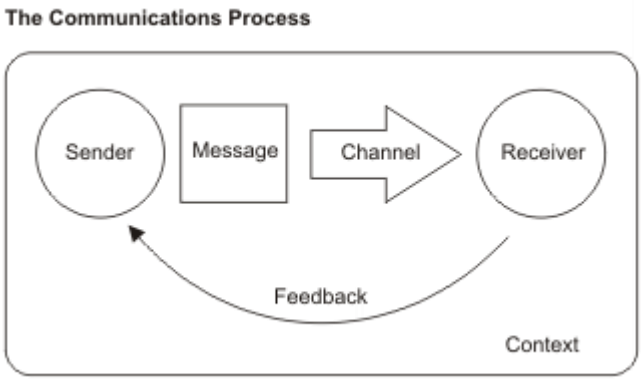
Communication & Active Listening Skills

Communications Skills - The Importance of Removing Barriers:

Communication barriers can pop-up at every stage of the communication process (which consists of **sender**, **message**, **channel**, **receiver**, **feedback** and **context** - see the diagram below) and have the potential to create misunderstanding and confusion.



To be an effective communicator and to get your point across without misunderstanding and confusion, your goal should be to lessen the frequency of these barriers at each stage of this process with clear, concise, accurate, well-planned communications. We follow the process through below:

Sender...

To establish yourself as an effective communicator, you must first establish credibility; this involves displaying knowledge of the subject, the audience and the context in which the message is delivered.

You must also know your audience (individuals or groups to which you are delivering your message). Failure to understand who you are communicating to will result in delivering messages that are misunderstood.

Message...

Next, consider the message itself. Written, oral and nonverbal communications are effected by the sender's tone, method of organization, validity of the argument, what is communicated and what is left out, as well as your individual style of communicating. Messages also have intellectual and emotional components, with intellect allowing us the ability to reason and emotion allowing us to present motivational appeals, ultimately changing minds and actions.

Channel...

Messages are conveyed through channels, with verbal including face-to-face meetings, telephone and videoconferencing; and written including letters, emails, memos and reports.

Receiver...

These messages are delivered to an audience. No doubt, you have in mind the actions or reactions you hope your message prompts from this audience. Keep in mind, your audience also enters into the communication process with ideas and feelings that will undoubtedly influence their understanding of your message and their response. To be a successful communicator, you should consider these before delivering your message, acting appropriately.

Feedback...

Your audience will provide you with feedback, verbal and nonverbal reactions to your communicated message. Pay close attention to this feedback as it is crucial to ensuring the audience understood your message.

The Importance of Non-Verbal Communication

For instance, it's not always just what you say. It's also how you "say" it – taking into account your eyes, your posture, your overall body language, even your appearance at the time the communication is exchanged, and the voice in which you offer the exchange.

In verbal communication, an active dialogue is engaged with the use of words. At the same time, however, non-verbal communication takes place, relying on nonverbal cues, such as gestures, eye contact, facial expressions, even clothing and personal space.

Nonverbal cues are very powerful, making it crucial that you pay attention to your actions, as well as the nonverbal cues of those around you. If, during your meeting, participants begin to doodle or chat amongst themselves, they are no longer paying attention to you: Your message has become boring or your delivery is no longer engaging.

Once again, you need to be mindful of cultural differences when using or interpreting nonverbal cues. For instance, the handshake that is so widely accepted in Western cultures as a greeting or confirmation of a business deal is not accepted in other cultures, and can cause confusion.

While eye contact, facial expressions, posture, gestures, clothing and space are obvious nonverbal communication cues, others strongly influence interpretation of messages, including how the message is delivered. This

means paying close attention to your tone of voice, even your voice's overall loudness and its pitch.

Be mindful of your own nonverbal cues, as well as the nonverbal cues of those around you. Keep your messages short and concise. This means preparing in advance whenever possible. And for the impromptu meeting, it means thinking before you speak.

Giving People Time

Setting aside a specific time for meetings and regular communications is a great idea. This allows time for everyone involved to prepare. Also, keep in mind that listening is oftentimes much more productive when working to communicate effectively, and can very well be more important than talking. Allow everyone involved the time they need to communicate effectively.

Enhancing your communications:

- Because gestures can both compliment and contradict your message, be mindful of these.
- Eye contact is an important step in sending and receiving messages. Eye contact can be a signal of interest, a signal of recognition, even a sign of honesty and credibility.
- Closely linked to eye contact are facial expressions, which can reflect attitudes and emotions.
- Posture can also be used to more effectively communicate your message.
- Clothing is important. By dressing for your job, you show respect for the values and conventions of your organization.
- Be mindful of people's personal space when communicating. Do not invade their personal space by getting too close and do not confuse communications by trying to exchange messages from too far away.

Verbal Communication

Although somewhat obvious and deceptively simple, issues include:

- Keep the message clear
- Be prepared
- Keep the message simple
- Be vivid when delivering the message
- Be natural
- Keep the message concise

Preparation is underrated. In fact, it is one of the most important factors in determining your communication successes. When possible, set meeting

times and speaking and presentation times well in advance, thus allowing yourself the time you need to prepare your communications, mindful of the entire communication process (sender, message, channel, receiver, feedback and context). By paying close attention to each of these stages and preparing accordingly, you ensure your communications will be more effective and better understood.

Of course, not all communications can be scheduled. In this case, preparation may mean having a good, thorough understanding of the office going-ons, enabling you to communicate with the knowledge you need to be effective, both through verbal and written communications.

Being prepared: Guidelines for Thinking Ahead:

Ask yourself: **Who? What? How? When? Where? Why?**

Who are you speaking to? What are their interests, presuppositions and values? What do they share in common with others; how are they unique?

What do you wish to communicate? One way of answering this question is to ask yourself about the 'success criteria'. How do you know if and when you have successfully communicated what you have in mind?

How can you best convey your message? Language is important here, as are the nonverbal cues discussed earlier. Choose your words and your nonverbal cues with your audience in mind. Plan a beginning, middle and end. If time and place allow, consider and prepare audio-visual aids.

When? Timing is important here. Develop a sense of timing, so that your contributions are seen and heard as relevant to the issue or matter at hand. There is a time to speak and a time to be silent. 'It's better to be silent than sing a bad tune.'

Where? What is the physical context of the communication in mind? You may have time to visit the room, for example, and rearrange the furniture. Check for availability and visibility if you are using audio or visual aids.

Why? In order to convert hearers into listeners, you need to know why they should listen to you – and tell them if necessary. What disposes them to listen? That implies that you know yourself why you are seeking to communicate – the value or worth or interest of what you are going to say.

Be concise. Be brief. Use short words and sentences. Where appropriate, support these with short, easy-to-understand examples, which help demonstrate your message.

Written Communication

Write With Necessary Caution...

When writing, be mindful of the fact that once something is in written form, it cannot be taken back. Communicating through words can be more concrete than verbal communications, with less room for error and even less room for mistakes. This presents written communicators with new challenges, including spelling, grammar, punctuation, even writing style and actual wording.

Thankfully, today's technology makes memo, letter and proposal writing much easier by providing reliable tools that check and even correct misspelled words and incorrect grammar use. Unfortunately, these tools are not fail proof and will require your support, making your knowledge in this area important.

The Importance of "Style"...

Some of the most basic tips to remember when writing include:

- Avoid the use of slang words
- Try not to use abbreviations (unless appropriately defined)
- Steer away from the use of symbols (such as ampersands (&))
- Clichés should be avoided, or at the very least, used with caution
- Brackets are used to play down words or phrases
- Dashes are generally used for emphasis
- Great care should ALWAYS be taken to spell the names of people and companies correctly
- Numbers should be expressed as words when the number is less than 10 or is used to start a sentence (example: 10 years ago, my brother and I…). The number 10, or anything greater than 10, should be expressed as a figure (example: My brother has 13 Matchbox cars.)
- Quotation marks should be placed around any directly quoted speech or text and around titles of publications.
- Keep sentences short

While the above tips cover the most common mistakes made when writing letters, memos and reports, they in no way cover everything you need to know to ensure your written communications are accurate and understood.

Listening Skills

Much research says that we can miss up to 70% of a message because of inattentive or poor listening.

There are many reasons why we miss 70 percent of what is being said to us. Many believe the most important reason is because we're all on overload. We all have 168 hours in each week. Some of us choose to fill that time so completely that we simply don't have the energy to accept any information that does not directly apply to us. In this instance our ability to "screen" information for relevancy becomes critical. If you've ever missed an important event because of "screening" you can understand how damaging the use of this tool can be.

The second most important reason we miss so much information is a skill that is used during the screening process and also one that guides us very well in all other aspects of our lives. It's "judgment".

Here are some of the ways that "judgment" works against us in a listening environment:

1. if the speaker is unclear, ineffective, or difficult to understand for cultural or physical reasons, we assume the information is not valuable and choose not to focus on the message.

2. If we do not like the speaker, the message is tainted with our personal opinion of the value of that person. If that person is not valuable, how can anything they have to say be important?

3. If the speaker himself or herself is expressing a specific tone or attitude that we find distracting or uncomfortable, we will focus more on our feelings around that tone or attitude than on the message itself.

4. If we believe the true message purpose to be different from the context of the message itself, we are less like to stay tuned in to that speaker as our mind is frantically utilizing that time to determine what's really going on.

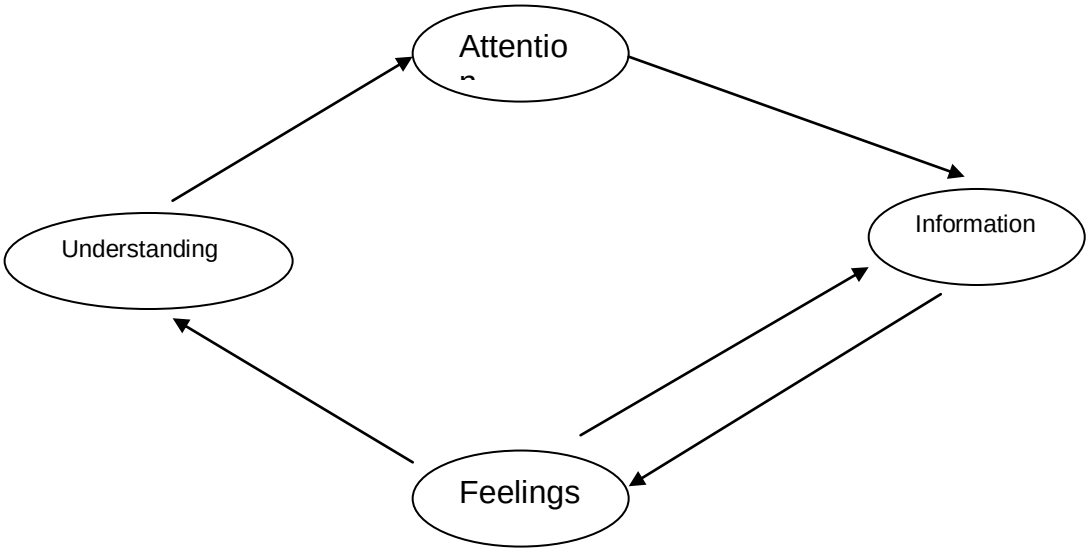
5. If the speaker's body language or voice tone is giving us cues that do not align with his or her message, our mind begins searching for a way to connect the verbal cues with the physical ones. If we cannot find one, we will focus on the discrepancies, drowning out the message.

The third most important reason that we don't listen well is our own ego, "If it's not about me, it's not important." When we have this perception, we focus on those things we can fix (to make ourselves feel good), change (to prove our value), or accept as an invitation to turn the conversation back to us. How many times have you missed part of a conversation because you were already in the process of creating your response?

By focusing on our purpose for being part of the conversation, we can

establish a motivation for listening and create the behaviour necessary to clearly understand the message of the speaker. Better communication starts with our ability to comprehend messages sent to us.

Active Listening



Key Principle 1 – Give your full attention

- Maintain eye contact but don't stare
- Sit upright, poised slightly forward
- Give confirming nods
- Watch the speakers facial expression, body postures and gestures – more than half the information we receive is non-verbal
- Watch for sudden changes of posture from someone you're speaking to – this can indicate they have been surprised, or offended. It can also mean that they are just uncomfortable so don't rely solely on body language, check it out with a confirmatory question

Key Principle 2 – Reflect back individual items of information

Key Principle 3 – Reflect back and label the speaker's feelings

Reflecting back is like holding up a mirror to the speaker so they can recognise the words that are being said. There are two ways of doing this and the difference is important.

1. With items of ***fact, individual items of information*** (key principle 2), paraphrase the speakers statement in your own words.

2. With items of ***feelings*** use the same words that the speaker is using. If you use different words the speaker may feel that you haven't understood and may well deny your statement and repeat their own more vehemently.

In both cases you need to find the 'space' to do the reflecting – and like any other skill this takes practice.

In some cases the speaker may appear to view the information with a feeling that is not being expressed. In this case you will need to prompt the speaker by offering a 'label' for the feelings, for example:

"It seems to me that you are not happy with this move to self-managed teams."

These two aspects of listening – for facts and feelings – are key to the idea of active listening. Quite often more information can be gleaned about the true situation from feelings than the facts that are blandly presented. Hence the need to gauge feelings with every item of information that is given to you.

You will need to make space in a conversation to do this mirroring. With a slow speaker this is easy – you can paraphrase during one of the pauses that occur. With a more voluble person you may need to interrupt. When you do it is important that you signal your intentions, to show that you're not interrupting to express your point of view but to check your understanding. So say something like "Can I just check that I've understood those points, Silvia?" or "Mary, I just need to make sure I understand what you're saying".

Key Principle 4 – Summarise overall understanding

When the cycle of reflecting back facts and feelings has gone on for some time, and you are beginging to grasp the overall ideas and thoughts of the speaker, a summary will help you both to establish a common understanding from which you can move to the next part of the discussion. It is particularly important to summarise at the end of a particular subject and at the end of a meeting.

Dos and don'ts of effective listening

Do	Don't
- Give total concentration to the speaker	- Let your mind wander onto other things

- Look at the speaker and give full physical attention - Assume a posture which shows interest - Give full attention of your mind to what is being said - Accept everything that is said, either verbal or non-verbal - Look warm and interested - Give verbal signs of encouragement - Tolerate silences **Do (Cont)** - Give a relaxed impression with humour where appropriate - Come in with a totally open mind - Observe non-verbal statements from the speaker	- Let your eyes wander from the speaker or give other physical signs that you are not attending - Sit (or stand) in a posture expressing apathy, impatience or other negative states - Think of what you want to say next while they are speaking - Give indication, by gesture, facial expressions or comment of whether you agree or not with what is being said - Look cold, reserved or hostile **Don't (Cont)** - Avoid all verbal utterance of encouragement - Interrupt if a speaker pauses for a second or two - Give an impression of heaviness, seriousness or intensity - Start listening with preconceived ideas about the message or the person - Concentrate only on the voice of the speaker

Handling Conflict in the Group

(This is taken from the NHS Modernisation Agency's "Improvement Leaders' Guide - Managing the human dimensions of change: working with individuals")

Conflict is a reality of working with groups and cannot be avoided but it can be managed and it can turn out to be very positive. An organisation that was operated completely by computers or robots without any people would never experience the stresses and detrimental effects of conflict. However that organisation would not remain in business for very long, as it would never grow and develop.

Conflict can be defined as "when behaviour is intended to obstruct the achievement of some other person's goals."
D Coon

Conflict can range from a minor misunderstanding, to behaviour where each party only seeks to destroy the other. Generally conflicts have two elements:

- The relationship between the people involved
- The issue which is the basis of the disagreement

As a trainer, you should aim to be able to intervene effectively in the early stages of conflict by preventing, containing or handling even if you are involved in the conflict yourself. Techniques to do this include:

- Preventing escalation by identifying early signs and taking action
- Containing to stop it worsening by dealing with difficulties and tensions and working to re-establish relationships
- Handling by taking positive steps to deal with the conflict issues and monitoring the effects

If the conflict gets worse, you will probably need someone else to help the parties involved in the conflict develop longer-term strategies.

Preventing conflict from escalating

Conflicts will take on a life of their own and will get worse if left alone, so ask yourself the following questions about any conflict as soon as it becomes apparent to try to stop it escalating.

- What type of conflict is it?
    - Hot conflict where each party is keen to meet and discuss to thrash things out

- Cold conflict where things are kept quiet and under the surface

- What are the most important underlying influences at work?
- What is this really all about?
- Where is the conflict going?
- How can I stop it?
- What needs to happen now?

Containing conflict

Remember that conflicts are more about people than problems, so understand and value the differences in the parties involved, which may include yourself.

- Recognise your own style with its strengths and its limitations
- Listen and try to understand the other person instead of attributing a motive from your viewpoint
- Ask questions to develop your understanding of the goal from the other person's point of view
- Look for a solution that incorporates both goals

Conflict when managed properly can be 'an energising and vitalising force in groups and in the organisation.'
Fitchie & Leary

Handling conflict

The following checklist of do's and don'ts may be useful at any stage of a conflict situation.

Do	Don't
• Work to cool down the debate in a hot conflict • Convince parties in a cold conflict that something can be done • Ensure that the issues are fully outlined • Acknowledge emotions and different styles • Make sure you have a comfortable environment for any meeting • Set a time frame for the discussion • Ensure good rapport • Use names and, if appropriate, titles	• Conduct your conversation in a pubic place • Leave the discussion open - create an action plan • Finish their sentence for them • Use jargon • Constantly interrupt • Do something else whilst trying to listen • Distort the truth • Use inappropriate humour

throughout

Conflict means different things to different people. This may be due to their personal style or even their professional training.

- Some people can find a heated discussion stimulating and enjoy a 'good argument' whilst others can be torn apart by it. Just because someone asks you lots of pointed questions or disagrees with you in a meeting does not mean that they are against you or the objectives of the project. It may just be their way of gathering further information to think about later

- Remember also that doctors and scientists in general are trained to challenge information, concepts and ideas. They may be testing out the validity of the project and your knowledge. We have found over and over again that direct questioning does not mean that people are against the proposal

The main thing is to acknowledge any conflict and not to avoid it. Describe the issues involved, talk about it and work through it.

Case study

There was an agreement to decide a set of referral criteria for patients with suspected cancer. Each of the consultants involved currently applied different clinical practice and different thresholds for deciding whether or not a patient was high risk. The discussions lasted for several weeks and were characterised by one consultant quoting research findings only to be challenged by another using anecdotal evidence and a third acting as devil's advocate posing many 'what if' scenarios. The Improvement Project Manager managed the situation in a number of ways. These included summarising where there seemed to be agreement and bringing examples of criteria set by other hospitals both to stimulate discussion and to foster an environment of wider collaboration. The team of consultants eventually agreed on a set of criteria and went on to demonstrate their ownership and agreement by collectively defending their decisions at a National Conference, in the face of intense questioning from their peers. When asked about the process, the consultants commented that they had never had such an in depth argument about clinical practice and they had found it invigorating. They said that it had set the tone for frank discussions in other meetings and the 'conflict' had kept them hooked on the project.