THE
BUSINESS
STUDENT'S
GUIDE TO
STUDY AND
EMPLOYABILITY

PETER MORGAN
COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY

CHAPTER STRUCTURE

When you see the ❌ this means go to the companion website https://study.sagepub.com/morgan to do a quiz, complete a task, read further or download a template.

AIMS OF THE CHAPTER

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Describe the communication process and how it can go wrong.
- Identify the various verbal, non-verbal and para-linguistic behaviours that can influence communication.
- Evaluate and develop your communication skills with a particular focus on communicating in difficult situations, giving feedback and active listening.

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INTRODUCTION

Understanding human communication is not easy – we could have based this whole book on communication skills. We probably know some people who love to talk, but, on the other hand, there are others who seem to have nothing to say. We could say that both are good communicators if they use their skills appropriately, and in the right situations, but communicating is no more about talking than it is about being quiet all the time. So, we could ask: ‘What does “use their skills appropriately” mean, and what are the “right situations”?’

There is no way to cover in one chapter everything that could be covered or that could enable you to become an expert communicator in one go. The subject is the topic of complete modules and degree programmes in themselves. The aim of this chapter is to give you an awareness of the key things to bear in mind as you communicate.

Your ability to communicate has implications for a large number of areas covered elsewhere in this text. It will affect the demonstration of your leadership skills (Chapter 11), your ability to work in teams (Chapter 12), to give presentations (Chapter 9) and to work cross-culturally (Chapter 13). Your communication skills will be vital for performing well at interviews (Chapter 17), and will and even being able to say ‘no’ in an appropriate way so that you can manage your time better – Chapter 3). In so many situations, the ability to communicate in a way that ensures a message is understood in the way you intend is critical to being able to perform well in nearly every job role. Yet it is the one thing that tends to cause the most problems in employment (and personal) relationships. Poor communication with others – or even an unwillingness to communicate (and an awareness of when or why not to communicate) – is important to get right, which is why it is included here.

Finally, much of the content below relates to oral communication, some of which will overlap with Chapter 9 on presentation skills, but there is some content on written communication in Chapter 7. This set of skills – getting grammar and spelling correct, ensuring your academic work is well structured, demonstrating your critical thinking – is also covered in Chapter 7 in relation to academic work. Within employment, however, there is a need to ensure that emails and letters are written in a particular way, so there will be some content covering these areas.

SKILLS SELF-ASSESSMENT

Complete the brief questionnaire below to see how well you communicate with others. Give each item a score between 0 and 5, where 0 is ‘not at all like me’ or ‘strongly agree’, and 5 is ‘very much like me’ or ‘strongly disagree’.

When I communicate with others, I know that I …

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Never interrupt other people in a conversation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Find myself daydreaming during most conversations because I find what others talk about is quite boring to me</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Want to be the last person to say anything during a discussion</td>
<td></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Score</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Think I can reduce tension during an emotional discussion or argument</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Want to think of something funny to say</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Never misinterpret what someone else is saying</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Vary the intonation (pitch) of my voice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Smile as much as I can</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Speak very slowly to ensure that I can get my message across</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Am happy to be passionate about a topic if I think it is important</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Speak too loudly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Use facial expressions (frowns, smiles) to emphasise the message I want to give</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Judge the person who is communicating with me</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Feel nervous about how others will react to what I want to say</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Consider the words I use carefully to ensure that the other person does not react emotionally</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Choose my language and the words that I use so that the other person will understand</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Get impatient with other people if they are taking a long time to say what they want to say</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Am interested in what others have to say</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>Do not care how others will react to what I want to say</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>Am happy to let others talk if they are saying what I want to say anyway</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>Regularly get emotional about what others say</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>Always understand exactly what others are trying to say</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>Cause problems in my relationships with them, but I do not know why</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>Believe that others will interpret my messages in the same way as I intend them</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>Enjoy myself</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.</td>
<td>Struggle to understand different accents when I am talking with or listening to people from different places</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.</td>
<td>Think carefully about whether I believe what someone is saying</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.</td>
<td>Reflect on how well I am communicating with others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.</td>
<td>Understand when I need to be formal and business-like, rather than informal and friendly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30.</td>
<td>Recognise how my own personality, perception and past experiences can affect how well I communicate</td>
<td></td>
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 This questionnaire is longer than that of any other chapter, indicating the complexity of what we refer to as ‘communication skills’. It is also deliberately focused on oral communication, rather than written communication, simply because oral communication is more frequent in most people’s lives than written communication, though some of the issues that affected your answers to these questions will also be apparent in your engagement with written communications as well. There are few right and wrong answers to this questionnaire, but for most answers the answer we give will have consequences for the quality of our relationships with others – especially those whose answers may be very different to our own.

FOR YOU TO DO

With others you know reasonably well, choose any five of the questions above (maybe randomly) and discuss the following:

1. Do you know others who might have different answers to you for these questions? Are they easy or difficult to work with?
2. What might the impact be of working with people whose answers to those questions are different to your own?
3. Why the questions might be important to consider in relation to communicating better with others.
4. Do you think there are better and worse answers to these questions?

THE CONTEXT OF COMMUNICATION

Very little communication takes place in isolation. Unless we are a brand-new manager taking over a local business or a new student who has just enrolled on a course, most communication will take place in the context of relationships which already exist. Figure 12.2 summarises the complexity of such a situation.

We will examine most of these processes and technical terms below, but the quality of relationships we have with others tends to be influenced by a number of factors, as outlined in Figure 12.2.

The way in which we behave through various media – our words, our facial expressions, tone of voice, and so on – will create impressions of us in the minds of others. Usually, whether we are successful in communicating what we wish to communicate will be influenced by aspects of communication that we can control: our body language (non-verbal behaviour), the way we use our voice (para-linguistic behaviours/cues), the context of and learning from the conversations we have had previously, the ways we communicate (channels, e.g. email or face-to-face) and the words that we use. These issues will all affect the way we ‘code’ our messages.

However, whether any message will be received and interpreted in the way that we expect will depend on whether those same issues help the recipient of the communication to ‘decode’ it in the same way.

The ongoing and important challenge is that where communication is not interpreted correctly (i.e. ‘as intended’), it will have consequences for the beliefs and attitudes of the recipients, their emotions and then their broader behaviour, which is why many relationship issues in teams, at work and elsewhere tend

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to arise from poor communication. Resolving where the origins of any poor communication arose can often help to do something to repair relationships, though sometimes this is not possible. The challenge is often that there are no absolutely ‘correct’ ways to communicate and that every individual has to work out a system (i.e. a set of tools for communicating usefully) that works for them in a variety of situations.

The model presented in Figure 12.2 indicates that: (1) the process of communication does not take place in isolation; and (2) there is a definitive process of communication that requires the ‘coding’ and ‘decoding’ (or translation) of information. Later sections of the chapter give more details of how these processes of encoding and decoding happen.

**UNDERSTANDING THE PROCESS OF COMMUNICATION**

Before we get into the details of how different communication skills are best demonstrated, it is important to understand the basics of how all communication processes work. The principles are relatively straightforward to understand; of course, the challenge comes in applying them to our communications. Unless we think about them, all the processes and issues identified below happen unconsciously, but when we do think about them and change what we do as a result, then our communications become much more effective. Let’s use an example to illustrate what we mean, and show how things can go wrong:

(a) **We find/have something we want or need to communicate to others and we put it into a form of words (code) that we can send to others in some way.** This may come from anything that we have in common with other people – perhaps we are working on

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something with others, or share a common interest with them in some way. Regardless, the information gets coded in our minds in a way that experience tells us is usually interpreted correctly with minimum negative consequences for us. (I will have ‘coded’ my words here in this text in a particular way reflecting my own experiences and ideas about what works.)

The experiences we have picked up have gradually expanded from our parents to siblings to friends and then to fellow students and colleagues at work, so the way we have learned to communicate (i.e. the code that we use) as young children will change as we unconsciously learn how to communicate with our expanded ‘circle of friends’.

Example: I want to check whether someone has done the work I asked them to do, so I use the following question: ‘Have you been able to finish that section of the assignment yet?’

(b) We give that information (in code) to others and assume that others will understand the code in the way we intend. There will be some who understand that code well, namely those with whom we share a ‘common language’. The ‘language’ we use can include technical language or ‘jargon’ or abbreviations that only those with a particular background or experiences will understand. In addition, there may be words used in a certain way that only certain people will understand correctly. Therefore, the assumption that we make about people always understanding us is rarely true.

(c) We select a ‘media channel’ as a way of sending a message at a time and place we think will work. It may be passive and is often a reaction to how a communication was passed on to us, but we have a choice as to how we respond to others’ communications. It may be via a meeting, or a reply by email or a corridor conversation, but the channel that we use to communicate does have implications for the way in which that communication is received.

Example: I send the following question as an email: ‘Have you been able to finish that section of the assignment yet?’ The real intention is to find out whether someone has finished their section of the report.

It is certainly quicker and easier to send an email to many people at once, but for many individuals, most of their email communication (including the use of synchronous chat tools, such as WhatsApp, WeChat, Line, Facebook messenger, etc.) is to individuals. There are times when it is slower to send an email to an individual than it would be to speak to them on the telephone or go to see them (and clear up any communication which is unclear or ambiguous), but the choice of ‘best channel to use’ will depend on the urgency of the communication, the number of people involved, and the potential for and consequences of any misunderstanding. Box 12.1 explains this in more detail.

BOX 12.1

WHICH COMMUNICATION CHANNELS ARE BEST?

The answer will depend on a variety of factors. Email and other forms of one-way communication (e.g. newsletters) might be effective for communicating for a lot of people at one time, but are not always the most effective if you want to deal with a sensitive issue that is relevant to just one person and where written communication is likely to lead to misunderstanding.

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Written communication is simply content and can be interpreted in a number of ways, assuming that the written communication is actually read of course! Someone reading an email at the end of a tiring and stressful day might interpret the email very differently from someone who can take their time, think about what it means and knows well how you usually communicate. Communicating with one individual by email may or may not be effective, but if someone does not know you well, then you will need to be very clear about your meaning, using language that most will interpret correctly.

Oral communication over the telephone adds what we call ‘para-linguistic cues’: small ‘behaviours’ (some call them ‘behavioural tells’) which add to the meaning of just giving the words themselves. In written text/chat communication, we have ‘emojis’, which perform the same function. Although we will cover them in more detail below, these tells – such as speed of speech, pitch, volume and variation in any of these – indicate how important different words and issues might be, and a telephone conversation will give you this extra information in a way that a letter or an email rarely will.

The richest and most complete form of communication is face-to-face communication. With this, others will be able to see your body language and facial expressions, as well as understand your tone of voice, which means that the chances of your message being interpreted correctly are increased. (This is one of the key reasons why employers use face-to-face selection interviews when selecting their staff.)

One word of caution: the interpretation of your message – even when given face-to-face – is only as good as the decoding used by the recipient of your communication, and this is not usually something that is within your control. The additional advantage of face-to-face communication is that you can seek the feedback mentioned above and check instantly whether the message was actually received in the way you intended.

(d) Even if the code is understood, there can be a range of issues which distort the reception of the message. Broadly speaking, communications experts call these ‘noise’ and ‘perceptual filters’. The ‘noise’ is the external background factors which can impact on the ‘hearing’ of a message (e.g. the number of tasks we have to deal with, the effort required to decode a message, motivation and interest in relation to the subject content – anything which can affect whether we actually hear parts of a message), while the ‘perceptual filters’ are internal factors which affect our interpretation of a message (e.g. our own knowledge and previous experience about an issue, trust we have in the individual). Both affect the accuracy of any ‘decoding’ process that takes place, and therefore the accuracy of the interpretation of any message.

Example: The question ‘Have you been able to finish that section of the assignment yet?’ is received by someone (let’s call them ‘B’) who believes that you do not trust them, and is interpreted as ‘I don’t think you’ve finished this part of the report either but I am just checking ...’, indicating impatience.

Such distortions in communication are particularly important when communicating across cultures. Cultural expectations can really distort the way that messages are given since the encoding will usually be very different (see Chapter 13). The point is made clearer when we think of differences between direct translation and interpretation. Direct translation from one language to another takes the words and translates them into another language. This is helpful to some
extent, but the recipient of that translation is still left to give meaning to those words. *Interpretation*, on the other hand, finishes the job, giving meaning to the words and phrases so that the recipient can understand them.

Example: The question ‘Have you been able to finish that section of the assignment yet?’ is interpreted by someone with poor English as ‘Have you found the resources and the ability to finish the section of the report?’ Remember: the original intention was to find out if they had finished the section of the report, not really whether they had been able to do so.

(e) **We rarely check that others have understood the messages that we give in the way we intend.** To check that this is so takes a lot of time, especially if we are communicating to a large number of people (e.g. by email). That is one reason why large corporate communication events tend to be largely inspirational and thin on detail – the detail will usually need to be discussed in smaller units where clarification is much more possible.

However, even in one-to-one discussions: (1) individuals rarely ask the other person to summarise what has been agreed or to rephrase any instructions given (perhaps because of a fear of seeming to be patronising or worry over whether someone will feel embarrassed because they have not interpreted something correctly); and/or (2) even when they are asked, individuals can simply repeat a phrase or statement without any understanding of what it really means. That feedback is crucial in establishing whether a message has been received in the way it was intended.

‘BUT I HAVE A QUESTION …’

... You say that communicating face-to-face is better than communicating over the telephone or via email. Does this mean that if I give more information about an issue in my e-mails, the chance that my communication will be understood will increase?

The simple answer is: not necessarily. Let’s assume for the moment that this is a communication via email to several people (maybe group members working on a project). If you regularly add increasing detail to the information you give, then you will probably confuse others and it is quite likely that they will just wait for what they think is the final communication. The best thing is often to give as much detail as you think you need to in order to inform the other individual(s) about whatever the issue might be; if they have questions, then be sure to invite them to ask – though the challenge will be with those who think they understand, but whose understanding is actually incorrect.

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**KEY LEARNING POINT**

Communication is a complex process which does not always produce the outcomes you intend. Checking that the understanding of your message(s) is the same as you intend with those who receive it is always important.

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REFLECTION POINT

Take some time to think about the following questions and write down some answers.

Do you ever have emotional arguments with other people, or with someone you know? Why do those arguments begin?

Do you find it easier to communicate with someone you know well, or someone you do not know? What makes the difference?

Do you ever try to find out whether someone has understood your message(s) in the way you wanted them to? Has that ever led to any arguments?

COMPONENTS OF COMMUNICATION

Having examined the way that the communication process works, it is useful to examine the various behavioural ‘inputs’ into the communication process. These were briefly referred to earlier on as aspects of ‘non-verbal behaviours’ and ‘para-linguistic cues’.

In some ways, it would be wonderful if communication was just made up of the words we use and if everyone interpreted those words in the same way – it would make life much easier and more straightforward. In other ways, having the extra information can give us more clues as to what someone might be trying to say, as long as we interpret those clues in the way they were meant of course.

We use non-verbal behaviours and para-linguistic cues all the time, but the way we use them in combination with our words can radically change the meanings. Some individuals are better than others at recognising those meanings.

Para-linguistic Cues

There are broadly four areas where we can change our behaviour to have a particular impact. Professional speech coaches will give a great deal of advice on these so that individuals can give speeches that have an impact (some of these areas are covered briefly in Chapter 9), but they also have an impact in every day conversations:

**Speed of speech:** Some people will speak more slowly than others, and some may take more time to speak and contribute than others. This may be a sign of being more thoughtful or of needing a little more time to think something through, but we cannot conclude this from speed of speech alone. However, there is usually a rhythm to our speech which helps others understand when we are about to finish a sentence.

**Volume of speech:** In usual conversation, people do not speak loudly enough for others to hear, so a loud conversation is often taken as a sign of heightened emotion, especially if the pitch of voice is also raised (both do often occur together). It can, however, be an indication that someone is struggling to hear, so we have to be careful in interpreting behaviour.
Pitch and intonation: The more monotone our voice, the less interested someone is likely to be in what we are saying. We naturally indicate important issues within a conversation by changing our pitch. There is no better tone – higher pitch is not better than lower pitch – but the pitch we use will probably send a message to others about how calm, emotional or authoritative we are about a particular issue. Higher pitch (and volume) tends to indicate more emotion, but it is not universally the case, and some individuals communicate their negative emotion by using much lower pitch than normal. With the pitch of our voice, we can indicate scepticism, sarcasm and humour as well as a range of emotions.

Change and modulation in any of the above: When we continue to use a normal pattern of speech, then the hearer is likely to assume that the information is of ‘average’ importance compared with other information, but if we suddenly change any of the three aspects above, we signal to the hearer that there is some information that they need to pay careful attention to.

To demonstrate the impact of intonation, consider the example in Box 12.2.

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**BOX 12.2**

**THE IMPACT OF INTONATION**

Let's take a very simple phrase: 'I want to have a cup of tea.' Which of these five phrases represents the meaning here?

(a) I have been waiting ages and I am very impatient to drink my cup of tea.
(b) You have brought me a cup of coffee but I really want a cup of tea.
(c) Thank you very much for asking; my favourite drink is a cup of tea.
(d) I asked for a cup of tea, but you have brought a flask of tea.
(e) Everyone wants to have some coffee, but I would like to have a cup of tea.

The simple (and maybe obvious) answer is that we cannot tell. Without knowing where the emphasis was - or whether there was any emphasis at all - we have no idea. So, let's add some emphasis by indicating some intonation:

I want to have a cup of tea.

If you say this out loud, then it is clear that the emphasis is on the word ‘tea’ in order to create a contrast with anything else, so the correct meaning appears to be (b). But if the emphasis is put anywhere else, then the meaning changes considerably. If we add volume of speech and facial expressions as well, then we can determine whether someone is simply making a comment, or whether they appear to be emotional and making a complaint.

Try taking all the alternative answers ((a) to (e) above): how would you indicate intonation and volume for each of these possibilities?

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**BOX 12.3**

**PUNCTUATION AND PARA-LANGUAGE**

When we read the page of a textbook or a fictional story, we take notice of the punctuation that is there. The punctuation gives us an idea of how we should use para-language to convey the meaning of the words on the page. Consider the following:

A '?' [question mark] at the end of the sentence means that our tone of voice should go up as we ask a question.

(Continued)
A ',' [comma] between phrases means that there is a short pause at the end of the statement before moving on to the next statement (or ‘clause’).

A ':' [full stop] means that we have finished a particular statement; our intonation should go down at the end of the sentence, indicating the end of that issue. Over recent years, there has been a trend for people to raise their tone, as if they were asking a question; this is not how the ‘full stop’ or ‘period’ (US English) should be used.

A '!' [exclamation mark] usually expresses disgust, surprise, shock or a strong negative reaction of some kind. As such, the volume and tone of voice usually go up.

This should help us understand more of what someone is trying to communicate, according to their tone of voice. Consider the words below:

The impact of punctuation is obvious to see whenever someone speaks out loud they use their intonation to express feeling and emotion about what is being said of course that is not the entire story speed of speech and volume become important as well and none of these things can be taken separately from the non-verbal behaviour we observe from others and the words they use it is clear that the words are just a small part of the story.

Are you able to read these words aloud? Where would you put the punctuation? Would that punctuation change how you use your voice to read the sentence?

TIP: A good suggestion for seeing if a written sentence is too long is to see if you can say the sentence in one breath. If you can, then the length is probably reasonably good, but if that is not possible, then the sentence probably needs to be punctuated or broken up.

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KEY LEARNING POINT

Para-language is a component of communication that can be used effectively to indicate particular emphases and to differentiate important issues from general ‘background communication’.

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Non-verbal Behaviour

If the vocal expressions – volume, pitch and speed – say something about our feelings, then other forms of non-verbal behaviour add to the interpretation of the message. The more information we get about the communication and the more consistent that information is, the more likely we are to interpret a message correctly (assuming that we do actually notice any inconsistencies). However, these signals all add together in terms of the meaning of someone’s message. In particular, we can consider facial expressions, body gestures and posture, touch, ‘proxemics’ and movement.

FOR YOU TO DO

Consider the emotions displayed below.

1. As you do so, draw a ‘smilie’ or ‘emoji’ (a small face indicating the positions of the eyes, the mouth and the eyebrows) reflecting what you think someone expressing that emotion would show on their face.

(Continued)
Facial expressions

Our eyes, the way we move our eyebrows, the amount of eye contact we give and the extent to which we smile all send messages to others. The challenge is to ensure that the message is interpreted in the way we intend. There are around 250,000 different facial expressions, meaning that the brain has to work very quickly to recognise the signals being sent by others.

It is actually difficult not to smile at someone who is smiling at us – it takes some effort and focus – which is why we often interpret smiles as a positive thing. Some people do not seem to smile very much; we could interpret that as a sign of seriousness, though any interpretation needs to be checked carefully. In Chinese cultures, showing the mouth when laughing is not seen as appropriate, so most Chinese will cover their mouth when laughing at a joke between friends.

We often move our eyebrows to show curiosity or surprise (raised) and lower them to show concern or scepticism or negative emotion (frowning).

Direct eye contact is a sign of confidence in western cultures (with a lack of direct eye contact being seen as indicating a lack of self-confidence), but used to be considered a sign of a lack of respect in Confucian heritage cultures (e.g. China and Asia). Of course, these two reactions are not exclusive – it is quite possible to show deep respect to others and still have a great deal of self-confidence – but in some places the idea still continues, so we need to be careful when interpreting the behaviour of others where values are represented in ways we might not expect or understand.

We also move our eyes around in different ways. When we remember something, when we are trying to think of something or when we are trying to imagine something, we look in different directions. You may suspect that someone is not telling you the truth because they avoid direct eye contact when they are talking, which is why people often ask others to ‘look them in the eyes’ when saying something that may not quite be true, but we also need to be aware that they may simply be thinking about something or trying to remember something, rather than telling you something that is not true.

Body gestures

What we do with our head, our arms and our hands adds to others’ interpretations of a message that we give. There are those who say that someone with crossed arms is adopting a defensive and potentially aggressive approach to a conversation. In reality, whether this is true this will depend on two other factors: (1) whether other non-verbal behaviours are giving out the same signals; and (2) whether this individual normally behaves in that way, even if they are relaxed. We interpret these behaviours instinctively, without thinking too much. It is quite possible for someone to sit in front of you with their arms crossed, to be smiling and to have a relaxed and friendly conversation.
Hand movements are often assumed to be very useful indicators of what is going through another individual’s mind at the time they are speaking, though hand (and head) movements when someone is supposed to be just listening can be taken as an indication that they are reacting to something, have stopped listening and are preparing to speak.

Gestures are often used alongside para-linguistic cues to add emphasis to the words that are communicated, especially in formal presentations, but a lack of any hand gestures should not be seen as a lack of emphasis. Some people deliberately hold their hands in a particular way (e.g. behind their back, or hold their hands together) in order to hide their nerves or to try to avoid distracting their listeners from the actual content (facts and figures) they are trying to deliver.

FOR YOU TO DO
Examine the photographs of the gestures given below. What do you think this individual is trying to say with these gestures? Do others agree with your interpretation?

Gestures and movement
Of course, the more regularly a particular gesture is made, the more likely it will be that the message conveyed by the gesture will be emphasised. This is not a problem if the meaning of the gesture is clearly understood, but if there is some ‘mistranslation’ taking place, then repeating the gesture many times may lead to increased misunderstanding.

If we are perfectly content, are thinking of the same thing constantly in the same way, or have no motivation at all to change our position, then it is unlikely we will move. Humans move when there is

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a reason to do so, and that reason can be large and urgent (e.g. people rushing out of a building when there is an earthquake) or small and relatively insignificant (e.g. someone getting up from the sofa when they have been watching TV because they are bored with what they are watching). So when we see people moving, we would naturally assume there is a purpose behind their doing so.

The challenge comes, then, when people do not behave in ways we might expect, either because we expect someone to move or gesture in some way but they do not, or because someone moves when there is no reason for them to do so. Both scenarios create varying levels of confusion, which then gets misinterpreted.

Both the movements we demonstrate and the frequency with which we demonstrate them can be signs of self-confidence. It is assumed that occasional and purposeful movement indicates more self-confidence than erratic movement.

‘BUT I HAVE A QUESTION …’

... There is a lot to consider, but how can I possibly pay attention to all of this when I am having a conversation with a friend or with a colleague at work?

This is a good question - and the simple answer is that in most situations you cannot. If you were to think consciously about all of these things then your communication would seem odd, because you would be trying to reconcile their perception of you with their behaviour caused by your behaviour and your tone of voice, and you would be trying to second-guess and assume the impact of all the communication signals you were sending.

The value of the information above comes from three things: firstly, reflecting on conversations that you have had where the other person misinterpreted your meaning and recognising what you might have done differently; secondly, identifying just one or two areas where you could give more clarity in how you say what you have said and working on those; and thirdly, becoming better at making sure that you gather feedback from the other person and check that they have understood your message as you intended it.

Focusing on a small number of areas will make the challenge of improving your communication skills much more manageable.

BOX 12.4

MISUNDERSTANDING TOUCH

One type of gesture that some like to give is that of touch.

This is an extremely delicate issue to cover, but it is very important to do so. In some cultures, and for some individuals, touch is something that is unwanted and can cause very serious misunderstandings.

Depending on the kind of touch, it can show compassion, kindness, friendship, love and more. Of course, it is never wrong to show kindness (even if definitions of ‘kindness’ may vary from situation to situation) and most would say that there is nothing wrong with a hand on the shoulder for encouragement, but the potential for touch to be misinterpreted is very large and workplace definitions of sexual harassment often include reference to unwanted physical contact.

In some cultures, it is frowned upon for people to be overly familiar with each other in public. In some cultures (e.g. particularly Arabic cultures), it is very common to see men walking down the street holding hands and greeting each other by kissing on the cheek, but in other cultures this kind of touch could be perceived as inappropriate.

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**BOX 12.5**

**CAN YOU TELL IF SOMEONE IS LYING?**

Behavioural psychologists tell us that there are a number of behavioural signs or ‘tells’ we can look out for when someone is not telling the truth. Most are similar to those occasions when someone is suffering from stress:

1. Having a dry mouth – and needing to drink frequently.
2. Overly frequent ‘aggressive gestures’ (e.g. forming the hand into a fist).
3. Blink rate – the rate is usually 20 blinks a minute, but is someone blinking faster than that?
4. Hand gestures – does anything appear to represent information being hidden?
5. Covering the mouth with the hand – information is being prevented from ‘escaping’.

The key thing for all of these is that, in isolation, it is difficult to conclude that someone is not telling the truth. However, if there are many ‘tells’ occurring at the same time, then perhaps someone is being economical with the truth.

It appears that individuals are very likely to tell lies to those they do not know well or do not care about very much, especially if they want to make others feel better about themselves. University students are suspected of lying regularly to their parents and some believe that individuals lie to every other person they communicate with.

Can you tell if someone you know is lying?

**Proxemics**

Put simply, proxemics is the study of the impact that location has on communication. The simplest way of demonstrating this is to consider the legend of King Arthur, who was supposed to have reigned in southern England around AD 800. He reputedly had his close followers sit around a round table, rather than one with definite ends, in order to create a discussion among equals, rather than have a clear hierarchy.

A choice to sit at each location will have certain consequences. Certain locations will inhibit the number and kind of (supportive or negative) contributions to a discussion – for example, where direct eye contact becomes difficult or where the location seems a long way away from the leader of the discussion. In meetings and other situations, physical distance is often interpreted as reflecting emotional distance, and such an interpretation will have implications for individuals’ communication with others. The location someone sits in will have an impact on:

- The number of contributions they are able to make easily without interrupting others.
- The formality or informality of the discussion.
- The sense of support or otherwise for the leader of the discussion.
- The extent to which individuals are engaged in the discussion.

Further online content on the topic of proxemics can be found on the companion website at [https://study.sagepub.com/morgan](https://study.sagepub.com/morgan).
SITTING IN LECTURES

Whether we like it or not, where we sit sends certain implicit messages to others. It may imply that we are not really interested in a particular discussion, or that we are intensely interested and have something we want to say.

You may or may not have a preference as to where you sit when it comes to your lectures, but if you do, and if you have freedom to choose your seat, consider that preference carefully. Many students seem to like to sit at the back of the lecture theatre for lectures, and this will send a message to your lecturers just as much as sitting at the front does.

1. Why do you sit in that/those particular location(s)?
2. Is where you sit better or worse than any other seat when it comes to encouraging you to learn during those lectures?
3. Do you change where you sit depending on the subject/lecturer?
4. How do you think your lecturer interprets where you sit?
5. What would encourage you to change where you sit?

KEY LEARNING POINT

Non-verbal communication consists of our facial expressions, body gestures and movement, and proxemics. They help us to add meaning to the other signals we receive - the words and the para-language.

REFLECTION POINT

Take some time to think about the following questions and write down some answers.

How ‘expressive’ are you in the way you communicate to other people? Do you use a lot of intonation, or speak in a monotone most of the time? What about your facial expressions, or gestures?

Have you ever been told that your use of non-verbal behaviour affects others’ reactions to you?

Do others communicate with you in the way you communicate with them? Do those same people communicate differently with others?

OUR WORDS AND LANGUAGE

So far, we have examined the impact that our para-language, our non-verbal behaviour and proxemics can have on the ways that communication can be interpreted. What we have not yet examined, of course, is the actual language that we use. Examining language is an academic discipline in its own right – a degree in Linguistics is not uncommon across universities – and is extremely complex as an area of study.

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What we will examine here are four aspects of language: the function that different forms of language can take; power and confidence issues; the ways in which the words we choose may or may not be particularly tactful or diplomatic; and, finally, the use of questions in conversation. There are other components to the study of language, for example the use of what linguistics call ‘register’ (we will not cover ‘register’ here, but, in very broad terms, it refers to the technical vocabulary level needed to understand conversations), but we will simply address the four areas highlighted above.

**Language Function**

When we write words as a sentence on a page, it is usually fairly clear what we are trying to do with the sentence. We might be trying to ask a question, give a suggestion or make a statement, and we use punctuation to indicate the functions that our language is trying to represent. As we saw in Box 12.3 above, punctuation is usually represented by our para-linguistic cues and so usually it is clear whether we are asking a question, giving a statement or making a suggestion.

However, there are occasions when things are much less clear. Take the phrase, ‘You could always ask the marketing department for their ideas’: is this a suggestion – that we should ask the marketing department – or an instruction that we are expected to/have to ask the marketing department? Alternatively, take the phrase ‘The marketing department usually have some good ideas’: is this a suggestion, an instruction or merely a statement of fact which we can ignore if we wish to? Box 12.7 examines the various functions that language can play.

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**BOX 12.7**

**ARE QUESTIONS ALWAYS ‘QUESTIONS’?**

We can usually think of questions as being tools for gathering information, and in many situations this is exactly what they are used for. However, questions can be used for a variety of purposes, and not just for gathering information. The examples below show how five fairly similar questions can be used to guide another individual’s behaviour and influence decision making:

(a) ‘*Don’t you think that would be a really bad idea?*’ Leading questions can be used forcefully to push someone to reconsider their actions.

(b) ‘*Do you think there would be any negative consequences to that idea?*’ This is a similar but much more gentle way of getting someone to reconsider their actions. Such a question might be used in coaching or counselling situations.

(c) ‘*What do you think senior management might think of this idea?*’ This could have a similar function to (b), but might (or might not, depending on who is asking it and how) include a threat – to tell senior management about this.

(d) ‘*Why are you persisting with this really bad idea?*’ This shows more about the negative emotion of the person that is asking it, than it does in gathering any actual information. When individuals are emotional, they often need to express it in some way.

(e) ‘*Wouldn’t that idea cause a problem with X (other issue or individual)?*’ This is clearer than (b) but is a leading question and so it achieves the same purpose. Being specific might indicate a desire to learn on the part of the person who is asking, or it might indicate a desire to put some pressure on an individual – more than is represented by (b) but not as much as (a).

(Continued)
The way that an individual would respond to any or all of these questions would give a particular impression of their leadership ‘style’.

All of these are questions but have a purpose beyond simply gathering information. The simple information-gathering form of the question would probably be something like ‘Can you tell us what you wish to do and why?’, but even the interpretation of this would depend on the non-verbal behaviours and intonation used to ask the question.

The answer will often relate to the context of the statement (Who said it? Under what circumstances?) and to the non-verbal and para-linguistic signals (tone of voice, volume, eyebrows, eye contact, smile, posture) given while saying it. When we are communicating orally, we take in all these signals and our learning from previous experience gives us an indication of which function the language is playing. When we are communicating by email, however, those signals are not there, and unless there is a ‘!’ we are often left to our own devices to interpret the function that the message is giving us. We do not always get the interpretation correct, but there are occasions when we should probably check.

‘BUT I HAVE A QUESTION …’

... Why don’t people just say what they mean?

One of my team members – someone who was the team leader – on a group assignment recently said to us, ‘Perhaps you might like to do the introduction and perhaps you could do the analysis and the conclusion? I’ll do the literature review, so let’s meet next Monday, OK?’ None of us actually thought she was telling us to do these things, we just thought we were going to meet next Monday to discuss whether we wanted to do those parts of the assignment, so she was pretty annoyed with us when we actually met and found that we hadn’t done any work. Why don’t people say what they mean?

Misunderstanding others’ communication in this way is very common, so you are not the exception. As we have seen, we can be clearer about the meaning of a phrase once we get to know someone better. We get to understand how they use their para-language and their non-verbal behaviour, and this helps us interpret what they are saying.

Of course, words and phrases such as ‘might’, ‘could’, ‘should’, ‘might have’, ‘could have’, ‘should have’, ‘might like to’, ‘could possibly’, ‘should probably’, and so on, tend to be seen as suggestions, but may actually be intended as gentle instructions.

Why do people use what can be seen as ambiguous language, that is phrases and words that can be misinterpreted? There can be a variety of possible reasons: maybe they did not want to appear too bossy and alienate other group members, or maybe they did not have the self-confidence to be a directive leader, or feel that they knew the other group members well enough to know how others would react and so took a gentle approach. You cannot blame her for any of these things (all of which can seem OK), though she probably should have checked that everyone understood her ‘instructions’ before closing the meeting.

What is very clear from what you have asked is that our personality and self-confidence can have a major impact on the way we communicate, and particularly when we take leadership roles.

Chapter 13 covers issues of context in more detail with respect to communicating across cultures, where our interpretations of behaviour can be very inaccurate.

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KEY LEARNING POINT

The function of a phrase can have a marked impact on whether we take any subsequent action and on the nature of any action. If there is a lack of clarity, then it helps to check that our understanding of the function of what others have said is the same as the person communicating with us.

Confidence, Communication and Power Behaviour

Whether we like it or not, the ways we communicate (our para-language, non-verbal behaviours, the words we use) can give others very different impressions of who we are, our thinking, our attitudes, our emotions and our self-confidence. Such impressions may or may not be correct, of course, and are always culture dependent. Nowhere are such impressions more important than when we are attending job interviews or giving important presentations, so while we need to behave as we usually would in our more normal (and relaxed) state most of the time, it does help to consider how we might help ourselves to show self-confidence in the presence of others.

There are certain behaviours that we show when we are communicating, which can give the impression of being unsure or having a low degree of confidence, and behaviours that can give the opposite impression, of course.

Table 12.1 Verbal behaviours displayed in situations of low and high confidence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Low-confidence indicators</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hedges and qualifiers</td>
<td>‘Maybe …’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irritators</td>
<td>‘You know,’ ‘sort of’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intensifiers</td>
<td>‘Really (good),’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘awfully (bad)’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tags</td>
<td>‘… didn’t you?’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hesitations</td>
<td>‘aren’t you?’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Em’, ‘er’, ‘ah’, ‘uhh’, ‘Well, …’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High-confidence indicators</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive talk</td>
<td>‘We can do this!’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give credit to others</td>
<td>‘I’m not the real hero here, it is …’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning from experience</td>
<td>‘I agree, we messed up’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and accepting responsibility</td>
<td>‘So, this is how I suggest we should do this’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persuade others</td>
<td>‘This is our situation: X is good, Y is OK, but Z is poor’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decisive speaking</td>
<td>‘If you look, you will see …’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell the truth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12.1 simply refers to the kinds of words we may use. Of course, our body language will also differ in situations where we have little confidence from those where we are very sure of what we are doing. Our body language – our eye contact, posture, handshake, tone of voice, volume, speed of speech, amount of erratic movement – will change as our brain struggles to find a way to communicate in what might be a stressful situation.

Using Language and Communicating Tactfully in Difficult Conversations

Communication becomes particularly stressful when we need to say something very important but do not know how to say it because of the personal consequences of doing so, or because of how the individual may react.
This is particularly difficult when we get frustrated with others. In such situations, we tend to want to express that emotion very forcefully to those who might be frustrating us. For others, they might hold things in for a while and then 'explode'. Expressing our frustration emotionally, however, is almost always not the best thing to do.

It is in these kinds of situations that we might find some ‘tools’ or phrases useful. We know of course that the longer a difficult situation goes on, the worse and more stressful it becomes – and so we do need to develop some tools, ideas and principles for dealing with them.

1. **Check any assumptions:** Ensure that you check any assumptions you have made before starting the conversation. Emotion can sometimes cloud an individual’s judgement. This may include the reasons for someone’s actions, especially if they are unusual and out of character, as well as the actions themselves. Be clear about the evidence you have for the behaviours you wish to change, and gather evidence from others if that will not harm other relationships.

2. **Reframe the purpose of the conversation:** See the conversation as a chance to solve a problem and to change someone’s behaviour, rather than as a time to get really tough and make an example of someone. If you take the latter approach, it is likely that the atmosphere will be tense, the language will become aggressive and you will likely create more problems than you solve.

3. **Use passive and active voice appropriately:** Try to keep negative feedback in the ‘passive voice’, rather than the ‘active voice’. For example, ‘You did this badly’ becomes ‘This was done badly’. The identity of the person who performed the action will be implicit anyway, but removing the personal criticism can remove the ‘sting’ for someone who is lacking in confidence or who is likely to become defensive. The opposite is true for good news or positive feedback (i.e. ‘You did this really well’), where personal praise is usually a good thing.

4. **Use a ‘praise sandwich’:** In the ‘praise sandwich’ remove the word ‘but’ from negative communication. For example, ‘You did XXX really well but I wish you had done YYY much better. But I am glad to see that you also did ZZZ well’ becomes ‘You did XXX really well. We might have to consider further how we move forward with YYY since there seem to be some issues with that, but I am glad to see that you have made some progress with ZZZ.’ The word ‘but’ is almost expected after you praise someone, and it means that the initial praise becomes relatively meaningless, with the only thing that the other person remembers being the negative comment. In the example here, a new sentence removes the conjunction.

5. **Watch your language:** Our input into a conversation will affect someone else’s input, so being careful about our language can enable us to achieve our objectives in a way that being very direct will not. For example, (1) refer to ‘we’ (rather than ‘you’) as much as possible. Referring to ‘we’ indicates two people (as a team) working together on improving someone’s performance (i.e. they will be supported in the future) and is likely to encourage someone to commit to personal change. (2) Similarly, there are a number of words that will likely increase the emotions of the person hearing the message: for example, ‘problem to deal with’ can become an ‘issue to manage’ or a ‘challenge’, or sometimes even ‘an opportunity for improvement’. (3) As mentioned above, try to remove the words ‘but’, ‘however’ and (even worse) ‘although’ from messages about things that have gone wrong. (4) Finally, some people use phrases such as ‘less well’ to talk about things which went ‘badly’, or ‘not always the best thing to do’ or ‘unhelpful’ to talk about things which would be ‘a bad idea’.

6. **Be clear about consequences:** Do not be afraid of informing someone of the consequences of their future actions. It is unfair to give someone the idea that they can continue to do things
poorly without any consequences, if those consequences might well happen: ‘but of course, we
don’t want to see those things happen, do we?’ Of course, never try to bluff: if the consequences
are not there or cannot be enforced, then do not make them up.

7. **Assume good intentions:** Unless you have information to the contrary, try to assume good
intentions. You can always change your view later, but it is very hard to get back to that point if
you start off believing that someone had bad intentions or did not care. ‘I am sure you did not
expect or want XXX to happen. Anyway, it has, so now we have to address it.’ Doing so will
educate someone to the unintended consequences of their actions.

8. **Avoid emotion during a conversation:** Focus on the evidence throughout the conversation,
rather than your reactions to it. Emotions will cloud judgement and will make the conversation
far more painful and challenging than it will need to be. Language in an emotional conversation
tends to become more destructive than helpful. Of course, this includes the recognition that
others more senior to you may already have expressed some emotion to you (which is what
human beings do, but it is not always helpful), but that does not mean that you need to express
that emotion to others. After all, your main priority is to solve a performance problem, not to
show how tough or angry you can be.

9. **Ensure that there are no surprises:** There is nothing worse than being told off for something
when you did not know that it was wrong – though certain things (bribery, theft, etc.) will be ‘known’
as wrong anyway. The basic principle here is to ensure that if you need to have a difficult conversation
with someone about an issue, then they would be expecting that conversation at some point.

10. **Leave the conversation on a positive note:** If you can, after having agreed some specific
goals and perhaps having put some resources or safeguards in place to prevent the problem from
arising again. There is nothing worse than having a conversation which is aimless and does not
agree a way forward when there is clearly a problem to be addressed.

11. **Use language which allows for some doubt:** Give the other person ‘a way out’ without
making them feel embarrassed, and, similarly, be prepared for evidence which contradicts your
view – you may have got it (your judgement) wrong. If you can, talk about actions which ‘might
have happened’ or ‘seem to have’ happened, or consequences which ‘could have happened’
rather than things which definitely did happen. It is a lot easier to recover from a conversation
where you have made incorrect judgements before hearing all the evidence if you phrase things
as possibilities, rather than from a conversation where you have begun with an incorrect
accusation that you later need to apologise for.

12. **Listen well and do not interrupt:** Give someone space to put their own side of the story,
even if the evidence you have seems to contradict it. Individuals will often feel very aggrieved if
they have not had the chance to share their view. At the end of the conversation, always check
that your understanding is the same as those of others involved in the discussion.

13. **Encourage self-reflection:** Give an opportunity for self-reflection early on in the
conversation. Some good communicators ask others to comment on what *seems to have happened*
first before telling the other person what they think. This gives the conversation a more friendly
atmosphere, rather than getting very quickly into a heated argument where neither person is
willing to listen to the other.

14. **Do not be afraid of silence:** Silence can give people time to think. If the conversation
seems to have stopped, then reminding the other person of the last thing that was being
talked about or making an observation about the other person’s emotion can be useful for
restarting the discussion.
15. **Do not match someone else’s ‘mood’**: If someone is angry, then one of the worst ways of trying to solve a problem is to become as angry as they are. The same is true for a situation where someone is upset: having two people in tears does not really help anyone. Focus on the issue you are trying to solve – together.

16. **Do not focus on what you cannot change**: Be specific about the behaviour you want to change, but trying to change someone’s personality is not going to work (and might be regarded as unethical by some).

17. **Consider whether you need to apologise**: Many people find this hard – and it can be very hard – but giving an apology can be very powerful at healing friendships and workplace (or personal) relationships. Often the more specific the apology, the more powerful it will be – and many people will appreciate that you have done so. There may be some who take advantage of it and exploit it to show others that you are not good at what you are supposed to be doing, and so getting some advice from others may be useful sometimes. However, be very wary of apologising for something over which you had no control – something which was not your fault. The next time the same thing happens, the other person will blame you and their trust in you will decrease.

18. **Do say ‘Thank you’**: Even if a conversation has been hard or has not achieved any of your objectives, the other person has still given up some of their time for you. They may well have seen the conversation as a waste of time, but it is appropriate to thank people wherever possible and for whatever you can.

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**FOR YOU TO DO**

Think about the phrases given below, all of which seem to arise from frustration with other people in some way. The phrases may all be quite emotive to the person hearing them, so think about how you might rephrase them if you were trying to give the same message in a more neutral manner.

‘You have a problem because your performance is just generally not good enough! You never get the work done on time.’

‘The English in this work is rubbish. Why don’t you get a dictionary? I think you need to do this again.’

‘I am so tired of this! No one ever communicates properly with me and I am finding it impossible to continue like this!’

‘Guys, can you arrange meetings so that I can actually attend? You know how difficult it is for me with childcare.’

‘I like the fact that you email me every day, but it is getting to be too many each day. Can you please stop? Thanks.’

‘Why don’t you listen properly??! I have already said that same thing at least twice.’

‘So, you’re saying that my work is no good?’ (And maybe think about how you would react to this.)

---

‘BUT I HAVE A QUESTION …’

... This is useful, I suppose, but why can’t I just be direct and say what I think?

Of course you can – if that is your normal style of communication and you are absolutely confident of what you think, believe and know, then sure. Be direct.

*(Continued)*

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But these ideas are there for those situations when you are unsure about how to handle the conversation, where information might be ambiguous or when you might be dealing with someone whose reaction might be somewhat unpredictable. There are times when less self-confident individuals might find direct communication threatening, so you need to think about whether being direct is the best way to achieve what you want to achieve. It is also worth noting that some cultures are more used to using direct forms of communication to get their message across than others (see page 282 'High- and Low-Context Cultures'). This has serious implications for business negotiations and other forms of intercultural communication.

KEY LEARNING POINT

The words and language we use send messages to others. These messages are supported by our non-verbal behaviour and para-linguistic cues.

Questions in Conversation

Usually, conversations are two way: they involve two or more people, both of whom contribute to the ongoing dialogue. At some point, it is quite likely, if not inevitable, that one individual or both will ask questions, to check their understanding, gather more information or open up a different topic of conversation. As we have already seen in Box 12.7 on page 258, questions can have very different purposes but generally fall into one of four types. In formal situations or interviews (disciplinary, selection or performance appraisal interviews), questions are usually asked in the order shown in Figure 12.3, representing a ‘funnel’, where the first open questions gather a great deal of information, the probing questions gather more detail on one particular issue, the closed question (with a ‘yes’ or ‘no’, or a numerical answer) finalises the information gathering and the reflective question checks the information in summary form.

In a more informal setting, there is no need for any such structure and the variety of questions asked can be much broader, but any conversation that consists of mainly closed or reflective questions is likely to be one without a great deal of natural ‘flow’.

![The funnel technique](https://study.sagepub.com/morgan)
COMBINING THE COMPONENTS: ESTABLISHING RAPPORT

In this chapter, we have covered three elements of communication: para-language, non-verbal behaviour and the language that we use. There is one other area we can note in relation to these three elements, and it concerns the concept of rapport. We say that two people have ‘rapport’ when they seem to understand each other and enjoy each other’s company.

We often know what rapport looks like. If we allow ourselves to enter a social setting, we might expect to be able to recognise individuals who have rapport with those around them and those who do not. Those who have rapport will be smiling at the same time that others smile, will be contributing to the conversation in some way and will be seen as part of a group. If we were to look at dating couples in the same setting, we might be able to see them making eye contact with each other, listening well and not interrupting, and maybe copying each other’s gestures (picking up their drinks, putting their hands on their head, etc.) at the same time. We know that rapport has been established when that ‘mirroring’ of each other’s behaviour occurs.

In sales environments, salespeople are trained to copy the language used by the other party, their body language and para-linguistic cues (or, in the case of telephone sales, the tone and speed of speech), until they seem to be ‘matching’ each other. Once that has occurred, it is believed that rapport has been established and, rather than following the behaviour of the other person, the salesperson can actually lead their behaviour – with the salesperson’s body language being reflected in the behaviour of the person they are trying to sell to. In establishing rapport, the salesperson has established a bond of friendship and, by inference, of trust, leading the customer to exactly where the salesperson wants them to be.

Of course, the challenge for all non-verbal behaviour is that we make assumptions about the meanings of others’ behaviour based on our own behaviour (‘if they do X then they must be thinking Y, because that’s what I do when I do X’) but we rarely think to actually check our assumptions, and it is this lack of checking (the feedback mentioned in Part III) that can easily lead to misunderstandings in communication.

Rapport is a state of being where two or more individuals feel relaxed in each other’s company.

**KEY LEARNING POINT**

Getting our language right with someone who might be used to interpreting these same words and messages in different ways is not easy, so getting feedback wherever possible is important.

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, we apply these different skills in different ways in different situations. The language we use and other signals that we give will be very different when we are counselling others, giving others feedback, negotiating, seeking to influence others and interviewing others, either for jobs or just to gather information. It is the application of these skills that can create effective or ineffective communication. We will now look to see how that can be done in two contexts, namely active listening and giving feedback, both of which are essential management skills in their own right.

Further online content on the topic of active listening can be found on the companion website at [https://study.sagepub.com/morgan](https://study.sagepub.com/morgan).
APPLYING COMMUNICATION SKILLS: ACTIVE LISTENING

The way in which we combine all these different elements of communication will vary according to the needs of any given situation. A situation is composed of two (or more) people, a series of messages, a context or goal, why there is a need for communication at all, and perhaps a history. Regardless, we will need to apply verbal communication, non-verbal and para-linguistic elements of communication and other factors together in different ways to achieve different aims: to negotiate, to listen, to persuade, to caution or discipline, to appraise, to interview or maybe to counsel others. To do so consciously takes a great deal of time and effort, but in some instances (e.g. disciplinary or appraisal interviews) it is vital to plan the conversation and be very clear about the issues which need to be raised, as well as the ways in which these issues will be raised. This will vary according to the individual you are talking to.

Of the four communication skills we have at our disposal (the two active ones – speaking and writing – and the two passive ones – speaking and listening), listening is one of the most frequent, one of the most important and often not very well done. In reality, listening well is anything but passive: it takes energy, time and effort if it is to be done well, which is why it is frequently not done well. Your ability to listen well will have an impact on whether others feel respect towards you, whether people continue to communicate openly with you (‘I’ll not bother – he never listens to a word I say anymore,’ which can have significant implications on decision making in management) and the broader impression that people will have. Therefore, being good at listening is important and is one of the most valuable communication skills sought by employers.

FOR YOU TO DO

Have a look at the following questions. When you are in a conversation with another person, how often do you ...

- Maintain eye contact with the other person?
- Ask questions to ensure that you actually understand the emotion and facts that are being conveyed?
- Wait until the other person has stopped talking before thinking about what to say next?
- Ensure that you understand what the other person has been saying before they finish their sentence?
- Interrupt the other person because they seem to be saying too much or rambling on for too long?
- Try to summarise what the other person has been saying before the end of the conversation?
- Avoid facial expressions of judgement?
- Ensure that your seating arrangement is appropriate for listening well?

In nearly all cases, the more we do these things, the better our listening skills will be. The exceptions are the fifth and sixth items, which are bad practice when it comes to listening well.

Active listening is not the same as hearing. We talk about ‘listening to music’, but unless we are processing the words and/or the music in some way, the actual activity we are usually undertaking relates to hearing rather than listening.

Hearing, therefore, is the passive reception of information by the ears, whereas active listening requires far more engagement from the individual, and far more processing of that information. Active listening is not easy, it requires effort, and typically anything which requires effort tends not to be done particularly well.
Tiredness, distractions, accents, active disinterest and making judgements or getting emotional about what is being said can all get in the way of our taking in information, and as soon as we omit information we are likely to miss out on certain parts of that information. Active listening, though, does involve ensuring that we take in and use as much information as we can, so not making judgements and trying not to think of what to say next are important.

We have so far looked at the principles of communication, examining the process of coding and decoding, issues of perception in communication and the non-verbal, para-linguistic and verbal skills we use in communicating. We have also looked at the way we can apply these behaviours and skills to difficult situations which require active listening. If we move to or communicate with people from another culture, we add an additional layer of complexity to the process of encoding and decoding information, so we will now look at why this is not easy and what we can do to improve how we communicate.

**APPLYING COMMUNICATION SKILLS: GIVING FEEDBACK**

For managers, being able to give feedback to a strong performer is not difficult, but being able to do so to a poorly performing employee is much less easy. It is an essential communication skill, but one that is not always done well.

Using the definition given here, we can assume that feedback can be non-verbal as well as verbal. A raised eyebrow or a frown can be as useful in communicating a message as what an individual actually says.

The earlier section above on using language and communicating tactfully in difficult conversations (pages 260–3) contains some ideas on how we might phrase messages in such a way as to avoid too much conflict, but there are some additional principles we need to bear in mind when giving feedback in order to improve an individual’s performance – which is the main goal of giving feedback.

**PRINCIPLES OF GIVING FEEDBACK**

While giving feedback is an essential part of managing others’ performance, it is something that many individuals do not necessarily do well, or often enough. This is particularly the case for negative feedback, where emotions can become barriers to a calm discussion aimed at improving an individual’s performance. There are, however, some principles to bear in mind which can make it easier to have such difficult conversations:

1. **Be specific:** Focusing on broad generalities might possibly produce general improvement, so if you wish to see an improvement in specific areas of performance, then you need to have both a reason why the performance needs to change and some examples to support your conclusions about someone’s poor performance.
2. **Keep it impersonal and descriptive:** Adding personal emotions to the feedback is what turns feedback into criticism and will likely produce a defensive reaction. Describing evidence rather than offering an evaluation of the evidence is more likely to be constructive.
3. **Ensure that the feedback is goal oriented:** The feedback conversation should be intended to help someone improve their performance, rather than the opportunity for you to express all of your anger or annoyance at someone else. Expressing anger or annoyance may help you feel

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better in the short term, but will likely give rise to resentment and further problems in the long term – and it will be unlikely to improve the other person’s performance.

4. **Time the delivery of feedback well:** It is helpful to give feedback as soon as possible after undesirable behaviour has occurred, but you will need to ensure that they have sufficient information before giving the feedback. Often, it is helpful to give feedback again shortly before the specific performance is likely to reoccur.

5. **Ensure the feedback is understood:** By using reflective questions and asking the recipient of the feedback to put the feedback into their own words, it is possible to ensure that they understand the message that they are being given in the way that was intended.

6. **Give feedback on controllable behaviour:** There is some value in finding out about issues that affect an individual’s behaviour, but it is unlikely that someone will change their behaviour if the issues leading to it are not under their control.

7. **Tailor the message:** The way we give a message will usually be shaped by our relationship with the individual, but it is also important to bear in mind someone’s emotional state when we are giving feedback. Negative feedback given when someone is upset will not change anyone’s behaviour and will likely reduce the quality of their relationship with you.

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**KEY LEARNING POINT**

Giving feedback to others is something that many people find hard. It requires the use of strong interpersonal skills, especially if we do not have a strong relationship with an individual, but the way in which we give feedback is often more important for the outcome than the feedback we give.

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**REFLECTION POINT**

*Take some time to think about the following questions and write down some answers.*

- How easy do you find it to tell someone what you really think about what they did or said?
- What was the most difficult message you have ever needed to communicate? Why was it so hard?
- How could some of the ideas above help you to convey the message(s) you want to communicate?

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**INTEGRATION AND APPLICATION**

Learning how to communicate effectively is something that will probably take a very long time. We start at birth when our eyes are taking in all the information they can, and when our brains are trying to develop ideas about what certain facial expressions of our parents mean, and ends when we stop communicating with others. Our brains make generalisations about what individuals mean and we learn to communicate with others in a way which we think helps get our messages across. Sometimes these generalisations are correct, sometimes they are nearly correct, but sometimes they are wrong, and we need to revise what we communicate and how we do so. The challenge is that individuals may well have slightly different interpretations of the meaning of the same message because of the perceptual and contextual distortions we will cover in the next chapter.

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The most effective solution is to ensure that we engage in seeking feedback from others that the message we intended to send is the same as the one received by others. Whether we are presenting some information to an audience (Chapter 9), attending a job interview, (Chapter 17) or writing a CV (Chapter 16), or whether we are listening to others, giving feedback to others, working in a team (Chapter 10) or trying to lead others (Chapter 11), the way that we try to overcome perceptual/contextual noise and then encode and send messages will have a significant impact on our ability to do well.

There is an important question which this chapter has not fully addressed and it is this: ‘Should we try to adjust our “communication style” for each individual we are talking to?’ The answer is simple and complex at the same time. As a leader, we do need to be consistent in how we communicate what we need to communicate: if we are inconsistent, then our followers may well become confused and their trust in us may start to erode. Our communication is likely to have a slight formality about it and may be less humorous. As a friend, however, we should probably recognise that our ability to establish rapport and relate to others is based on how well we, as friends, understand and use similar patterns of communication and language to them. We could probably joke with a friend in a way that we might struggle to joke with a boss. Finally, as a colleague in a team, we might wish to use a mixture of informal and formal language but build others’ confidence in our ability to do a good job by making definitive commitments and communicating regularly about our own progress. So, to answer the question, it is often less about the personal characteristics of the individual that we are talking to, but more about their own emotional situation and how we relate to them, in order to work well with and/or enjoy the company of others.

CONCLUSION

By now, you should be able to:

- Describe the communication process and how it can go wrong.
- Identify the various verbal, non-verbal and para-linguistic behaviours that can influence communication.
- Evaluate and develop your communication skills with a particular focus on communicating in difficult situations, giving feedback and active listening.

During this chapter, we have covered a wide range of issues related to how we communicate with others. We have actually covered a lot here. We have looked at the context and process of communication and the impressions we create, the impact of using different communication channels, and the verbal, non-verbal and para-linguistic aspects of communication, including the words we use. These components of the communication process were then applied to different scenarios such as communicating tactfully, using questions appropriately and establishing rapport. Finally, the chapter closed with an examination of how we can communicate effectively through active listening, giving feedback to others and communicating effectively with those from other cultures.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Based on the content of this chapter, what do you now know about the processes of communication that you did not know before?

What key learning point had the most impact? Why?

(Continued)
Do your answers to either of the above questions have the potential to change your ability to communicate effectively? Why?

What will you now do differently? (Write this down and put it somewhere where you can see it regularly.)

**INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

Think about the following questions. What might your answers be?

1. Tell me about a time when you tried to communicate an important message, but the message was misunderstood. What went wrong and what did you do afterwards?
2. What have you learnt by watching others around you communicate with each other?
3. Which communication skills do you think are the most important? Why?
4. Imagine that you need to communicate a complex idea to an intelligent audience. How would you go about it? What issues would you need to take into account?
5. From your own experiences, can you give some examples of poor communication?
6. Describe a time when a relationship with a fellow classmate, team member or someone you had to work with went wrong. How did you resolve the issue?

Chapter 17 gives a lot more information on selection interviews and the online content gives some guidance on these questions.

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

Want to learn more? Visit [https://study.sagepub.com/morgan](https://study.sagepub.com/morgan) to gain access to a wide range of online resources, including interactive tests, tasks, further reading and downloads.

**Website Resources**

*University of Kent website*: www.kent.ac.uk/careers/sk/communicating.htm  
*University of Manchester website*: www.careers.manchester.ac.uk/experience/skills/communication/  
*University of Salford website*: www.careers.salford.ac.uk/page/communication

**Textbook Resources**


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