



# **WATCH WHAT YOU SAY!**

**An etiquette brief on verbal communication by Civility Experts Worldwide**

## **Introduction**

Talk, talk, talk...how many words do you think you say in a day? And how many of those words inspire, motivate, capture, or persuade? Effective communication skills are a powerful tool. Having the ability to verbalize what you mean in a way that means something to others is an essential leadership quality.

Business leaders, public speakers, negotiators, human resource professionals, anyone who communicates with others, and anyone who needs to give direction and get action would benefit by improving verbal communication skills.

On a daily basis we are bombarded with communications: emails, couriers, the radio, the chit chat of friends, honking of car horns, buzzers and beepers, ringing telephones and so on. The number and mode of communications is unlimited. How do we choose what to listen to? Successful professionals know that if they want to connect with people, if they want to build relationships, they must communicate in such a way that people will listen. This lesson covers the basics of verbal communication.

For an expanded lesson plan including activities and answer keys, please visit the shopping cart at [www.etiquettelearningtoolkits.com](http://www.etiquettelearningtoolkits.com)

## VERBAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS (Excerpt)

From the moment we learn to speak, many of us take for granted that speech and communicating orally is a simple thing. The truth is that given how busy and stressed we all are, and considering the distractions, poor grammar, lack of clarity, and other situational factors that impact communication, it really is a miracle that we understand each other at all.



### TERMS TO KNOW:

Glossophobia is fear of public speaking. It is believed to be the single most common [phobia](#), affecting as much as 75% of all people. When ranked among fears, it generally is the number one fear, surpassing even the fear of death. Glossophobia is considered a [social phobia](#) and may be linked to, or sometimes precede, a more severe [anxiety disorder](#). Several talented and successful musicians have the fear of performing in public, including [Barbra Streisand](#) and [Dusty Springfield](#). *Source: Wikipedia*



**THINK ABOUT IT:** Some interesting facts and statistics about verbal communication include:

- David Crystal, in the *Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*, suggests that there must be at least a million words in the language. [www.worldwidewords.org](http://www.worldwidewords.org)
- The average person has a total vocabulary of 40,000 to 50,000 words. [www.killdevilhill.com](http://www.killdevilhill.com)
- Producing speech sound requires that the vocal folds, in combination with the lips, the tongue, the lower jaw, and the palate, the lungs, windpipe,

esophagus and voice centers of the brain are all in sync.

[www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com).



- As you look at the map of the continents, imagine that by some estimates there are roughly 6,800 languages spoken on this planet. 96% of them are spoken by a mere 4% of the world's population. The exact number of languages may never be determined exactly.

Communicating through speech is quite a broad and complicated endeavor. Let's review all the elements of speaking which potentially impact a listener's understanding or comprehension of your oral message. Each of the 23 elements of speech listed below (as identified by [www.itstime.org](http://www.itstime.org)) is an opportunity to either increase or decrease the effectiveness of communication. We can only control what we are aware of, so we need to remind ourselves to consider at least what, why, and how we are saying what we're saying. The point is – all too often we just talk and don't give it a second thought.

### ELEMENTS OF SPEAKING:

- Body language
- Voice quality
- Intention
- Manner: directness, sincerity
- Dress and clothing (style, color, appropriateness for situation)
- Visual aids, animation
- Eye contact
- Emotional content, energy, strength
- Self-concept
- Concept of others
- Listening, hearing the underlying message
- Speaking from the heart
- Energy
- Setting, time, place, timing
- How the messenger holds the message
- Sensitivity
- Rhythm and pacing
- Attitude and confidence
- Rapport

- Agenda
- Purpose of communication - knowing what you want to communicate
- Clarity
- Silence, centering, looking

[www.itstime.com](http://www.itstime.com)

Use praise not flattery – sincere credible people know the difference

### **SMALL TALK: THE ART OF CONVERSATION**

As a professional at any level, it is vital to recognize that every interaction and every minute spent in communication with clients and co-workers solicits a reaction. This includes dining and mixing business and social settings. Try to consistently keep in mind that the minutes count and it's often the little things, the details, which have the greatest impact. Accordingly, make every conversation count and remember that small talk often has big meaning.

In dining settings, small talk acts as an ice-breaker. Eating in public can be a stressful situation for many people, add to that having to sit with and have conversation with strangers and it's a wonder more people don't make terrible dining faux pas or put their feet in their mouth more often.

For example, a sincere greeting carries tremendous impact towards putting someone at ease. Don't forget to reinforce the greeting with a deliberate "thank you for your efforts" or "I appreciate your time" or "it was a pleasure dining with you" at the end of the event. Simple common courtesies take little time or effort and can make all the difference.

For example:

1. *Choose your words carefully and think before you speak.* Do not assume the worst, and try not to be on the defensive before you've heard all the details. You can learn a lot by listening. Just as your small talk can add value to an interaction, you have to learn to really listen and read between the lines when others are speaking to you. Don't forget, trivial conversation often sets the tone of new relationships and by watching nonverbal communication cues carefully during small talk exchanges you can learn a lot about a person.

2. *Go for clarity.* If you are unsure of someone's meaning or find your mind wandering as you listen, ask the speaker to reiterate. If it's obvious you weren't listening, you might even apologize and ask the speaker to continue. Make efforts not to criticize or give opinions unless you're asked. Professionals know that timing is everything when it comes to constructive criticism and your efforts are wasted if the timing is off. Do not point out your weaknesses or the weaknesses of others and never be afraid to say something nice. We often

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overlook the fact that if others come to expect negativity, they automatically shut off and soon become indifferent to the message and the messenger.

3. If you're going to be the boss. *Learn to take a compliment* and to give them freely. It's going to take a lot of hard work to be the leader of the pack and you deserve to be recognized for it. Leaders who have the confidence to take credit for their accomplishments while acknowledging those of others set a good example and encourage productivity.
4. *Show your human side* now and then. Have a repertoire of great, non-work related stories about your experiences and your life. Great stories are true, based on personal experience, descriptive yet not pretentious, typically include some humor and shouldn't be too long. Telling something about yourself that others can relate to reminds them that although you may be more accomplished than they, you are still human. Don't get too personal of course; you want them to respect you in the morning...

In dining settings, try to avoid talking about the following:

- emotional issues
- health
- diets
- personal hygiene
- violent or gruesome topics



**THINK ABOUT IT:** Remember that it takes two to have a conversation. The best conversationalists spend more than half the time listening.

Say no to ideas not to individuals - Unknown

### **LISTENING SKILLS**

“Why don’t people listen?” Experts suggest that some of the reasons people don’t listen include:

- They are not interested
- Speaker is boring
- They are distracted
- They cannot hear
- They shut off because they’ve made assumptions about what you’ll say next
- They do not believe you
- Short attention spans
- Language barriers
- Other\_\_\_\_\_

We’ve all heard that the best conversationalist is a good listener, right? Well, it is indeed true that one of the most respected but least practiced polite behaviors is listening. Most of us would agree that problems could be solved more quickly and a lot more could be accomplished if people would just listen. So...what constitutes a good listener?

**Be sincere!**

**Speak with your body language.**

**Ask intelligent, relevant questions.**

**Interrupt politely.**

**Wait your turn to speak.**

**Pay attention.**

### **IMPROVE YOUR LISTENING SKILLS**

Being able to listen to a message is as important as being able to send one. Effective communication happens only when the listener receives the same message as the speaker is intending. This is sometimes difficult as we seldom receive formal training on learning how to listen.

### Why We Don't Hear Others

We can think quicker than we can speak so often instead of listening we are processing information. Evaluate your skills by answering the questions below. Mark a 'Y' for Yes and 'N' for No.

While you are listening to someone speak, do you:

- rehearse your next response in your mind?
- daydream?
- think about all the reasons you either like or dislike this person?
- change the subject when the person is done?
- criticize or devalue the comments just made?
- agree with every word?
- get bored quickly?
- lose your patience?

If you answered Yes to any of these questions, you may want to consider practicing your listening skills.

**References:** Walker, James and Walker, Lilly, *The Human Harvest*, 1987. Vester, Nadine, *Communication Tool Kit*, Alberta Agriculture, 1982. REDA, *Improving Communications*, 1986. **Publications List: Factsheet: Communications for Farm Families Factsheet: How to Become an Effective Leader**

Active listening is crucial whenever you are communicating. The three techniques above are also very important if the speaker seems defensive or if conflict is developing. Instead of losing patience or responding quickly, step back and try to understand what the speaker is feeling and verbalize the speaker's perspective. This will help the speaker feel like they have been heard and then the real issues can be dealt with.

Listening takes time and energy but it is a skill that anyone can learn with practice. Good listening begins with a commitment to communicate more effectively with others and at first it will seem awkward and uncomfortable, but it will soon become easier.

Listeners also make good leaders. Through their talents in listening, they are able to process what is being said from many people and then provide a common direction or vision for the group to move toward. If you are a great listener, you can consider yourself a good leader.

Public speaking training is not eliminating the butterflies; it is getting them to fly in formation.

— Toastmaster's International ([www.toastmasters.org](http://www.toastmasters.org))

## **ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS**

You can save a lot of time and energy by learning how to ask the right questions. It's equally important to actually listen to the answers and watch the speaker's body language so you can "read between the lines" and pick up on nonverbal cues. There are five types of questions which when properly used can help you solve most any service issues quickly and effectively.

### **1. General Questions-**

General questions are asked when you are just "making conversation" for example when you first meet someone. This type of question is used to show basic courtesy or to fill a space of time. General questions include open-ended questions like, "How are you?" or "Isn't it a great day?" or "Aren't you glad it's Friday?" When you don't know someone well, asking general questions and actually listening to the answers can give some insight into a person's mood, attitude, conversation style, and much more. Many people will disclose too much about themselves when they think they are engaging in mindless "small talk" For example this is often where the "too much information" issue arises.

### **2. Leading Questions-**

Leading questions are asked with a specific purpose in mind; however, the asker does not want to appear rude, pushy or overly assertive so the question is asked in such a way that the person being asked does not always realize the questioner has an objective. For example, if I want to know if a client will be returning to our hotel for the holidays but I don't want to put her on the spot, I might ask, "So Mrs. Client, are you thinking about a Florida vacation this winter?" Or if I want to get feedback about a service issue but don't want to solicit an opinion I might ask a client, "Mrs. Brown, have you used our 24-hour emergency hotline? I want to draw a response without seeming pushy. When it comes to client complaints, leading questions can sometimes help you determine the real issues.

### **3. Direct Questions-**

If you need to get straight to the point, ask direct questions. This saves a lot of time and energy and gives others the impression that you are interested in their issue. Direct questions also suggest that a questioner is competent; capable of solving a specific issue and that the questioner respects the person he/she is speaking to. Depending on who you are questioning, you may need to preface a direct question with a statement like, "Let's get straight to the point..." or "I can help you with this issue if you'll just answer some specific questions for me...." Sometimes a very direct approach can seem confrontational or aggressive so you have to be mindful of your tone of voice and keep a smile on your face. Direct questions are best for volatile situations where someone is angry and/or impatient. Ask specifics, "So, please tell me about your problem with the washing



machine”, or, “I understand you had a problem with your telephone last Tuesday, please tell me what happened exactly.”

#### **4. Clarification Questions-**

Once you have asked enough specific questions to actually determine the problem, you should ask a couple of clarification questions to make sure that you and whomever you are speaking with on the same page. For example, “Okay, Mrs. Brown, just so I’m sure, what you’re saying is, is that the phone goes dead every Tuesday between 3:00 and 4:00?” or “You’re sure, Mrs. Brown that the service attendant got the message?”

It is vital that you ask clarification questions prior to determining a course of action in solving a problem. You may think that Mrs. Brown is telling you the coffee service is a silly idea from you initial questions; however, a clarification question has determined that you need only refresh the coffee more often to keep it hot. Think about a time when you did not get clarification and you and a client got your “wires crossed”.

#### **5. Verification Questions-**

Verification questions are used to establish if a specific course of action is acceptable to someone, e.g., a customer/client, to get feedback, and/or to see if someone will be satisfied with how you have determined to solve a problem. For example, “I’ll make a point of calling the service person Mrs. Brown, would you be so kind as to let me know if it seems hotter next time you take a cup?” or “Mr. Resident, I am prepared to take this service charge off your bill, will that be satisfactory?” or “Mrs. Customer, what can I do to show you how sorry we are for this inconvenience?” Verification questions are a little like “closing the deal”. Again, make sure to smile and be sincere when you extend these questions.

**NOTE:** It is important to remember that when you do respond to an inappropriate comment, express an opinion, or make any statement, you need to say whatever you’re saying like you mean it- talk on purpose- this builds your credibility and gets, as well as keeps, the attention of others.

Don Gabor, in his book *Speaking Your Mind in 101 Difficult Situations* offers these tips for using TACTFUL conversations:

**T** = Think before you speak

**A** = Apologize quickly when you blunder

**C** = Converse, don't compete

**T** = Time your comments

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**F** = Focus on behavior - not on personality

**U** = Uncover hidden feelings

**L** = Listen for feedback

[www.itstime.com](http://www.itstime.com)

### KEYS TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

1. You should know the point you are trying to get across and state it at the beginning of communication.
2. Speak in a clear, concise manner and slowly enough that the listener can understand. Listen when it's the other person's turn to speak and watch nonverbal cues.
3. Use positive vocabulary and speak with energy.
4. Speak in full sentences but try to keep things short and simple when possible.
5. Give the listeners an opportunity to ask questions and be sure to ask them clarification questions to ensure that you are both on the same wavelength.
6. Try not to say "hmmm" or "umm" or leave long pauses between your sentences.
7. Ask questions about others. Don't always say "I" and talk about yourself.
8. Remember not to raise your voice at the end of your sentences, which makes everything sound like a question.
9. If you are speaking an opinion, say so. Don't speak as though your statements are facts or directives.
10. Use your whole body when you speak, make direct eye contact, make your body language match your verbiage and control your gestures.

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