habits and behaviors. As we learned during the session in Seattle, many of these skills and concepts seem easy to understand but difficult to implement because we are so used to communicating, reacting, listening, etc. in a particular way. Conscientiously practicing will help us add these new concepts into our communication skills toolbox.

Architecture of Gathering

How we gather can create or diminish our sense of connection. How we gather for meetings will add energy to people and our meetings or it will drain energy from people and what we are doing. This applies to 1-1 meetings as well as to research group, department and divisional meetings. Utilize the space so it helps your meeting and the connection you seek rather than let the room defeat you. For example, one university attending the workshop is exploring how to have meetings of 40 or more faculty in a space that improves the atmosphere and energy of the gathering and thus enables the chair of the meeting to create a more desirable experience for all.

I hope you are continuing to watch how people gather noticing what impact the physical arrangement of the room and the people in it has on the connection, the energy and the sense of good will among those in the room.

Non-Verbal Communication

A great deal of information is communicated non-verbally. We briefly explored how eye movement, breathing and changes in facial muscle structure and skin tone convey information. We then highlighted the following:

- Avoid making assumptions, as pop psychology books will do, that a certain body posture always has a particular meaning. Rather, just be aware and notice and see what their body posture might be conveying in relation to what they are saying.
- When listening, look interested. Notice how the person is sitting or standing.
- Better yet, mirror their body posture. Doing so (subtly) will increase the connection between you and the one with whom you are communicating.

Verbal Communication

Open and Closed Questions

The use of Open questions will help us stay focused on understanding the other and being open to the person with whom we are talking. These questions can help us suspend our own agenda, and learn how the other person perceives the issue we are talking about. And especially, if this conversation is a conflict or about a conflict, open questions to which we do not know the answer, will help each of us be more understanding of what is going on at a deeper level.

Open questions are usually brief and rarely have any kind of preamble or explanation.

Open questions are aimed more at helping the person to whom we are listening than satisfying our own curiosity. Open questions are questions that begin with who, what, where, when, how and sometimes why. Open questions often are most productive when we ask questions to which we don't know the answer.

Closed questions are usually questions to which the answer is yes or no. An example of a closed question that will be changed to an open question is: "Is it cold outside?" The open version would be: "What's the temperature outside?" Or "What's it like outside?" Another example: "Were you angry yesterday?" could be: "What were you feeling yesterday?"

Open questions encourage the speaker rather than the listener to lead the conversation. Open questions help the listener to suspend their agenda so that they can hear what the other person is really saying instead of what the listener perceives them to be saying. Open questions also help

us, the listener, reduce our reassuring, diagnosing, providing logical arguments, or evaluating, be it positive or negative.

You and I Statements

You statements are remarks that inaccurately place the responsibility or the blame for what I'm experiencing on someone else. I statements on the other hand, accurately report my experience and place the responsibility for what I'm experiencing with me. In addition, I statements prevent judgmental and blame-filled conversations. Examples include (first the you statement then the I statement): "You make me angry." "I'm angry." "You're confusing me." "I'm confused." "You need to check in with me." "When you change your plans, I worry and become concerned."

A closed question and you statement style of communication often favors short-term thinking instead of taking the long view in relationships. Open questions and I statements encourage a long-term approach to relationships.

LEADER is spelled LISTEN

A leader's influence increases through non-agenda listening.

When it comes to people – the way to problem solve is not to

Often, when it comes to people and relationships, the more effective way to solve problems is not to. We live in a problem-solving society in that when something isn't going well, we label it a problem and then we allocate resources to "fix" what is wrong. It can cause us to rush to fix whatever is wrong and as a result we don't listen. Often the way to problem solve is simply to LISTEN. In doing so, frequently the answer reveals itself.

When it comes to people – the long way around is the short way home.

We live in a world culture that seems to be going faster and faster and where the demands we experience seem to be greater. We seem to be increasingly deadline driven. Because of these pervasive daily pressures, we have a tendency to fall into a communication pattern that matches this current way that our world is. So we end up wanting to communicate faster and we tend to talk more than listen or to tell versus request, because we're being pressured to deliver something with greater speed and sometimes with fewer resources. But that very pressure works against effective communicating. We have a tendency to take shortcuts that don't work very well for relationships. Listening well to someone now, even if we don't feel we have the time, will usually gain us more time over the long haul. "Extra" time spent now will pay dividends both now and in the future.

Emotional bank accounts, the sandwich model and relationships

When giving feedback, the sandwich model of praise...criticize...praise is rarely effective. People "know what is coming" and thus the praise portions seem disingenuous. Thinking of relationships as a bank account where you can make infinite numbers of deposits and withdraw them all in one poorly executed transaction is a more accurate reflection of the relationship landscape. It also highlights the need for careful, thoughtful and respectful feedback.

Anger is a secondary emotion

Anger always comes after fear, sadness, hurt, loss or anticipated loss. When we become angry, we are already well down the road in an issue. Problems are much more easily addressed and resolved at the fear, sad, hurt and loss stages.

In addition, even if you have already reached the anger stage, it is important to redirect the conversation back to these earlier emotions because doing so better connects you to the other person and comes closer to what is at the heart or core of the concern. Your conflicts will be more easily prevented or navigated if you address these earlier feelings.

Conclusion

Part of our nature as human beings is to seek meaning in our life. As a result, we place meaning on events and people throughout each day. Indeed, our conversations are often a prime location in which we are making meaning. The problem comes when we make meaning without sufficient understanding. In trying to make sense of people and situations, human beings make assumptions and *interpret* what is happening outside of them. This meaning that we place on events, behaviors and people then creates internal emotional and intellectual experiences. What we experience inside, however, is not the actual event...it is our selective, subjective interpretation of what just happened. We then project our meaning and our experience onto what is happening or being said and assume that our view is what is real.

As department chairs, this pattern of meaning making can work against our and the department's better interests. The communication concepts and skills we explored in Seattle will ameliorate this common human tendency. This process works for individual conversations as well as in meetings and in policy and strategic development. Asking open questions and using I statements in conversation will slow us down and help us be more present. Asking open questions and using I statements will help widen the gap between what the other says and how we react and thus help us better understand the other person.

Giving ourselves more time between what we experience and how we respond gives us more freedom to choose an effective response and our meaning making has a greater chance of being accurate.