Verbal Communication

Inquire: The Importance of Verbal Communication

Overview

Verbal communication is one of the first things people think of when dealing with communication. This lesson will teach you what verbal communication is and explain ways to overcome the different challenges you can face when communicating verbally. Understanding verbal communication is essential to mastering effective communication. Having strategies that help overcome obstacles to effective communication will set you up for success not just in professional environments, but in personal situations as well. Verbal communication is the gateway to effective communication in all aspects of life.

Big Question: What difficulties with verbal communication do you have, and how do you overcome them?

Watch: What’s in a Name?

Verbal communication is comprised of the words we speak and write to communicate our messages. These messages need to be understood by the receiver to make sure the message is received as intended. To do this, we use words that have meanings that both the sender and receiver understand.

Why do we call pancakes by that name?

What about all of their other names? Is there some inherent reason about their shape, color, or taste that declares them as pancakes? No, there isn’t. We know what a pancake is because we have been taught that that thing matches to that name.

This is the basis of verbal communication. Understanding what things belong to what words is a necessary first step to effectively getting a message across to our receiver.

These symbols, things that match an agreed upon meaning, are the foundation for language. Language is one of the main elements of verbal communication. To be understood, written or spoken words both require some kind of language. That’s why dictionaries exist — to help explain what words mean so that people can agree upon them. Agreement of word meaning is the most important part of verbal communication. In your life, you will find yourself in situations where someone is saying something to you, but you have no idea what they mean. This is ineffective verbal communication. In order to overcome this, you and the other person have to come to an agreed upon meaning of the words you are using. At a new job orientation session, you might not share the same vocabulary about the processes and requirements of the job as the presenter. Once you and the other person agree on what words mean, you can then efficiently communicate with them and get your message through.
Can you think of a time where you didn’t understand what someone was telling you? It might be math class, or someone might have been speaking too quickly to understand. In these situations, how did you handle it? What did you do to try and understand what was being said to you?

Read: The In’s and Out’s of Verbal Communication

Overview
Talking is one of the first things that comes to mind when people say the word “communication.” However, written words are also verbal! In this lesson, we will examine what verbal communication is, what it is made up of, and what things can get in the way of it. Mastering the art of verbal communication is the first step toward mastering effective communication in any part of your life.

What is Verbal Communication?

Verbal communication is defined by communication experts Scott T. Paynton and Laura K. Hahn as “an agreed-upon and rule-governed system of symbols used to share meaning.” This definition means that verbal communication is all about language, spoken or written. When your boss tells you to get a task done, a simple “yes, ma’am” is verbal communication. Snapping finger guns in her direction is nonverbal. But, what about things more in the middle? What about a sigh, or a grunt? Because they do not involve words, the symbols mentioned in our definition, both a sigh and a grunt are nonverbal communication. In short, this lesson is teaching you only about words and the impact words have on the communication process.

What Makes Up Verbal Communication?

Verbal communication is made up of agreed upon, rule-governed symbols. First, agreed upon means that all parties involved agree on what words can be used. For example, if you begin ordering food from a restaurant in a different language, that verbal communication is foreign and ineffective. The same can happen if your coworker uses an acronym that you have not heard before. Because you have not agreed upon using that acronym (probably because you do not know the definition of it), that verbal communication is ineffective.

Rule-governed communication means that rules are agreed upon by those communicating. These rules are what gives words meaning to convey a message. Inside jokes are a great example to explain rule-governed language. Only the people that are part of the joke understand why it is funny or what it even means, because they agreed to the rules of that joke by being present for the creation of it. And because you “had to be there,” people outside of the joke will never get it. If it is explained to the outsider, the new person can also agree to the same rules as the original group.

The most important part of our definition is “symbols.” Paynton and Hahn explain symbols “are arbitrary representations of thoughts, ideas, emotions, objects, or actions used to encode and decode meaning. Symbols stand for, or represent, something else.” Why do we call a wall a wall? Is there anything about it that naturally lends itself to being called that? No, and that’s exactly what a symbol is. It’s something that only has meaning because people agree to the meaning of it. It’s made up or arbitrary. For instance, before the creation of Twitter and other social media platforms, the symbol # was not called a hashtag but was referred to as a “pound sign.” It symbolized the word “number” in many instances. Now, it has a new meaning and symbolizes new things. The meaning of the symbol has changed because the agreed upon rules dealing with that symbol have changed. It makes sense to some people that seeing that symbol
means they should think “number,” but only because they have been taught that and agreed to it, not because something about that specific arrangement of lines naturally means “number.”

The hashtag example explains the second quality of symbols: they are ambiguous or can have multiple meanings. Because symbols have multiple meanings, it is important that symbols’ meanings be agreed upon. In order to communicate effectively, ensure the verbal symbols you use mean the same thing to the audience as they do to you. In Australia, a “thong” is a type of sandal. It’s called a “flip-flop” in the U.S. In the United States, “thong” refers to a kind of underwear. An Australian would need to think about the symbols they use at the beach, because “thong” has different meanings in different cultures. This difference in symbol meaning could cause some awkward problems to arise if a speaker is not aware of the ambiguous meaning that symbol can have, depending on the audience being addressed.

What Complicates Verbal Communication?

Because verbal communication relies on agreed upon definitions of symbols, one complicating factor arises when people do not agree on a definition. When this happens, miscommunication can take place. A miscommunication happens any time an intended message is either lost or misinterpreted by the receiver. However, this is not the only thing that can complicate verbal communication. Both verbal and written communication have complications that can cause miscommunications to occur.

Noise can affect verbal communication. Is there a noisy fan that prevents your audience from hearing you? What about people that are hard of hearing? That can also cause verbal communication to fail. Other things — speech impediments, accents, and slang — can also cause problems to arise in the communication process.

Written communication is not without its pitfalls either. Bad handwriting, unsent email messages caused by technical problems, texts without nonverbal elements such as tone to convey a joke or sarcasm: all of these issues can cause miscommunication in written verbal messages.

How to Overcome Verbal Communication Barriers

Usually, miscommunication can be easily addressed once you are familiar with the problem causing it in the first place. Slowing down and asking questions to help your audience understand can prevent miscommunication. If it is an atmospheric issue, like a loud fan, you can either turn off the distracting noise, try to talk over it, or move the conversation. If your handwriting is difficult to read, ask someone else to write down the information for you, or type it out instead. Follow up emails that verify if the recipient got your message, or if they have questions about it, help to resolve issues that arise from technical issues or from a lack of nonverbal inputs.

The goal of communication is to effectively send your message to the receiver. The easiest way to address problems with communication is to ask your audience (or receiver) what issues they are having understanding your message. Once you know, you can come up with a new way to present the message that solves those problems. Flexibility in the face of barriers is the ultimate way to ensure effective verbal communication in any setting.

Reflect: What is Verbal Communication?

Poll
Should written communication be included as verbal communication?
Expand: Complications of Verbal Communication

Introduction

In this section, you will be introduced to Anne and asked to evaluate her performance at verbal communication. You will need to identify what kinds of verbal communication she uses, what obstacles she faces, and how she could have addressed these obstacles. Remember, effective communication is the goal, and that means getting Anne’s message across to the audience as intended.

Presenting to the Board

Anne has been asked to present sales numbers from her department to the board of the company. She decides to use PowerPoint slides to illustrate what her department has accomplished. As Anne begins setting up her presentation, she notices a glare on the screen coming from an open window in the room. Throughout the presentation, one of the older members of the board keeps slightly bending over and cupping a hand next to his ear. She notices that this happens more frequently after the air conditioner turns on in the room. In the middle of the presentation, a phone belonging to one of the board members starts ringing and continues for several seconds. Several times throughout the presentation, Anne references an acronym that her team created for referencing sales numbers. None of the board members ask about it, but none of them were present when Anne and her team came up with the acronym. Every time she uses it, some members of the board look around at each other with a confused look on their face.

At the end of the presentation Anne is thanked by the board for her team’s hard work, but none of them congratulate her on the accomplishments she told them about in the meeting. It’s almost as if they did not realize what it was her team had managed to do in the past year. Anne can’t help but feel the presentation could have gone better. What would you have changed to ensure an effective presentation for the board?

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

Communication Barriers

- A video explaining nine different barriers that can interfere with verbal communication
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jsl468Hwr4o

Effective Verbal Communication

- An article explaining skills to use in order to master effective verbal communication

Overcoming Communication Barriers

- An article explaining common barriers to the communication process and providing strategies for overcoming the different issues
  - https://www.icas.com/professional-development/overcoming-communication-barriers
Lesson Glossary

**verbal communication**: an agreed upon and rule-governed system of symbols used to share meaning

**symbols**: arbitrary representations of thoughts, ideas, emotions, objects, or actions used to encode and decode meaning; symbols stand for, or represent, something else

**miscommunication**: what happens any time an intended message is either lost or misinterpreted by the receiver

Check Your Knowledge

1. Verbal communication includes only written words
   A. True
   B. False

2. Finger guns are an example of verbal communication
   A. True
   B. False

3. Symbol meanings never change over time.
   A. True
   B. False

Answer Key:

Citations

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