



Project Pointers

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By Marta A. Brockmeyer, Ph.D.

Previous newsletters have outlined the fundamentals of successful project management. Topics have included scope clarification, time estimates, project management tools and effective meeting tips. But the one topic that flows through all aspects of the project life cycle is communication, the focus of this issue.

This communication review is offered as a “tune up” for many readers and as a suggestion box for others. Many of you are exceptional communicators, some skilled clinicians. But we all have days when we are not as clear and focused as we would like to be. I have moments when my counselor education flies out the window—those stressful times when I listen poorly, speak too quickly or confuse others. That’s when I go back to the basics.

What is communication?

Communication is the interchange of thoughts, opinions or information by speech, writing or activity. It implies both delivering and receiving, a combination we often overlook. Think for a minute about all the people—your customers—with whom you communicate at work: supervisors, colleagues in other departments, volunteers, funders, vendors and clients. While these customers can feel endless, they all fall into one of two major categories: external customers or internal customers.

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A participant of one of Marta's fall courses wrote, "This course was much like a 10-week course I took through an MBA program, except this one was much more clearly stated and more thoroughly communicated, in one afternoon!"

External customers are those people outside the organization with whom you need to build good working relationships. **Internal customers** are those fellow employees with whom you also need to build good working relationships. In both cases, mutual understanding is the goal for both sender and receiver. This “complete” state improves work and allows both parties to feel more fulfilled.

Think about a project team that models effective communication and try to describe the behaviors that work. If you have developed a Working Contract recently, you probably included a few bullet points related to team communication. You might have agreed to speak honestly, listen until the other person has completed speaking or limit hostile non-verbal behavior when you disagree. If you have not yet developed communication norms, guide the team through this exercise as soon as possible.

A project is an organized, temporary endeavor that creates a unique product or service.

While focusing on the positive, it helps to also consider the **barriers to team communication**. These depend on the people, the project scope and the office environment. Barriers may include such things as fear, past experience, mistrust, hidden agenda, rivalry and emotional blocks. Jargon often gets in the way, also. And, certain words may be barriers in themselves. Try to avoid using the following words or expressions:

<i>Can't</i>	<i>Can't help you</i>
<i>You should have</i>	<i>It's all we can do</i>
<i>That's agency policy</i>	<i>You have to</i>
<i>Always</i>	<i>Never.</i>

What other phrases work against mutual understanding?

Listening

Listening seems to be the most difficult communication skill to develop. As adults, we retain only twenty-five percent of what we hear. We need to hear a message five or six times, in several different ways, to retain it. While writing memos, crafting email for potential donors and preparing Board exhibits require experience and competence, listening is the foundation of the communication path. And, it is very hard work for many reasons. Active listening requires a commitment to the process and implies a partnership with the other person. It also requires dedicated time, time when multitasking will be set aside to allow for concentration. And, listening does involve physiological issues, particularly as colleagues grow older.

Three Stages of Listening

1. Receiving
2. Processing
3. Responding

Our listening patterns are set when we are children. Most people learn the habits that they experience in their closest adult circle. In many cases, these internal messages or tapes negatively work against our understanding. Some of these messages might include:

*Don't argue with me.
You don't know what you're talking about.
Don't interrupt your elders.
Don't be forward.
Shut up and listen.
Children should be seen and not heard, etc.*

Even in healthy families, listening can be hard work. As a strategy for improved listening, consider the following **Seven Listening Tips:**

1. Listen for the **main ideas**. Even if someone speaks at length, the heart of their message can be captured in a sentence or two. While all of the words may be important, your immediate charge is to simply state the topic and key points.
2. Use **familiarity** to advantage with co-workers and stakeholders. If you are listening to a colleague with whom you've worked for several years, you may know her pet peeves, family situation or politics. Because of this, you can focus more easily on her key points-you probably will not get lost in the verbiage.
3. Eliminate **distractions** and physical barriers. While we can't walk in to someone's office and start cleaning, it may be appropriate to move chairs, close windows, or ask to move a stack of files that make it impossible for you to get comfortable. Sometimes, the best aid for active listening is a walk down the hall, moving the other person to a neutral place. As I have seen so often in my consultancy, it is not unusual to find that a person who is in crisis may be trying to work in a room that makes it impossible to do good planning.
4. **Follow through** on what you said you would do. This sounds easy, right? Whether you have agreed to take minutes, dig out a report for someone or place the call to the printer, just do it. This step in active listening only reinforces the earlier steps.
5. Take an **interest** in what the speaker has to say. You may find it difficult to listen because you feel you are well versed in a topic or you do not respect the speaker. In most cases, there is still room for information sharing and perhaps enjoyment. While it is often easier to listen to someone you do not know because of the novelty factor, almost any exchange can be helpful if you focus on the process of listening.

6. Remember you have **two ears, two eyes and one mouth.** Before speaking, especially if it involves stating an opinion or suggesting a course of action, gather your data through listening and watching. Allow the other person to speak openly, try to stay with them during their process, then speak. In some cases, a nonverbal may be more appropriate. But you cannot listen and speak at the same time.
7. Be **patient.** Always easier said than done!
8. Take **notes.** Unless you have an extraordinary memory and can easily recall the heart of discussions, write down the key themes from your listener's presentation.

Taking notes is a sign that you take the speaker seriously and you will be more likely to follow through on what you say you will do. Sometimes, reviewing your notes allows you to see key themes that are emerging in a project, then you can prepare a document that allows you to share these with others.

During the next week, practice these tips and see how people respond to you. Active listening is a valued commodity and one that is in short supply. As you practice, you will find that your project communication will improve.

Happy spring!

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**Marta A. Brockmeyer, Ph.D.
553 East 4th Street
Newport, KY 41071**

**Phone: 859.581.7089
Email: marta@martabrockmeyer.com
www.martabrockmeyer.com**

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