**Communication Skills and Conversational Intelligence**



**Purpose**

The purpose of this tutorial is to discuss oral communication and the type of conversational intelligence that will make you a good communicator.

Surveys of employers in both South Africa[[1]](#footnote-1) and the United States[[2]](#footnote-2) show that they value good oral communication in their new employees. Communication can be short and interpersonal or involve a planned presentation. This tutorial focuses on (usually) short, interpersonal communication between you and a client or customer.

In some professional degrees at the University, students learn how to manage professional relationships. For instance, medical students learn about how to talk to patients, to reassure them, to ask them questions – often called a ‘bedside manner’; and how to talk to colleagues on the health team – nurses, physiotherapists, other doctors. Many professionals are meeting people on one of the worst days of their lives – their much-loved pet is ill; they have a legal problem; a woman has been abused by her husband. Dealing with people who are traumatised requires the right type of communication: you have to listen empathetically and be clear but caring in your responses. Some professionals have multiple-level relationships such as a new teacher with colleagues, head of department, principal, employer, possibly a union, parents and children.

More usually, though, most of us have to deal with colleagues, customers, authorities, and the like and there are some communication behaviours that ‘win friends and influence people’ and others that at best confuse and at worst alienate people one would want on one’s side.

Communication theory tells us that there is always a sender and a receiver for a message: a speaker and a listener, a writer and a reader. In oral communication, listening is incredibly important to gain an understanding of the other person. Ask for clarity if you are not sure that you understand. When speaking yourself, expressing ideas clearly at a level and in language that will be understood by the listener are essential skills.

It is very important to note that communicating is speaking and listening, not just speaking.

The following are some vital issues to consider when communicating orally:

* **Who** is your listener? For example, you might have a casual conversation or a professional discussion with a colleague; how you talk to a peer at work (casually) would probably differ from how you talked to a supervisor (formally); you might need to adapt the vocabulary of your profession when talking to a client who is not knowledgeable about the field.
* **What** are you addressing? Often at work there are spells of informal communication but more often than not at work the focus will be on professional issues. Allow time for both sides of the story – yours and your cllient’s.
* **Why**? Casual discussions with colleagues over tea maintain relationships. In more formal discussion, you might want to persuade your colleagues on a particular course of action. You might want to persuade a prospective client to use your services. You might want to find out something from a client; for instance, health professionals, psychologists, social workers, architects, engineers and many other professionals need information from their clients. How good are your questioning skills? How well do you listen? This module will explore ways in which we can improve our communication not only to be more effective in the work place but also to have more rewarding relationships.

**Learning Outcomes**



At the end of this unit, you will be able to

* use some of the skills discussed in this unit to make a start on becoming conversationally intelligent.
* Demonstrate an understanding of good communication practices.

**Key points**

**The process of communication**

The process of communication starts even before we speak.

When we meet another person, the following process happens in the body and the brain:

* The moment the person is closer than 3 metres, we feel an energy. The energy is an awareness that can be positive or negative.
* We experience any of the following: acceptance; rejection; judgment; admiration; fear, etc.
* If the experience is positive, the heart beats comfortably and some chemicals are released.
  + Dopamine (It feels good, I want to reach out)
  + Adrenaline (Energy and motivation)
* If the experience is negative, we experience fear/ frustration and the reason for the negative feeling surfaces from old memories. Some chemicals are also released during a negative experience.
  + Cortisol (A stress hormone that prevents us from performing well)

Only after this initial process has taken place in the body and brain, do we speak. The initial process, however, strongly influences what we say and how we say it. More familiarity with a person might well reverse initial impressions.

Whether this initial reaction when we meet a person is positive or negative, we often have to establish a relationship where open communication takes place. Some communication can be completely trivial while other types require more depth. There is a difference between responding to a question for directions – ‘I hear there is a park around here where I can jog. Do you know where it is?’ – and engaging on a work-related matter, such as meeting a new client or discussing issue with a workplace mentor.

One of the requirements for communication is a willingness to communicate openly. The question then is, how do we create such a willingness in ourselves as well as in others?

**Building trusting relationships as a basis for effective communication**

Stephen Covey wrote *The seven habits of highly effective people,* first published as a self-help book in 1989. The seven habits he identifies are:

* Be proactive;
* Begin with the end in mind;
* Put first things first;
* Think win-win;
* Seek first to understand and then to be understood;
* Synergise;
* Sharpen the saw.

You can view a summary on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yj9pDRoBnVo> – 13:18.

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| TRUST IS THE GLUE OF LIFE.  IT'S THE MOST ESSENTIAL INGREDIENT IN EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION.  IT'S THE FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLE THAT HOLDS ALL RELATIONSHIPS TOGETHER.  S Covey |

Creating a willingness to communicate openly implies that we have to trust. According to Judith Glaser, the basic ingredient for Conversational Intelligence (CI) is trust. The website <https://www.conversationalintelligence.com/team/983-judith-e-glaser-ceo> (accessed 16 May 2019) tells us something about Glaser:

Judith E. Glaser was an Organizational Anthropologist. She was one of the most pioneering and innovative change agents, consultants and executive coaches, in the consulting and coaching industry and was the world’s leading authority on Conversational Intelligence®, WE-centric Leadership, and Neuro-Innovation, and was a best-selling author of 7 business books including her newest bestseller - Conversational Intelligence: How Great Leaders Build Trust and Get Extraordinary Results. Through the application of ‘the neuroscience of we’ to business challenges, Judith showed CEOs and their teams how to elevate levels of engagement, collaboration, and innovation to positively impact the bottom line.

You can read more about her on that site and elsewhere if you are interested.

Trust is not easily established. If you have an aim to achieve, it can motivate you to have the courage to trust. This means that you have to decide to make yourself vulnerable, to open up. Most of the time we can trust freely in the belief that the other person will not take advantage of the trust we invest in him or her. Then the challenge is to convince the other person to trust enough so that we can both communicate openly.

Trust is a two-way street. We must be trustworthy from the point of view of our colleagues and clients. Many people trust professionals by virtue of their status: doctor, nurse, lawyer, minister, teacher, social worker. They trust professionals to listen, to apply their knowledge and to keep confidences. They are sharing their health issues, their family problems, their feelings of inadequacy, their tax situations, the ideas that give your firm the edge over competitors. In the workplace, then, work on your own trustworthiness.

**The importance of showing empathy in building trusting relationships**

Empathy is the ability to recognize and appreciate how other people feel. Empathy involves being able to articulate our understanding of another’s perspective and behaving in a way that respects the other person’s feelings. This does not have to imply that we feel the same or agree with the opinion of the other person.

We show empathy by ensuring that we connect in such a way that the person has a positive response. It may necessitate showing vulnerability and sharing more than we usually do.

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| **Guidelines for showing empathy**   * Establish eye contact.So much is gained from making eye contact with your colleague or your customer. Make sure that the message in your eyes reflects compassion. Keep cultural preferences in mind, though, as people from some cultures do not easily make eye-contact with others * Sit comfortably, relax your shoulders and lean a little forward to emphasise attentiveness. * Listen attentively. * Reflect, summarise or paraphrase the verbal messages you hear to ensure understanding. You can also ask questions for clarity. (e.g. ‘So you are saying that …’; ‘My understanding of what you are saying is …’; ‘Could I ask you to expand on the point you’ve just made?’; ‘Would I be correct in saying that …?’) |

We often talk of ‘empathetic listening’ and this will be discussed later.

**The foundation of trust**

Trust stands on three pillars. All three have to be in place before a person will trust you.

* Understanding:
  + Understanding is probably the most basic element of effective communication. It is more than only understanding the verbal side of what a person says; it is also more than understanding the non-verbal. It is stepping into the shoes of that person and understanding what he/ she says from his/ her own frame of reference. It is showing empathy. If we succeed in this, we indicate to the person that we understand how he/ she feels. We show support. This encourages the person to open up and helps the person to start trusting us.
  + You have to convince the other person that you have understanding for his/ her point of view, values, principles, life style, etc., even if it is clear that you are different.
* Acceptance
  + Acceptance means the diversity and complexity of human beings are recognized and accepted. This implies that we accept that every individual has the right to make his/ her own decisions and live his/ her life the way he/ she prefers and that we respect that. By indicating acceptance we transmit the message that we are willing to listen attentively and that we will consider what is said seriously.
* Sincerity
  + This concerns projecting a valid and reliable image of our own thoughts and feelings.
  + It implies authenticity in your behaviour
  + It also implies that you are sincere in showing understanding and acceptance

Not one of these three elements of trust can be achieved verbally only. Your non-verbal messages must convince the other person of these three. It is thus important to be aware of the meaning people can get from your non-verbal messages.

Distrust is enhanced by anything said or implied through body language or tone that results in a person wanting to defend or protect himself or herself.

Listening to the other person also contributes to trust.

**Empathetic listening skills**

Listening should be aimed at understanding the other person. One of Covey’s seven habits of highly effective people is ‘Seek first to understand and then to be understood’. He wrote:

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| S Covey  MOST PEOPLE DO NOT LISTEN WITH THE INTENT TO UNDERSTAND;  THEY LISTEN WITH THE INTENT TO REPLY. |

Just think of two people discussing their holidays after the end of the year break. Both want to describe their holidays and they chip in alternatively with their own thoughts and do not respond to or explore what the other person said.

*Example*

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| **Lebo**: The family went down to Durban during the holidays.  **Martin**: We went up to the Kruger National Park. Man was it hot.  **Lebo**: Durban was hot, too. We hadn’t been there for years and I was surprised at how well it looked.  **Martin**: We go regularly to the Kruger but not usually in December.  **Lebo**: It’s a pity we only have a long holiday in December as Durban is crowded and expensive then.  etc.  **V**  **Lebo**: The family went down to Durban during the holidays.  **Martin**: Really. Where did you stay?  **Lebo**: In a hotel right on the beachfront.  **Martin**: That must have been expensive. Did the family enjoy it?  **Lebo**: Yes, thanks. We went for a lovely walk along the promenade each morning before breakfast then spent the morning on the beach and the afternoon visiting local attractions.  etc. |

The situation could become even more competitive in the workplace, with colleagues actually interrupting each other to make their points.

We should ‘seek first to understand’, according to Covey. People feel rewarded when others listen to them. When people realise that you listen with the aim of understanding them, they will more easily trust you. If you listen attentively to a colleague’s ideas without interruption, he/ she will accord you the same respect. You might also ask questions for clarification before you present your own ideas.

View the following video on *Interpersonal Communication – Listening* now and jot down notes as you watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXz2T5dvXZM> (8:26).

Did you note the different aspects of the act of listening that were stressed by the presenter? Listening is not just about hearing.

Steps to convince people that you listen actively:

* Suspend judgment.
* Show empathy and show respect for any emotion expressed.
* Reflect emotions that you see or hear: ‘I can see that you are not happy with this situation’.
* Rephrase what you hear in your own words to ensure that you understand.
* Do not respond to outside distractions.
* Listen for real meaning by focusing on the important themes of the conversation. Also listen to what is emphasised.
* Use the time differential between the rate of speech (100 to 150 words per minute) and the rate of thought (400 to 500 words per minute) to reflect upon content and to search for meaning. Then plan your response or question.

The following illustrates how two people can totally misunderstand each other. They will find it difficult to reach a relationship of trust and open communication:



**The verbal part of communicating effectively**

Have you ever participated in a ball game – tennis, football, netball? Often when a team mate misses the ball, he/ she is blamed. However, the person who directed the ball could also have been at fault, off balance, not really looking carefully or calculating the rate of play and the positioning of the other team player. The same can happen in communication. The speaker has a responsibility to be absolutely clear when communicating and explicit about what must happen and when. If you issue a request to a colleague when rushing past him/ her in the corridor, you cannot automatically assume that your requirement will be met. What if you say ‘I’d like the Maimane report asap’. First, the other person might have something else on his/ her mind and therefore not remember well. Second, you have not defined ‘when’. ‘As soon as possible’ (asap) for your colleague might be next week but you need it before the end of the day. It would have been better to communicate clearly and fully in a dedicated few seconds in the office or even to send an e-mail.

**Word choice**

The words we choose to express our ideas, opinions and responses are important. The choice of words:

* determines how well we are understood;
* has a powerful influence on attitude;
* can ignite emotions;
* can decrease the attention the other person gives to the meaning of the message;
* can directly lead to conflict.

Video clip illustrating the power of a more effective choice of words. Click on the following link (give URL) and watch the short video (… minutes). As you watch it, notice the choice of words.

The choice of words directly influence trust. You could use words to shift from distrust to trust. Look at the following example:

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| **Words that lead to distrust** | **Words that lead to trust** |
| * Yes, but … * Why did you do it that way? * Just do as you’re told. * You don’t need to know why! * You always mess up. | * Yes, and yet … * Help me understand why you did it that way. * What do you recommend? * What information do you need to succeed? * What is getting in your way? |

Below are more alternatives to ‘yes, but ...’ that contribute to trust and open communication:

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| **‘Yes’ variations** | **‘But’ variations** |
| * I think I understand where you are coming from … * I see your point, … * That may be true, … * I know that seems like the obvious solution. * You could say that … * While that is one way to look at it, … * You’re absolutely right, … * Sure, … | … however …  … nevertheless ...  …on the other hand …  ... still …  … only then …  … have you considered ...  … it’s just that …  … and yet ….. |

What is the problem with ‘Yes, but …’ you might be asking yourself. Well, it clearly signals an argument against what was said rather than agreement with it. It is a little abrupt and abrasive. Far better to say ‘I’m not sure I see your point’ and after further explanation maybe just ask ‘Have you considered …?’.

A few tips for communicating with conversational intelligence:

* Start with the intention to build trust.
* Choose words to encourage a positive attitude.
* Choose words to enhance trust.
* Choose words to stimulate the desired emotions.
* Express your ideas, opinions and questions with the intent to achieve a positive outcome.
* Intentionally choose caring words.
* Ask questions that the other person can answer without fear of criticism.
* Avoid words or tone that trigger shut-down or defensive responses.

It requires thinking and planning exactly what words you want to use to say what you want to say.

**Communicating in a diverse society**

Remember in South Africa that in speaking English, which is the mother tongue of perhaps 10% of the population, you are using the second language of many of your listeners. Not only must you choose words that promote understanding not confusion, but you must sometimes speak more slowly and articulate well as your accent might be strange to the listener(s). In listening to second language speakers, you might have to ask to have something repeated before you understand what was said, because of their accent – rather be sure than act on misunderstood information.

Of course, if you speak more than one language, and can communicate in the language of your fellow conversationalist, so much the better. Nelson Mandela is reputed to have said: ‘If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.’ (<https://www.goalcast.com/2017/05/02/top-nelson-mandela-quotes-inspire-you-to-believe/>).

Remember that, in our multilingual society, when discussing matters in front of colleagues, you could be using a language unfamiliar to them. Use language as inclusively as possible.

**Tone and emphasis**

Tone is how we sound: bored, angry, happy, excited, demanding, critical. Tone could have a strong influence on how you are understood. It could also have an effect on how you are listened to. If you sound angry, the listener could be scared or defensive or angry as well. If you sound bored, will they take sufficient note of what you are saying? If you are rude or too direct, which they take to be rudeness, will they listen or will they react?

The following illustrates how the emphasis we put on certain words changes the meaning. The words in red are emphasised and every time the meaning is different. Read the sentences aloud if you can and listen to the difference that the emphasis makes.

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| * I didn’t say you changed the figures * I didn’t say you changed the figures * I didn’t say you changed the figures * I didn’t say you changed the figures * I didn’t say you changed the figures * I didn’t say you changed the figures |

Theories on Emotional Intelligence (EI or even EQ – emotional quotient, equivalent to IQ or intelligence quotient) suggest that emotions have a strong influence on behaviour and decisions. It is even said that behavior is driven by emotions. If we could influence the emotions of others, we could thus influence the decisions they take and the way they respond to us. Influencing emotions is a handy tool in communication but note that we are not talking about manipulating emotions. We can, however, by being positive ourselves, stimulate positive emotions that influence the attitude of the other person.

Part of planning a conversation is to decide what emotions will lead to the desired outcome. Emotions are catching. If you want people to experience a specific emotion, then show that emotion. Mirror neurons in the brain of the other person pick up on our emotions and the other person also feels that emotion. So if you are angry, you are likely to provoke anger. If you need a calm atmosphere for quiet reflection or to stimulate creativity, then you have to create calmness by being calm yourself. If you need energy and enthusiasm for decision making and to persuade people to do what you want or support you, you need to portray the energy and enthusiasm. This means that if you are feeling emotions that will not be conducive to the outcome you desire, you will first have to adapt your own emotional state. Please refer to the module on Emotional Intelligence for some guidelines on how to manage own emotions.

If you struggle to get a person to reflect your emotional state, you could also manage that person’s emotions by verbally validating them. It is important that your tone (how you sound) is neutral, compassionate or supportive. Here are a few examples:

* ‘I sense that you feel … (name of feeling) because … (reason for feeling)’
* ‘It sounds as if you are angry about …’
* ‘Are you saying that that made you sad …?’
* ‘It must have been a … experience.’
* ‘It seems as if you are very upset …’
* ‘It makes you feel as if …’
* ‘What bothers you is …’

The following are examples of responses that show little empathy and will harm trust. Never tell people how they should feel – their emotions are always valid:

* ‘You should not feel so sad/ angry/ disappointed.’
* ‘You should feel thankful … .’
* ‘One should not get upset about something like that.’
* ‘Everything will be all right.’
* ‘Tomorrow will be better.’
* ‘It was not that bad.’

John Kehoe says the following in *Mind power into the 21st century*:

When you recognise people as worthy of respect, they tend to respond accordingly. You empower people by seeing the greatness in them. Maybe people don’t see themselves as great and unique. Well, be their mirror! Show them that you see their potential. Show them with your acts, words, thoughts and feelings. Treat each person as special. Bring out the best in everyone by believing in them.

Kehoe worked on mind power from the 1970s and his official URL is [www.learnmindpower.com](http://www.learnmindpower.com). He also has a Facebook page

Communicate using the advice given in this tutorial you will have open, successful communication with others. Sometimes you have a hard truth to communicate or a direct question to ask. Respect for others promotes politeness. Read through the attached poster on using polite expressions in English. Adding just a few words can change the whole tone and direction of communication.

**Assessment**

View *Interspersonal communication in workplace*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_tG9YHeZT2A> (duration 6: 52) then answer the following questions.

**Question 1**

Just based on your first few seconds of looking at the drawing of Fred, what did you feel his facial expression and stance were communicating about him?

1. He is not a happy man and could do with cheering up.
2. He is the kind of serious person who would put first things first.
3. He is angry and probably a good person to avoid.

**Question 2**

Is there anything else in the video that reinforced your initial perception?

1. He gets fired so there must have been something wrong with him.
2. There is mention of him screaming and yelling at both colleagues and customers.
3. He seems to be in constant conflict with his supervisor.

**Question 3**

When it comes to clarity in his spoken communication, what do we learn about Fred?

1. He thinks he is better than his staff so does not pay attention.
2. He mumbles and is not a clear communicator.
3. He is not good at giving instructions or at listening to his employees.

**Question 4**

How does Violet’s communication style differ from Fred’s?

1. She connects with the staff through her smile and makes sure they are clear about what she wants.
2. Women have a different management style from men and are usually more polite.
3. She is a more experienced manager than Fred so knows how to address staff.

**Question 5**

How would assertiveness differ from aggression in communication?

1. In one you rule with an iron fist as Fred does and in the other you get your own way by smiling as Violet does.
2. You listen more than you speak and first seek to understand others before your respond.
3. You are self-assured in a calm and positive way without being domineering or insisting you are right.

**Question 6**

What is Fred’s relationship with his staff?

1. It is one of trust.
2. It is one of fear.
3. It is empathetic.

**Question 7**

From the point of view of an employer with the bottom line in mind, which behaviour of Fred’s has potentially the worst impact?

1. His rudeness to the customer, which could influence business if the information spreads.
2. His communication with his staff which is creating toxic working conditions so they might leave.
3. His ignoring attempted coaching by his supervisor which undermines her influence.

Memorandum

Question 1

c) He is angry and probably a good person to avoid.

Question 2

While they are all true to some extent, b) is the most comprehensive: There is mention of him screaming and yelling at both colleagues and customers.

Question 3

c) is the best option as it refers to the full communication behaviour – speaking and listening: He is not good at giving instructions or at listening to his employees.

Question 4

a) is the right option: She connects with the staff through her smile and makes sure they are clear about what she wants.

Question 5

c) is the right option: You are self-assured in a calm and positive way without being domineering or insisting you are right.

Question 6

b) is the correct answer. It is one of fear.

Question 7

You need to understand that ‘the bottom line’ usually refers to profit. Therefore, a) is the best answer: His rudeness to the customer, which could influence business if the information spreads.

**Use English to Express Politeness**

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| A saying in English is ‘You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar’. It basically means that if you are friendly and respectful to people, they will feel more inclined to be friendly and helpful to you. In a context where the majority of people are not mother-tongue speakers of English, the possibilities for perceptions of rudeness are great. Using particular words and phrases in English can help to reduce the possibility of conflict.  The less the language sounds like an order or demand, the more likely it is to be perceived as polite. |

**Asking Questions**

*Could* I ask you to …

*Would* you be so kind as to …

I *was wondering* if you *could* …

*Do you think* you *could* …

*Would you mind* …

*Would* you be so kind as to …

I *would appreciate it* if you could …

*Could* you *please* …

**Asking Permission**

*Would* I be able to …

*I was wondering if* …

*Would it bother you if* …

*Do you mind if* I ask …

*Would* I be able to …

I *was hoping* that …

*Could* I interrupt you …

*Excuse me*, …

**Expressing Dissatisfaction**

I have a few concerns …

*No disrespect meant but* …

*May I request* that you give urgent attention to this problem, please?

I know you are busy but I *would be grateful if* you *could* prioritize this issue because …

*Please* let me know when I can expect the payment/ meeting to be arranged.

*I’m afraid I disagree*.

*I have a few concerns* that I *would* like to raise.

*I’m not satisfied* …

*I’d prefer* …

*Might* I ask you to explain/ investigate/ correct/ facilitate …

*Would* you be able to help me to solve this problem?

*It would help me if* you *could* …

*I would like* …

**Additional Learning Resources (choose one)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p7Hthgu6g_k>

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/grammar/british-grammar/functions/politeness>

<http://em.colorfulmedia.pl/dodatki/Politeness%20in%20English_EM45.pdf>

1. Nell, C. (2019). Employer Satisfaction with UP Graduate Skills 2018. Department of Institutional Planning, University of Pretoria. Unpublished report. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Hart Research Associates. (2018). Fulfilling the American Dream: Liberal Education and the Future of Work - Selected Findings from Online Surveys of Business Executives and Hiring Managers. Conducted on Behalf of the Association of American Colleges and Universities with support from Newman’s Own Foundation. Washington. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)