Does My Bum Look Big In This? Learn to Inform Constructively

What is Communication?

communication
kəmjuːnɪˈkeɪʃ(ə)n/
noun
noun: **communication**; plural noun: **communications**
1. the imparting or exchanging of information by speaking, writing, or using some other medium.

Origin

late Middle English: from Old French *comunicacion*, from Latin *communicatio(n-*), from the verb *communicare* 'to share' (see communicate).
Definition from Oxford dictionaries (http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/communication)

Or a more technical definition:-

"A message or communication is sent by the sender through a communication channel to a receiver, or to multiple receivers. The sender must encode the message (the information being conveyed) into a form that is appropriate to the communication channel, and the receiver(s) then decodes the message to understand its meaning and significance." From:
http://www.skillsyouneed.com/general/what-is-communication.html#ixzz37

These definitions over simplify a much more complicated issue and then for Effective Communication, it requires that the information is not just imparted or exchanged but that it is also understood in the way the sender meant it to be.

Facts
- Words per minute that you can listen to 600-700 words per minute
- Average speaking rate of a person - 150 words per minute

Listening:
When we are looking at communication we often look at the delivering side and not the receiving side. However ineffective listening can lead to assumptions and conclusions being drawn without really listening to what is being said. Have you ever caught yourself doing any of the following?

- Do you ever doodle? Not always a bad thing - Doodling has been shown to be a way to enhance understanding - http://www.newsweek.com/why-doodling-may-help-improve-your-memory-82665
- Do you sit there bursting with something to say?
- Do you ever do a laugh when someone is speaking?
- Have you ever continued looking at your screen, checking your phone when someone is speaking?
- Have you ever sat there confused and said nothing?

In good communication, you need to use clarification and reflection but that does not mean you should interrupt. Jot down what you want to say if you think you will forget it.

Think about:

- Looking at the speaker - otherwise you will miss the non-verbal clues in the conversation. Looking at the speaker shows your interest too.
- Don't interrupt
- Don't be judgmental.
- Show your interest

Related reads
Karten, Naomi, "Are You Listening?", http://www.agileconnection.com/article/are-you-listening, Agile Connection, 2009
Levison, Mark, "The Beginner's Mind - An Approach to Listening", http://www.infoq.com/news/2008/08/beginners_mind, InfoQ, 2008

Non-verbal Communication

- Have you ever had trouble maintaining eye contact when talking with others? Do you look at your shoes, cross your arms? When?
- Do you ever speak with a timid voice? When?
- Do you ever talk too quickly because you are nervous? When?
- Do you smile too much because of nervousness? Too little?
- How do you stand? Do you keep your head down or slouch? When?

Think about:

- Gestures and Posture
- Physical distance
- Eye contact
- Facial expression
- Voice - Volume and Tone

Stress and emotion

- Have you ever gotten worked up in a conversation?
- Started to clench your fist or fidget your leg?
- Ever forget to breathe?

Think about:

- Recognize Stress in a conversation/situation - Yours or someone elses
- Deep breaths -Take a moment to calm down
- Compromise or agree to disagree
- Look at others - try to assess their stress and emotion regarding the situation
- Ellen Gottesdiener has said that when giving feedback is much more about the giver than the recipient. Be aware of your motivations and goals

Related reads

You can be a problem-solving leader even if you aren't a manager. Derby, Esther, Don Gray, Johanna Rothman, Gerald M. Weinberg, *Readings for Problem-Solving Leadership,* LeanPub, 2013, https://leanpub.com/pslreader

Assertiveness

- Do I struggle to ask for what I want?
- Is it hard to state my opinion?
- Do I have trouble saying no?

Think about:

Being a true team player doesn't mean saying "yes" or "I'll try", it means being realistic and helping others set achievable goals. Hone your craft.

Related reads
T*he Clean Coder: A Code of Conduct for Professional Programmers*, by Bob Martin
http://www.skillsyouneed.com/ips/nonverbal-communication.html

Obstacles to Communicating

Be aware of some of the obstacles to communicating and try to overcome them by looking out for them and mitigating the impact they have on the communication:-
- Language - Using too much jargon or terminology when communicating can mean the message gets lost.
- Emotion - whether it is your emotions or the other people's in the conversation/meeting be aware and try to manage the emotion if necessary to enable the communication to be effective.
- Cultural - The thought patterns of different cultures are different, as are the way they convey emotions, so be aware of people's cultures and try to adapt accordingly.
- Physical barriers - assess whether there are any physical barriers and accommodate them, try to mitigate the impact of those barriers.

- Desire to listen - if people do not find the information relevant or interesting or are distracted it affects their listening.

Think about:

How you would like people to communicate with you? Have you made other people aware of your preferences? When you are in a conversation do you paraphrase to confirm you understand? Do you repeat things back to someone?
Do you probe for missing information?
Do you clarify any points you do not understand?
How and what will you remember from the conversation?

When you are talking, what information are you sharing, is it Must, should or nice to know? Make sure you manage to highlight the information that you need people to understand.

Remote Working

Remote working can complicate things further as it can restrict ones ability to see people, meaning you can miss out on a large part of the communication (body language).

Think about:
- Defining some policies about availability? - Like core hours or contactable at certain hours?
- If you are not hte remote worker, try being on the end of a video call, so that you empathise better.
- Using video calls over email or messaging or Google Hangout or Sqwiggle. Combined with maybe HipChat, Campfire or Yammer and have good project visibility so use things like Trello and dropbox

Constructive communication
When providing information around a problem it is important to maintain positive relationships between the communicators. It is easy for the receiver of the information to become defensive. Sometimes people think there are only two approaches; avoid the conflict altogether or go for a more 'hard nosed' approach but there is a third way which using constructive communication.
- Be tactful
- Keep the conversation related to the problem - try not make it personal
- Describe the situation - try not to evaluate or pass judgement
- Be specific - try not to make generalisations
- Keep calm - acknowledge emotions so everyone remains objective
- Listen

Meetings
We are all involved in meetings (and yes that includes conversations) so we need to make sure we bring our best to them and get the best out of them.

- Try not to take meetings off agenda - take the topic off line and discuss it later
- Use constructive communication and keep the dialog open

- Provide the information people need and confirm they have understood
- Ask for the information you need
  - Probe for missing information
  - Reflect back your understanding
- Make sure the actions are clear (and who owns them)

Stand-ups
- Prepare the information you are going to share
- Listen
- Speak clearly
- Raise problems
- Be concise
-

Sprint Planning
- Prepare for the upcoming stories
- Clarify the stories - remove assumptions
- Highlight issues

Reports

We write documents often, whether they are emails, bug reports or test reports they all have a similar aim, to communicate information. A good report should have these characteristics:
- Factual
- Clear
- Provide the relevant information
- Facilitate people to make the right decisions
- Well structured

Think about:

Keeping reports reader friendly, what do they need to know and how can you clearly provide that information. Provide relevant information and try to avoid repetition and redundancy.

Other good reads

- Hunt, Andy, *Pragmatic Thinking and Learning*, Pragmatic Bookshelf, 2008
- Manns, Mary Lynn and Linda Rising, *Fearless Change: Patterns for Introducing New Ideas*, Addison-Wesley, 2005
- Seashore, Charles N., Edith Whitfield Seashore, and Gerald M. Weinberg, *What Did You Say?: The Art of Giving and Receiving Feedback*, Bingham House Books, 1997
- Sullivan, Wendy and Julie Rees, Clean Language: Revealing Metaphors and Opening Minds, Crown House Publishing, 2008