



How to Speak so Others Listen

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Introduction

Good communication is a vital component to quality patient care. Yet, many patients and family members struggle to absorb important conversations due to overwhelming emotions, physical pain, or ineffective communication. Even poor peer-to-peer communication can lead to costly and dangerous errors. Creating a message to cut through the “noise” means speaking in a way that makes it easier for others to listen and pay attention to your message.

Educational Objectives

After taking this course, participants will learn how to:

1. Communicate messages that capture attention and are memorable.
2. Clarify the core meaning of a message.
3. Eliminate communication elements that distract or overwhelm listeners.

Let’s Get Started!

Keep it Simple

A memorable message doesn’t have to be complex – in fact it should be the opposite: simple and easy to digest. But, don’t confuse simple with stupid. A message really packs a punch when it’s whittled down to the core. Skip the flowery language, jargon, and excessive explanation, and you’ll land on a bottom line that people can remember. People are distracted and have limited short-term memory. Studies on short-term memory suggest we can only remember an average of seven to nine items at any one time. Therefore, your main point should never be more than seven words. Otherwise, people won’t be able to repeat what you said.

Less is More

Get to the point by asking yourself what you want people to repeat about your conversation when it’s over? What is it that you want them to do, say, change, or consider? Just like a newspaper headline summarizes an entire story, your main point should clearly state your message. Trim the fat by watching for these common errors:

- *Redundancy*. Use one strong example or word rather than several weak ones.
- *Big words*. Put the dictionary and away and use common language.
- *Jargon*. Eliminate technical terms that only insiders understand.
- *Excessive details*. Description is good, but just enough to make your point.
- *Clichés*. Be specific rather than rely on tired phrases.
- *Vagueness*. Cut to the chase and say exactly what you mean.

Chopping Block

Putting the above rules to the test, how would you edit the following paragraph to reveal the core message?

“People are crazy drivers today. Everyone is driving way too fast. Plus, most drivers are texting or talking on their phone, so they’re not even paying attention. Since they’re not paying attention, you have to be the one paying attention when walking across the street. If you don’t pay attention, you could get killed! Pedestrian crosswalks are simply not safe. Cars are coming in all directions so be very, very careful when crossing this street, because it’s super dangerous.”

Did your mother ever give you a warning like this? Here’s the seven-word translation: “Look both ways before crossing the street.” While this example may seem obvious, you’d be surprised how much over-communicating takes place when it’s your own message. It’s easy to go on and on when you’re trying to make a point, but it has the opposite effect. Now, imagine a patient or client who’s emotionally or physically impacted trying to make sense of rambling phrases. It’s easy to understand why much of what health care professionals are communicating isn’t heard.

Establish Credibility

Why should people listen to what you have to say? Asking yourself this question will help keep you in check with topics you choose to address. Sometimes people aren’t listening to you because you have no business talking about the subject. If you’re offering unsolicited advice, gossiping, or giving opinions about subjects that don’t involve you, people will naturally reject your efforts. There are other topics on which you’re uniquely qualified to speak. In those cases, it’s important to let people know why you’re a credible source without sounding like you’re bragging.

Why You?

There are several ways to earn credibility as a speaker. The first is your personal experience. What have you learned through trial and error that would benefit someone else? You will always be the authority regarding your personal experience and it gives you a unique credibility that no one else can duplicate.

Another way to establish credibility is through your observations. Perhaps you’re in a position where you haven’t experienced something first hand, but you’re close enough to observe. Consistent observations over time can produce a valuable perspective that would interest others.

You can also have credibility because of your formal education. If you’ve studied a particular subject beyond the average person’s knowledge, you can offer more insight. Announcing your degree or license may catch the attention of others to start, but be careful about assuming you’ve earned respect. You can come across as smug, especially when speaking to those without your level of expertise. Remember, you still need to speak in common language to connect. The best way to establish your credibility is by *showing* it through stories and examples, rather than telling it. So, rather than tell someone, “I have 25 years of experience,” you’d show your experience by saying something like, “A big difference from when I first started in the field and today is...” It’s assumed you must be experienced without you having to announce it, making you sound far less pompous.

Stay Relevant

If you want people to care about what you're saying, give them a reason to listen. Messages become meaningful when you break down big ideas with real life examples. The best examples are timely and specific to your listeners. Giving examples forces you to be concrete, which is good because vague ideas are forgettable.

The most effective teachers are the ones who make book learning come alive with practical examples. Politicians use this strategy when trying to explain complex ideas like tax or healthcare reform. First, they deliver a brief overview and then they give an example of one person's story. Every President's State of the Union address follows the same format of including one or two "average Americans" whose story is highlighted as an example of certain policies. You'll even see local news broadcasts do the same thing by taking a national story and localizing it with examples from your community. The more you can relate to the example, the more relevant and memorable the message.

Keeping it Real

For examples to connect, they have to be real and authentic. Choose situations that appeal to your listener's real life experiences, needs, age, culture, and interests. If those examples are very different from your own real life, you need to take care in listening and gathering material. Before you can include an example, you might need to ask more about his experience so you can offer something relevant. If you've communicated with enough people with similar circumstances (even if they are different from your own), you can draw from their examples. Or, you can share your personal examples as long as they relate to the other person's experiences.

Timing is important when offering examples. The more recent, the better. Talking about something that happened 25 years ago won't have nearly the impact of an incident that just occurred. So, you'll need to constantly update your material so it's fresh. As to when to use an example, do so right after stating a broad idea. The overview statement gives your example context and lets the listener know what you're trying to demonstrate. After providing one or two specific examples, restate the big idea to tie the whole message together. Think of this formula like a sandwich. The two pieces of bread are the same main idea, and the filling is the example. Make your message sandwich this way every time, and your listeners will always bite!

Metaphor Magic

A metaphor is a figure of speech that uses one thing to mean another and makes a comparison between the two. The meaning is implied, not literal. So, when someone says, "He's become a shell of a man," you know not to take this literally. If you say, "The goalkeeper was a rock," you're not saying that the goalkeeper was an actual rock. Well-chosen metaphors inserted at just the right time increase understanding ten-fold because you're not over-explaining, just using what the listener already knows. Metaphors are succinct and can spark instant understanding.

Been There, Heard That

You may currently be using metaphors and not even know it since they're so common. If you've ever referred to yourself as a "night owl" or an "early bird" in reference to your sleep schedule, you're already using them. In fact, metaphors are so common, they can become cliché such as, "Love is a battlefield," or "Life is a journey." Overused metaphors lose their punch. It takes work to find clever, fresh comparisons that are truly magical. Consider this description by poet Rita Mae Brown, "Love is the wild card of existence." How about this take on life by novelist Peter De Vries: "Life is a zoo in a jungle." A good metaphor makes you pause, pay attention, and think.

What are your most common subjects? Think about metaphors you're already using to get your ideas across. Scour your language for tired clichés and eliminate them. (If you've heard the saying before, it's a cliché.) One good metaphor is better than 10 overused phrases. The best way to raise your awareness and think more creatively is to read well-written novels or essays. As you read, make it a challenge to recognize as many metaphors as you can. Soon, you'll be applying them to your own language.

Build a Bridge

Metaphors are particularly helpful when introducing new concepts. By using an existing example to explain similarities with a new idea, you're building a bridge between the familiar and the new. This technique is great to use when your audience is skeptical. That's why advertisers often use metaphors to sell new products to consumers. For example, the first cars were called "horseless carriages." People were familiar with carriages, so this gave them some idea of how to imagine a car, something they had never experienced. The Internet was first explained as the "information super highway" to convey the high-speed access. Remember, all learning must be in context, so metaphors create a frame of reference based on what your listener already knows.

Similes are Similar

Similes are a type of an analogy that can be distinguished by the inclusion of "like" or "as." They serve as another effective speaking tool for grabbing a listener's attention and increasing understanding. You can create similes by asking yourself, what's it like? Or, what's this the same as? Here are some popular examples:

- "A day without sunshine, is like, you know, night." *Steve Martin*
- "Worrying is as effective as trying to solve an algebra equation by chewing bubble gum." *Everybody's Free (to Wear Sunscreen)*
- "Life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you're going to get." *Forrest Gump*
- "Like sands through the hour glass, so are the days of our lives." *Days of Our Lives*

Similes can be overused as well. You've probably heard these phrases so often that they cease to be memorable: "strong as an ox" or "quiet as a mouse." The key to a strong simile is making sure the listener has some experience with the reference, otherwise your comparison will be "as clear as mud."

Include Signposts

Imagine driving down an unfamiliar road for hours with no road signs or GPS. After a while, you might start to wonder if you're headed in the right direction or want to know how far you still need to go. That's the same feeling you have when people ramble on with seemingly no direction. It's natural to wonder where the conversation is headed. Instead of concentrating on what the person is saying, you start trying to figure out his final destination and when he's going to finally arrive. The anecdote to this is to include verbal signposts.

Examples of Signposting

Signposts act as directional signals that point listeners to your main idea. They have the effect of making you sound confident and authoritative since you seem to know exactly where you're headed. Here are some examples:

- “My main point is...”
- “The most important thing to understand is...”
- “The question I need answered is...”
- “My bottom line is...”
- “The thing to remember is...”
- “What I'd like you to know is...”

To be effective, each of these signposts would need to be followed by one clear and succinct sentence. If your “bottom line” turns into multiple lines, it just leaves people confused.

Stay on the Road

Signposts also help you to avoid going off on a tangent. By clustering your ideas in groups of three (or fewer) and saying, “I have three points to make. Number one...” The number sets up an expectation in the listener's mind. If you stray or forget a point, the listener will actually correct you by asking, “What was number three?” Why limit it to three points? Because, most likely, that's what you can remember off the top of your head. If you tell people you have 10 points to make, they'll run in the other direction! Although you may have more to say, it's better to have several shorter conversations that people can actually absorb rather than bombard them with too many ideas at once.

Frontload

A technique closely related to signposting is called frontloading. It means to share the most important information first, and then fill in the details if necessary. Most times this means you will need to tell a story or explain an idea out of chronological order, starting with the most recent development. This can be difficult for people who like to start at the very beginning and include every last detail. The downside of communicating in such a linear fashion is that it can take too long to get to the point and interest drops off.

Examples of frontloading can be found in journalism. Reporters are attempting to capture your attention before you stop reading, listening, or change the channel. In order to do this, they

use a style of writing called an inverted pyramid, where the base of the triangle is at the top. They lead with the most crucial up-to-date information addressing the main questions of who, what, why, where, when, and how? This is followed by details such as evidence, recent background, controversy, or opposing viewpoints.

The last section (the smallest part of the inverted pyramid) includes more in-depth background information or related items that may be helpful, but not necessary to grasping the main idea. In a written article, most readers skip over this part unless they're very interested in the topic. This is the first section that gets cut if more ad space is needed which is why the bulk of information needs to be presented upfront. The same thing happens in on-air broadcasting. If a three-minute report has to be whittled down to two minutes, it's the last part that will be edited.

Start With the Point

It takes practice to start with the most recent information first, and then work backwards to fill in the details. But, in doing so, you'll find people will pay attention to what you have to say. You'll also learn that what you think is important to include may not be necessary at all. The best way to find out is to lead with crucial information followed by supporting details, and then pause. If the other person asks questions, you know to share more in-depth details. But, if he seems satisfied with the basics of what you said, there's no need to speak further on the topic, as it will fall on deaf ears. Likewise, if you're short on time, the answer is not to talk faster (making you sound nervous) but to frontload the important information, so you can easily edit the ending without compromising your message.

Stop Trying

What's the difference between trying and doing? Commitment. It's amazing the difference one word can make in how you're perceived. If you're a person who consistently talks about "trying" to do this or that, you're broadcasting that you're not really an achiever, just a person who tries a lot. You tell friends you'll "try" to come over if you have time and you tell colleagues you'll "try" to finish the project today. Your voicemail message states that you'll "try" to return phone calls as soon as possible – but you're not promising anything!

Compare that with a person who says what he's going to *do*. He talks about achieving financial stability by following a plan instead of "trying to spend less." He updates projects by saying what he's done and what he's working on next. His voicemail message states that he'll return calls within 24 hours, and he does. Which person would you naturally gravitate towards? A person who merely tries says nothing concrete and therefore his communication has the same effect as white noise. Eventually, people just tune it out.

Give Up Disclaimers

Perhaps you've heard commercials for certain medications that promise benefits so great that you might take the drug even if you don't suffer the ailment. But then at the very end of the commercial, the announcer (who talks faster than seems humanly possible) warns you of the possible side effects like chronic diarrhea or heart failure. Suddenly, that drug doesn't sound so appealing! Your message can have the same effect if you're including what's known as disclaimers.

Disclaimers set the listener up to disregard what you're about to say because it may or may not be worthy. They sound like, "I'm not really sure about this, but..." or "It's just my opinion because you have more experience." How different it sounds to drop the disclaimer and say, "Here are some concerns I have," or "Based on my experience, this is my opinion." Sometimes people couch their ideas with disclaimers because they want to avoid sounding conceited. But, the result swings too far the other way, making the person come across as having little confidence. If you don't believe in what you're saying, why say it? Cut the disclaimers and start with the message you want people to hear.

Stay Positive

It's far easier to understand a message stated in the positive versus the negative, so it's better to share what you can do, not what you can't. For instance, if you say, "I can't make it until 8:00," you're asking the listener to concentrate on what you *can't* do, and then in his own mind use a process of elimination to determine what you *can* do. That's a lot of work! How much easier it would be to say, "I'll be there at 8:00." At the same time, you're creating a subtle perception about yourself as being either a can-do or can't-do type of person.

Ask for What You Want

Likewise, positive directives that tell people what *to do*, versus what not to do, are easier to understand and follow. Here are some examples of negative directives. See if you can reword them so they state what *to do* versus what not to do:

- Don't be late.
- Don't trip.
- Don't be so negative.
- Stop having an attitude.
- Stop making mistakes.
- Don't worry.

Imagine how confused (and frightened) children would be if they were told, "Don't get hit by cars when crossing the street," instead of, "Look both ways before crossing the street." Adults deserve the same clarity. If you've ever been frustrated that someone hasn't followed your instructions or advice, perhaps it's because you were making him work too hard to figure out what you really wanted. Telling someone *not* to be nervous has never helped him to be calm. That's because the brain is concentrating on the main message of "nervous." Ask for what you want.

Staying positive is also communicating what's going right versus what's going wrong. That doesn't mean things are always running smoothly, but no one wants to listen to a chronic complainer. Even if you're giving corrective feedback, it's more effective to highlight what people are doing right and encouraging them to expand on those qualities to address deficits. If you only share what they're doing wrong, the message will surely stick! But, knowing what's wrong doesn't automatically translate into what to do instead so all you've done is reinforce the negative message.

Speak Honestly

People listen to those they trust. But how do you convey trustworthiness, especially if you don't have a long history with the person? Start by noticing what makes you trust someone. The answer has to be more specific than, "I just know," or "It's a gut feeling." Those feelings are the result of reactions to subtle verbal and non-verbal cues. One thing for sure, you won't encourage people to trust you by telling them to do so! Here are phrases that evoke immediate *distrust*:

- "Trust me."
- "Just between you and me..."
- "To be honest with you..."
- "I have to be honest here..."
- "Can I be honest with you?"
- "I'm not lying when I say..."

Trust is demonstrated and earned over time. Honest people don't have to announce it. So, the more you tell others to trust you, the more you increase doubt. In addition, speaking in sweeping generalities gives the suggestion of lying as in, "always," "never," and "everyone." These absolutes are rarely accurate because, most times, there are exceptions. It's more honest to say, "sometimes," "occasionally," and "some people." For example, you could respond to a friend's late arrival by saying, "You're *always* late to *everything* and I *never* complain, but *everyone* agrees you're a problem!" But, if the friend has been punctual at least once in the past, your statement would be untrue. Carefully choose your words to be specific and accurate.

Kick But

Another subtle way of communicating doubt is by using "but" in your sentences as in, "It's a good idea, *but* it won't work." That word negates everything that comes before it. What the listener hears is, "Blah, blah, blah, *but* now I'm going to tell you the truth." It would be more honest to say, "Thank you for the idea. It's not going to work in this situation and here's why." If both sides of the sentence are true, then replace "but" with "and." It would sound like, "It's a good idea *and* it would work under different circumstances, not this situation."

That's Not Funny

Finally, be very careful with the use of sarcasm. Used sparingly, it can be witty and entertaining. However, sarcasm can be hard for some people to read. They wonder, are you joking or do you really mean that? It makes people uneasy when they can't tell if you're being serious. Then, when you are serious, they don't believe you. Some people hide behind sarcasm because they're afraid to speak honestly, so they float comments. If they're not well received, they cover by saying, "Just kidding." But, were they? The problem with sarcasm is, you can't tell.

In Conclusion

In order to grab and keep people's attention, your message must be clear, concise, and well timed. After all, you're competing with multiple distractions such as technology, trauma, memory limitations, multi-tasking, and other speakers. A successful communicator will cut through the

“noise” by crafting a message that is succinct and uses techniques that help people pay attention like metaphors, frontloading, and signposting. In addition, people pay attention to those they trust. Becoming more aware of the subtle cues that suggest competency and trustworthiness versus presenting vague or disingenuous messages will keep people tuned in to what you have to say.

TEST

How to Speak so Others Listen

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Name: _____

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Circle the correct answer:

1. People are more likely to pay attention to messages that are:
 - a) Vague and non-offensive.
 - b) Complex and filled with impressive language.
 - c) Concise and to the point.

2. Frontloading your message means to:
 - a) Start with the most up-to-date, important information.
 - b) Speak in chronological order.
 - c) Offering to answer questions first, followed by your message.

3. Metaphors help listeners pay attention to your message because:
 - a) You get to use fancy language.
 - b) They help explain new ideas by comparing them to something familiar.
 - c) They make simple ideas more complicated.

4. Three ways to establish credibility are:
 - a) Bragging, gossiping, lecturing.
 - b) Age, number of years on the job, and job title.
 - c) Personal experience, observation, and education.

5. Using disclaimers helps others to trust you more.
 - a) T
 - b) F

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