

# Beyond the Horizons Consulting

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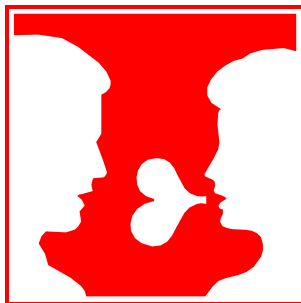
February 2007

## Communication Skills, Part I

This is the first article in a series about communications in the workplace. In our January Newsletter we completed our series on Violence in the Workplace with some excellent tips on how to care for yourself should you experience the extreme stress of a critical incident. In this Newsletter we address “just the basics” of good communication practice in the workplace. If you are new to our Newsletters, feel free to send along comments or questions to [info@beyondthehorizonsconsulting.com](mailto:info@beyondthehorizonsconsulting.com).

### “Just the Basics”

Communication is at the heart of all “soft skills.” It is the invisible oil which makes events flow smoothly and



the connective tissue of human relationships. With excellent communication skills, followers develop into leaders, and teams achieve the seemingly impossible. Without such skills, misunderstanding and rancor prevail, leadership withers into nepotism, and teams fall into entropy.

### What Do We Mean by “Active Listening”?

We might ask, “Aren’t we usually listening when our spouse or our boss says something to us? The answer is *yes* and *no*. Normally we may hear a person’s words and even

understand the content. But there is much more to communicating than hearing the content of a message.

Studies have shown that listeners base their understanding of a message on the following components, shown with the approximate percentage of impact on the receiver’s comprehension:

- ◆ Actual verbal content 7%
- ◆ Tone of voice 38%
- ◆ Nonverbal communication 55%

Communicators, beware! Approximately 93% of the impact of your message depends on your nonverbal skills. Here are some of the factors of which you need to become more aware as you communicate.

- \* **Appropriate eye contact.** You should make eye contact with the receiver of your message, but you should not stare or glare. Your sight is one tool to gauge the emotional receptivity of your audience, including how the person presents *before* you begin conversing *and* how your message is affecting him/her. If the person is looking down and to the right, for example, s/he is recalling some past experiences which the conversation has elicited.
- \* **Facial expression.** Become aware of what *your* facial expressions convey. Center yourself before facing an employee in what may become an emotion-laden session. Identify beforehand possible outcomes and what emotions may surface for you. Of course, having a “dead-pan” look is not advisable either. You may want to videotape yourself in several role plays of difficult situations so that you can see yourself as others see you. A videotape is a powerful tool in becoming aware of and amending unhelpful facial expressions.
- \* **Proximity and positioning.** Do you want to convey camaraderie or perhaps a mentoring rela-

lationship? Then you certainly don't want to sit behind a huge desk or tower over your listener. Sitting at a medium-size, round table, standing to receive the listener, and cordially inviting him/her to sit beside you would create a nonthreatening environment. Also to be avoided are getting into someone's space bubble or patting him/her patronizingly on the shoulder.

- \* **Nonthreatening and nondefensive body posture.** Again, a videotaped role play of a difficult performance review would be an excellent way to observe your own body stance. An open body stance is characterized by arms hanging comfortably at the sides, erect posture, and appropriate upward movement of the arms to indicate welcome.
- \* **Person-centered focus.** The person with whom you are communicating should be the focus of your attention. You should not allow yourself to be distracted by the telephone or computer.

When you have something worth communicating, it is certainly worth taking the time to ensure that "it's a go." First of all, be aware of the setting in which you seek to convey a message. Ideally it should be private and also convey a sense of orderliness that promotes relaxation. The size of the room should also match the size of the group. For two persons, a small room or a tastefully partitioned

area gives a sense of safety. For larger groups, the size increases proportionately, while still conveying safety via doors that can be firmly shut after all participants have arrived.

"Turf" should be considered when there is to be a discussion of sensitive issues. The board room or the boss's spacious office would communicate nonverbally that s/he is in charge and that others had better mind their Ps and Qs. An offsite location would best convey a neutral zone where all voices will be heard.

After you have determined the setting, you need to center yourself by keeping in mind what you hope to achieve and what would be in the best interest of both parties. Perhaps you need to process verbally or in writing what has been upsetting to you, so that you come to the meeting having laid aside some of the emotional upset. When you do process highly charged emotional issues in person, be sure to do so with an impartial third party, who can listen and give you objective feedback. Do not involve coworkers or same-level managers in emotional turmoil that could descend into morale-destroying rumors.

Finally you need to be aware of your listener's emotional state at the start of the meeting. We will devote more

attention later to "reading" your receiver's emotional state.

## Factors in Verbal Communication

Suppose you have set the scene to put both you and your listener at ease. You have not only created a receptive atmosphere, you have made *yourself* receptive and open to communication. Now you need to pay attention to the verbal delivery of your message. Your



tone of voice should reflect calmness rather than anger, frustration, annoyance, anxiety, or other negative emotions. How

fast or slowly you talk is partly idiosyncratic to your own style, but enthusiasm may bring a somewhat faster pace. Your speech also needs to be in sync with your listener's reactions, pausing if s/he looks puzzled, accepting of responses or even interruptions if that promotes a better interchange.

When the listener does respond, you probably want to give feedback to let him/her know that s/he has understood correctly. This is an important part of the process of active listening.

## Active Listening

Let us take a moment to clarify this important catch word. First of all, it means listening not only with your ears, but with your eyes, your gut, your skin, and your "third ear." In other words, active listening is not merely hearing spoken words of a communication, it is hearing how the speaker feels about what s/he is saying. This is not an easy task for the layperson, who is neither a therapist/mediator nor a coach. Let's face it, professionals have spent years honing their listening skills.

However, we professionals can give you some idea of what to look for in any communication. When a communication is **congruent**, it conveys a clear message to the receiver. When one of the aspects of the message does not match the others, it is incongruent and confusing to the listener. Here is a simple formula:

(Content of message) + (appropriate emotional tone) + (gestures, facial expressions, eye contact) = congruence (or incongruence)

For example, suppose you are annoyed that your employee has not completed a task you indicated was a priority two weeks ago. If you enter the employee's work space, verbally say you are unhappy about the project not being done but speak in a soft, nonassuming tone of voice and smile as if you're looking for that person's approval, you will probably not be taken very seriously.

On the other hand, if you want to congratulate a team member for his significant contribution to the success of a project and you enter the room with a scowl from a prior interaction with a difficult superior, you most certainly will not convey gratitude or satisfaction, but instead annoyance.

In our March Newsletter we will offer you more guidance on active listening, as well as assertive communication and sender/receiver distortions.

**Stay tuned to Beyond the Horizons Consulting Newsletters for timely information to solve your management challenges! Please feel free to write us at**

[info@beyondthehorizonsconsulting.com](mailto:info@beyondthehorizonsconsulting.com)

**or to call us at 505-466-4990 to schedule a free, complimentary coaching session or consultation for your business needs.**

**Beyond the Horizons Consulting offers a variety of services for individuals, teams, and organizations.**

- ◆ **Individual coaching for managers is a process that begins by identifying your style, what you want to retain and strengthen, and what you want to modify. Objective assessments are part of the process, as are also a mutual give-and-take process of creative problem solving and supportive guidance.**
- ◆ **We offer group seminars on identifying and dealing with stress in a relaxing and supportive environment.**
- ◆ **Our team building seminars will help your team or department run more smoothly, whether it is a brand-new team or one that has been put together after a reorganization.**
- ◆ **Our communication seminars identify the several**

- ◆ **We also offer group seminars on teamwork, using the MBTI or DISC.**
- ◆ **Our conflict resolution services help opposing parties identify mutual purpose(s) and restore harmony to your workplace environment.**
- ◆ **It is our pleasure to tailor a seminar to your company's, department's, or team's needs!**

**Take a look at our May and June, 2005, Newsletters to see our new, serene home, a place we invite you to take advantage of!**

**Call us to schedule a complimentary consultation for yourself or your business!**

**Our helpful Office Administrator, Stan, will work with you to schedule a meeting time that fits your schedule.**

**Stan and Jean Eva can be reached at  
(505) 466-4990**