

Communication Skills For Daily Use at Work

Listening, giving and receiving instructions, asking questions, and making introductions are communication skills that are often overlooked. Many jobs, however, require good skills in these areas. For example, what happens when a waitress does not listen as customers place orders from the menu? A hospital orderly who does not follow directions is of little use. How can an emergency operator who does not listen and ask good questions help someone who is in trouble? A salesperson who cannot make introductions properly leaves a poor first impression. The level of skill you have in these areas can make a big difference in your ability to do a good job. This publication will focus on specific ways to improve your ability to listen, give and receive instructions, ask questions, and make introductions.

Listening

Listening, not just Hearing

The average person spends 63 percent of the day listening. This suggests that listening is an important activity in daily life. Listening is more than just hearing. Hearing is understanding the message. Listening involves hearing the message and interpreting the sender's meaning. It is an active process that requires the ears and brain to work together.

Reasons for Listening

We listen to gain information, to make decisions, and for enjoyment. Good listening habits help to avoid misunderstandings, embarrassment, and mistakes on the job. These situations waste time and energy that could be spent on more productive activities.

Barriers to Good Listening

Factors that prevent us from listening are called barriers. Examples are noise, lack of rest, lack of interest in the topic, poor room arrangement, and closed-mindedness. You can overcome listening barriers by identifying the reasons you listen poorly and finding ways to remove the obstacles.

Ways to Improve Listening

1. Concentrate on the message. Sit away from noise and other distractions, but close enough to the speaker to hear the message clearly. Do not let your mind wander.
2. Listen for the main points. It is impossible to remember everything you hear. The average person remembers only 25 percent of what is heard. The most important ideas to remember are usually stated at the beginning and again at the end of a presentation.
3. Listen for details that support main points. Decide which details are most important to remember and concentrate on those.

4. To stay focused ask yourself questions about what is being said. Example: "Do I agree with what I am hearing?"

5. Listen to the entire message. If you stop listening before the message is completed, key bits of information can be missed.

6. Take notes. Write down ideas, facts, names, and dates that will help to trigger your memory later.

Instructions

Giving Instructions

Good instructions are simple instructions. Always explain the simplest way to do the task. Leave out unnecessary details that could be confusing. Organize your thoughts. Use terms the listener understands. Repeat if the task is complicated. This helps the listener to remember the instructions. When repeating instructions, try to use the same words used the first time. Avoid making repeated sounds such as "uh," "well, uh," and "mm" that can frustrate the listener. Drawing a picture might be helpful when instructions are long or complicated. Admit if you do not know something, and tell the listener that you will get back to him or her when you have the correct information. Always follow through with your promise.

Receiving Instructions

When receiving instructions, focus your attention on the supervisor or coworker who is giving instructions. Having the ability to understand instructions shows that you are on the way to success on the job. Pay attention to the words used.

Ask for clarification if you don't understand something. Check with the speaker and repeat the instructions in your own words to make sure that you understand. Watch the steps closely when someone shows you how to do a task. Write important points in a notebook to help you remember the instructions later.

Asking Questions

Employees learn what they should and should not do by asking questions. Don't be afraid or embarrassed to ask questions when necessary. It is better to ask questions and get a clear understanding than to do the wrong thing. Get in the habit of asking questions before a problem worsens.

Tips for Asking Questions

1. Direct your questions to the right person. If you don't know who the right person is, ask your supervisor. He or she is the person who can answer most of your questions, but coworkers can also be helpful. Learn which questions to ask a supervisor and which to ask a coworker.

2. Check the company policy manual, directory, and other reference materials for the answer before asking someone. If you can't find the answer on your own, then ask someone. This will increase your resourcefulness and help you become independent.

3. Don't take up too much of someone's time with your questions. Ask the most important question. Be direct and to the point. Remember that the other person is doing you a favor and is delaying his or her work while talking with you.

4. Choose the right time to ask questions. It is better to ask questions while someone is cheerful, not grumpy or busy.

5. Repeat answers in your own words to show that you clearly understand.

6. Thank the person for taking the time to answer your questions.

7. Work hard to remember the answers. When someone has to tell you the same thing twice, it makes you look bad and it takes up more of his or her time. Write answers on a notepad for later reference.

Word Questions Carefully

The words used when asking a question influence the answer you receive. To get the information you really need, word your questions carefully. Keep these guidelines in mind:

1. Make sure you ask a question, not make a statement. A question is "What copy machine settings will result in a high quality copy?" A statement is "I think the machine needs to be on certain settings to get a high quality copy." A question worded as a statement can confuse the listener.

2. State the question as simply and straightforwardly as possible. Long, complicated questions should be avoided. A simple, straightforward statement is "When can we expect the supplies?" A more complicated question is "We need the supplies as soon as possible, so when do you think they will arrive in our office?"

3. State the question to get more than a yes or no answer. "How does this new labeling machine compare to the old one?" results in more information than "Is the new labeling machine better than the old one?"

Introductions

Introductions break the ice when two people meet for the first time. Remember that most people are shy. Making introductions can help people in new situations feel better. Taking the initiative to introduce yourself to your boss and coworkers gives the impression that you are a confident, take-charge type of person. Making introductions for others shows that you are thoughtful and considerate of their feelings.

Introducing Yourself to Others

Informal and business introductions are the two main types of introductions that take place at work. Below are directions for each type of introduction.

Informal Introduction

First greet the person.
Then state your name.
Say something about yourself.

“Hi.”
“My name is Annie Johnson.”
“This is my first day as a machine operator.”

Business Introduction

First greet the person.
Then state your name.
Say something about yourself.

“Hi.”
“My name is Annie Johnson.”
“I am with XYZ Company. I have come to repair the generator.”

Tips for Introducing Others

1. Say the name of the person with the highest status first. “Dr. Wilson, this is Martha Peterson.”
2. When both people have the same status, say the name of the older person first.
3. When status and age are the same, say the name of the woman first.
4. When the above rules do not apply, present the person you know better to the other person.

Wording an Introduction

Here are suggestions for what to say when making a formal or an informal introduction.

Formal

“I would like to introduce”
“I would like you to meet”
“May I present”

Informal

“This is”
“Do you know”
“Have you met”

It is important to pay attention to what you say and how you communicate if you want your employer and coworkers to have confidence in you. Everyone in the workforce should practice good, basic communication skills. Practice these suggestions for talking to others, listening, giving and receiving instructions, asking questions, and making introductions and you will be on the path to employment success.

Sources:

Kimbrel, G. & Vineyard, B. S. (1992). *Succeeding in the world of work*. New York, NY: Glencoe McGraw-Hill.

Ludden, L. (1992). *Job Savvy: How to be a success at work*. Indianapolis, IN: JIST Works, Inc.

Newcombe, P. J. (1988). *Communication: An introduction to speech*. Newton, MA: Allyn and Bacon, Inc.

O'Connor, J. R. (1988). *Speech: Exploring communication*. Englewood, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Shingleton, J. D. (1991). *Career planning for the 1990's: A guide for today's graduates*. Garrett Park, MD: Garrett Park Press.

Verderber, R.F. (1988). *Speech for effective communication*. Chicago, IL: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers.



HE-764

Carol Centrallo, *Extension Specialist, Consumer Science and Personal Financial Management*, Associate Professor, Consumer Affairs, Auburn University

For more information, call your county Extension office. Look in your telephone directory under your county's name to find the number.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work in agriculture and home economics, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, and other related acts, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The Alabama Cooperative Extension System (Alabama A&M University and Auburn University) offers educational programs, materials, and equal opportunity employment to all people without regard to race, color, national origin, religion, sex, age, veteran status, or disability.

4.5M, **Reprinted July 2007**, HE-764

© 2007 by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System. All rights reserved.