



Article 2: Communication

“Nobody Cares What You Have to Say . . .
Until You Give Them a Reason”

Too often, we make the assumption that when we communicate, the other person is listening. Yet, the competition for people’s attention is intense. We are all bombarded by messages from every direction: Managers, peers, direct reports, customers, vendors, and staff — each with something to say meetings, reports, e-mail, snail mail, discussions, presentations, and speeches. The information overload serves notice: If you’re trying to communicate, you will have to cut through the interference — not just from competing sources, but from people’s built-in resistance as well.

Applying What You Already Know

Your own experience tells you that you are not always ready to listen. How attentive are you to anyone else if you are angry — especially if you are angry with that person? How much of a conversation really registers right after a phone call about your child being sick?

Do you keep listening when someone's conversation is all over the map? (Oh, no, here comes that story again about his first job!) How often do you stay focused if you feel a meeting you're in is pointless or unnecessary?

If we keep in mind our disengagement when we aren't ready to listen, we should know better than to expect others to be riveted to our every word. However, people will be more attentive and think about a discussion — processing it, carefully considering our ideas, reacting mentally — if they have a stake in the communication.

You may say the “stake” is that you're the boss, and if they don't listen, they will eventually be putting their jobs in jeopardy. Granted, you buy some automatic attention when you're in charge. But it doesn't buy much, and it may actually get in the way. Just as important, you probably talk with many people who aren't required to listen to you at all. You must earn all of their interest.

Are They Ready to Participate?

To earn that interest in communicating, we try to raise and maintain people's receptivity. Receptivity is the willingness to listen to and work with someone else to make an interaction productive. Think of receptivity as a line on a graph. As we engage in conversation, the other person's line may move above or dip below a minimal level of receptivity. Sometimes, he is highly involved; sometimes, not at all. It can change from moment to moment.

Effective communication depends on raising receptivity as high as possible. If we do nothing to budge low receptivity, we lose the lively interplay of ideas, insights, debate, and the weighing of options that characterize quality discussion.

If we can't get that synergy going, we will be far less successful as leaders engaging in activities that depend on good communication, such as motivating, coaching, or training. So, it's worthwhile to work on raising receptivity.



Give Them a Reason to Participate

One way is to plead, badger, and threaten to gain a certain momentary level of receptivity. “Now listen carefully. I mean it. This is really important!” How frequently can we say this to people and remain effective? We end up paying for their interest with our credibility.

A better way to create interest is to appeal to people’s self-interest. What will they gain from engaging in dialogue with you? And the answer can’t simply be that they get to hear your pleasant voice and brilliant ideas.

A good technique for creating interest is to actually answer their question, “What’s in it for me?” make a benefit statement; take the time at the beginning of a discussion and at other appropriate moments to state what the benefit will be for them to participate.

“Karen, I’m glad I caught you. I did an inventory check at the warehouse. I want to talk about it because I think we can solve your shortage problem.” The other person’s ears perk up. Something to solve my problem? I’m listening!

That’s fine if it’s good news. But if the topic is unpleasant, keep finding the benefit. Suppose you are a team leader and must talk to a member who monopolizes discussions, and runs roughshod over the views of others? You might say, *“John, I’m concerned about the way you approach our team discussions. If everyone were allowed more of a chance to contribute, your ideas would be better received and have a greater chance of being adopted.”* Stating a positive outcome up front as a reward for John’s willingness to work out the problem makes more sense than, *“John, you’re being a loudmouth, and people are complaining about it. So, knock it off.”* Receptivity will be a lot higher in the first conversation, even though the statement in the second may be just as accurate.



A photograph of two women in professional business attire. The woman on the left is Black with long dark hair, wearing a dark blazer over a white shirt. The woman on the right is White with dark hair pulled back in a bun, wearing a light-colored blazer over a white shirt. They are both looking towards each other in profile, suggesting a conversation. The background is a blurred office or public space.

Interfering Emotions

Even if we can show what's in it for them, interfering emotions can be a barrier to raising receptivity. If the other person is angry, depressed, or agitated, it is probably pointless to try to engage in meaningful dialogue because receptivity will be low. Even positive feelings of elation and excitement can be roadblocks to receptivity. Whatever the circumstance, too often, we simply ignore the other person's emotional state, or we press on, hoping receptivity will improve.

Two kinds of interfering emotions can occur. In one, personal circumstances outside of work generate the emotions. Financial difficulties, troubled relationships, or health problems can cause interfering emotions that are difficult to manage but can't be ignored.

The other interfering emotions are created at the workplace itself. We may be able to intervene and change a situation that creates turmoil. Be aware, though, that we may be the source of the interfering emotions! Our own behavior could be causing anxiety, anger, or frustration.

Fortunately, we can work to reduce tension by venting the other person's emotions. Venting means letting the person express aloud a strong feeling. The very act of venting serves as a safety valve; reducing interfering emotions allows receptivity to go up. The person can once again concentrate and engage.

Putting It Into Practice — Or Not: A Study

While it has been proven that raising receptivity, stating benefits, and venting interfering emotions will greatly improve our ability to communicate effectively, these tools won't work if they are not put to use. We conducted a statistical study among upper-management executives based on their performance in a simulated meeting. Results indicate that when engaged in a difficult, one-to-one communication of high importance, most of them failed to use these techniques, and their performance suffered for it.

Eighty-four participants took part in a role-play simulation knowing that their leadership style and communication skills would be evaluated. Their task was to tell a talented direct report that he had been passed over for a promotion because his people skills were deficient.

They were also told that they should try to gain the direct report's commitment to continue in his position. The direct report was coached to exhibit QI assertiveness and negative emotions.

We purposely made this scenario challenging in order to observe how well the executives would utilize their communication skills. They were free to structure the meeting any way they wished, to move the direct report from understanding his deficiency to gaining his commitment to a positive plan for the future. Realizing this, a majority of the executives still did little to raise receptivity and get the direct report's active involvement in the meeting. They seemed to sacrifice direct report participation and involvement in order to control the meeting and keep it from deviating from their own planned strategy.

After delivering bad news, it would be reasonable to vent emotions that would normally interfere with further discussion. Although those portraying the direct reports acted out being visibly upset, only 20 percent of the executives tried to vent these intense emotions before moving on. How engaged would a real direct report be while remaining in a highly agitated state?

If one important purpose of the meeting was to arrive at an understanding about the future and to gain a commitment from the direct report, you would expect the executive to draw out the direct report's thoughts and views, raising receptivity.

To preserve one-way-only communication, participants used a number of tactics that discouraged feedback. Only 16 percent checked for understanding of what was said along the way. Less than a third developed any give-and-take at all during the meeting. As for determining a plan of action, far fewer than that asked for the other's input first before determining that plan. In effect, the direct reports were handed a plan.

While hesitating to draw universal conclusions from one study, we do think it's a reasonable conclusion that when important information must be delivered and meaningful dialogue should take place in a meeting, very little attention is paid to choosing the communication techniques and strategies that would boost success.

In an effort to make a potentially contentious meeting run smoothly, the person in charge appears to be tempted to take control and sacrifice collaboration that could actually help both sides.

Rating the Factors for Improving Communication

Skilled behavioral analysts reviewed the role-play simulations of 84 upper-management executives to evaluate, among other leadership indicators, their communication skills. Their behavior in a meeting with a “direct report” was uniformly scored. These figures were tabulated in a variety of categories, including:

Executive	Yes (%)	No (%)
Makes benefit statements	45	55
Checks readiness to proceed	12	88
Gets details before presenting	22	78
Reflect's DR's feelings	23	77
Vents emotions before dealing with issues	20	80
Checks for understanding	16	84
Questions to understand DR	28	72
Develops constructive give-and-take	28	72
Asks for other's input first determining an action plan	17	83

Probing — A Powerful Technique

There's one other area in which many participants of this study came up short — probing. Probing is a verbal technique for finding out what another person knows, thinks, or feels. It's similar to questioning, but probing is much more than asking questions; it also raises receptivity and increases involvement.

No doubt you are familiar with a number of probes. Being skilled in knowing how to probe and applying a probing strategy can improve greatly the encounters you have, from dealing with the worst problems to engaging in the most stimulating dialogue.

When using probes to give the other person a chance to speak, get things off his mind, and be involved, you are acknowledging his worth. He feels included and even appreciated. There is something in it for the other person when we probe.

Probes are effective because they force us to put ourselves in the other person's place. Probes work to ensure that she not only is heard, but her point of view is truly represented. Probes can:

- Encourage the other person to open up (start the flow of conversation)
- Encourage the other person to keep talking (continue the flow)
- Confirm or check understanding.



Effective But Underused

When used in combination, probing is very effective. Yet, when the videotapes of the 84 role-play meetings were analyzed, we learned that an average of only about eight probes of any kind were used per executive for their entire meeting. Remember, the role-play scenario virtually required that the direct report participate and become involved. Probing is the only way to make sure that happens when the subject of the meeting doesn't have the power to demand it.

Only 10 of the 84 executives seemed to understand that. Of the total number of probes used by everyone participating in the study, these 10 individuals used the great majority of them, averaging 27 per person and using a wealth of probes to gain receptivity and seek commitment to action.

Unfortunately, if you remove these top communication achievers from the group, the remaining 74 executives averaged a little less than six probes each in the entire time they spent with the direct reports. It's hard to believe, but a handful used no probes at all in their meeting.

We aren't trying to belittle any of the efforts of the executives who participated in the study. They are successful businesspeople who show a healthy bias for getting things done that is probably a big part of their success. However, because they are capable people, it is unfortunate they don't apply their skills to be more effective communicators. Most of them missed an opportunity to reclaim an employee. They could have encouraged the direct report's participation and involved him in planning his future.

In real life, which employee would be more likely to try solving his people skills problems and work toward a brighter future at his company — the one who is acknowledged and invited to share in mapping out his strategy for success, or the one who isn't?

The Most Underused Probes

Perhaps the most underused probes, so important to raising receptivity and soliciting participation, are the open-end probe, reflective statement, summary statement, and pausing.

Open-End Probes. Most people already understand the concepts of open- and closed-end questioning, which are quite intuitive. To draw someone out, ask open-end probes that get people talking, such as, “How would you go about solving this problem?” or “What is your reaction to the plan?” To pin down someone to specific facts or to contract the conversation, ask closed-end questions that require few words to answer. “What day do you want to start?” “Do you prefer plan A or plan B?”

While our executives used open-end probes more than others (30 percent of the total), they should have used them even more. Once they disclosed the bad news, most of the meeting could have been devoted to eliciting the direct report’s feelings and thoughts about making changes and to seek out his ideas for a planned course of action. The opportunity to raise receptivity and involvement would have been tremendous.

The other three underused probes are not intuitive, and we have to train ourselves to use them:

Reflective Statements allow the other person to vent emotions.

Examples are:

- “It’s obvious you are concerned about this.”
- “You find the new rule a real burden; I can tell.”
- “The more we talk about the budget, the more frustrated you’re getting.”

A reflective statement may seem awkward; our natural inclination is not to speak about someone else’s emotional state during a business conversation. However, if you don’t allow people to “let off steam,” receptivity for whatever comes next in the conversation will be low.

By the way, this process doesn’t mean the other person will join your side if you’ve been having a strong disagreement. The purpose is to be sure the emotions aren’t getting in the way of the give-and-take of ideas. The people in our simulations would have been more effective had they vented anger and disappointment before proceeding.

Percentage of Types of Probes Used By All Participating Executives	
Open-End Probes	30%
Closed-End Probes	26
Brief Assertions	20
Summary Statements	10
Reflective Statements	6
Leading Questions	5
Neutral Phrases	2
Pauses	2

Summary Statements briefly rephrase or sum up what the other person has told you, checking to be certain you have understood clearly and correctly what was said. For example:

“You’re saying we should not back this merger — that the timing is wrong and the conditions are not favorable.”

It may not feel natural to make summary statements during a conversation, but it is well worth it, because they do more than verify that the other person has been correctly understood. They acknowledge the other person, saying in effect, “I’m paying attention to you whether I agree with you or not. Your thoughts and feelings count.” Summary statements work to raise receptivity.

Summary statements are also useful during an impassioned discussion when it is helpful to sort out the points made and consider them one at a time. They can help crystallize the thoughts of someone who rambles and get the discussion back on track. However, even during the smoothest conversation, it is good to check that you understand what you’ve heard. Just be sure that in summarizing someone else in discussion, you don’t simply play back his exact words. You should actually rephrase what you’ve heard and not just parrot it, which can be annoying.

Pausing. We may pause at times in normal conversation, but a pause used as a probe is a planned silence. It can be used to allow the other person to collect her thoughts or think over what has been said.

The purposeful pause is also used effectively to slow down an interaction so the other person doesn’t feel pressured. At the same time, if someone is reluctant to speak, a long pause creates an awkward silence that often compels the other person to say something to break the silence. That’s why it is considered a probe. It actually promotes dialogue when used this way, and can be very effective if you have the discipline to wait long enough for the other person to respond.



Probing Strategies

The real power of probing comes from combining them to form a **probing strategy**. Probing frequently during conversation is not a strategy. Strategy comes from giving thought ahead of time to both the other person and the purpose of the communication, and, then, picking appropriate probes to use.

A probing strategy would have been an effective way for our executives to create high receptivity and a commitment to action. Open-end probes could have been used to get an accurate picture of the direct report's reaction and thoughts. Reflective statements would have vented the anger and frustration. Additional open-end probes could have gained participation in developing a plan for the future. Summary statements along the way would not only have maintained receptivity, they may have brought on a lively or even impassioned discussion of the issues.



Probes That Encourage the Other Person to Open Up

Probe	Definition	Objectives	Characteristics	Examples
Open-End Probe	A question or statement that invites a wide-ranging response; often asks for ideas, opinions, or views.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opens up discussion • Invites broad response • Gives the other person freedom to talk • Gets involvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can't be answered "yes" or "no" • Gets at feelings, opinions, thoughts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "What do you think about . . . ?" • "Tell me about . . ." • "Why do you feel . . . ?" • "What's your opinion?"

Probes That Encourage the Other Person to Keep Talking

Probe	Definition	Objectives	Characteristics	Examples
Pause	An intentional, purposeful period of silence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gives the other person a chance to think and respond • Slows down pace • Draws out the other person 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Usually follows open-end probe • Deliberate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Why do you say that?" (silence) • "Tell me more." (silence)
Reflective Statement	A statement that describes and reflects a feeling or emotion (without implying agreement or disagreement)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifies emotions • Shows you understand • Vents interfering emotions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Names a feeling or emotion • Generally uses the word "you" or "you're" • May state cause of the emotion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "You're pretty mad about it." • "You seem reluctant to talk about it." • "Sounds like you're excited."
Neutral Phrase or Question	A question or statement that encourages the other person to elaborate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gets the other person to tell more about a subject 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses few words • Pertains to the subject under discussion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Tell me more." • "Please elaborate." • "Explain that." • "Amplify on that."
Brief Assertion	A short statement, sound, or gesture that shows involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourages the other person to continue • Increases receptivity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elicits additional information • Occurs automatically 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Oh, okay." • "I see." • (Nodding your head)

Probes That Help Confirm Your Understanding

Probe	Definition	Objectives	Characteristics	Examples
Closed-End Question	A question that limits the answer by requesting specific facts — or a “yes” or “no” answer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Finds out details, specifics Checks understanding Directs the discussion Gets the other person to take a stand 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Often starts with “Who,” “Which,” “When,” “Where,” “How many,” etc. Sometimes answered with a “yes” or “no” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Who is ...?” “Which order ...?” “When will you ...?” “Do you think ...?”
Leading Question	A question that implies only one answer — or a rhetorical question to which no answer is needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pins down positions or agreements Verifies assumptions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is a question that gives the answer No answer is required Can be threatening 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Shouldn’t we discuss ...?” “This is the best way to go, isn’t it?”
Summary Statement	A brief statement, in your own words, of what was said	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Checks understanding Proves you’re listening Gives structure and direction Helps the other person clarify thinking Invites the other person to comment or expand 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Summarizes content, not feelings Restates essential ideas Uses your own words 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “So you disagree about ...” “The way you see it is ...” “You prefer working overtime ...” “Let me summarize how I ...”

Strategy With Q1 Behavior

Since the “direct reports” behaved in a Q1 manner, we can derive a probing strategy that’s useful when encountering Q1 behavior. The highest receptivity and commitment to the interaction itself comes from being open. Let someone with dominant Q1 behavior talk and express himself fully, supporting his ego (as do reflective and summary statements), keeping the spotlight on him. Avoid closed-end probes and leading questions; these might signal that you are trying to box in or manipulate the other person’s thinking.

People with Q1 behavior may have equal or more power than you. Developing a probing strategy makes sense because you can’t resort to making them participate. Your probing strategy is part of giving them a reason to.

Strategy With Q2 Behavior

What would be a sensible probing strategy for Q2 behavior? Typically, this person is quiet, doesn’t take chances, and prefers to stay in the background. Q2 behavior has nothing to do with intelligence, creativity, or knowledge. If you don’t think ahead of how to probe effectively, you may consistently miss the benefit of this person’s thinking and ideas because she’s not likely to bring them to your attention.

Maintain a low-key, low-risk environment for your conversations. Slow the probing to a comfortable pace. To draw out this person, use the open-end probe to invite a response. Downplay closed-end questions. Avoid doing all the talking when there is a silence. If you get no response from an open-end probe, try purposeful pausing to make the other person want to say something to break the awkward silence. Reflective and summary statements also help by appealing to the security needs of Q2 behavior.

Strategy With Q4 Behavior

While it’s true that Q4 behavior is already collaborative and participative, you can employ skillful probing to elicit quality thinking and creative problem solving. Q4 likes a challenge, and effective probes can get the most out of communication and lead to productive results. Using lots of open-end probes and summary statements will promote the free flow of ideas. Avoid closed-end and leading questions, which may be perceived as restrictive or manipulative.

In general, a probing strategy also means varying the types of probes used in conversation. An open probing strategy does not mean asking endless open-end probes. After awhile, the other person may feel the conversation is not leading anywhere and will lose interest or question your motives. A string of closed-end questions will start sounding like a police interrogation. Summarizing too frequently will seem manipulative, as if you are repeating the other person’s words to trip him up. Instead, combining probes appropriate to the other person’s behavior can tap into the best people have to offer.

Strategy With Q3 Behavior

A contrasting strategy makes sense for Q3 behavior. Because of a strong need to be accepted and liked, those with a Q3 behavior pattern tend to talk a lot, although not always on topic. Be cordial to make the other person comfortable, but use probes that channel discussion so this person doesn’t drift from the topic. Closed-end probes and summary statements serve to keep the conversation on course and productive. Open-end probes usually aren’t needed and tend to exacerbate meandering.

Stop Talking and Start Communicating

Highly capable people are losing out on the benefits of valuable, two-way communication. Everything we've discussed takes some practice; but, with time, these skills can become almost second nature. With a probing strategy and the overriding idea that you have to give people a reason to stay involved, you can produce a tremendous return for your effort. A rise in receptivity doesn't have to be dramatic to start paying off. And when you achieve higher receptivity, the quality of your communication will also rise and benefit from open-minded listening, careful consideration of ideas, and strategic questioning that is constructive and clarifies.

Sound too idealistic? We have positive feedback from so many who have applied these sound communication principles and probing techniques to great advantage. The fact is, these methods work.

Questions to Ponder

1. Imagine if people simply told us how they'd listen to what we have to say — letting us know if their receptivity is high or low. Since they don't, we must observe carefully. What outward signs tell us where their receptivity is? How do you signal to others your level of interest?
2. Receptivity can drop if someone is experiencing a strong emotion. Q1 anger, Q2 fears and frustration, even Q3 delight, can be obstacles to listening and giving full attention to what you say. What is the value of using a Reflective Statement to help overcome these obstacles? Why do you think people are reluctant to use it in conversation?
3. While any one probe may be a useful communication tool, the real power of probing is putting together an effective combination to deal with specific behaviors. What combination of probes would be effective for: Working with Q1 dominance? Handling Q2 reluctance to engage or state views? Focusing Q3 on the issues and stating disagreements?