

The Art of Communicating at Work

Making Sure with Feedback

eREPORT



By **Dr. Tony Alessandra**

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Making Sure with Feedback

What do the following sentences mean to you?

In a little while.

I'll be there in a minute.

It isn't very far.

Let's get together sometime.

I need it quickly.

I want you to do a good job.

We'll provide you with a small number of these at no cost.

We need to communicate better.

That will cost a lot of money.

Call me later and we'll discuss it.

You have probably already realized that most, if not all, of these statements are highly ambiguous. When used in normal conversation, there is a high probability that these statements will be misinterpreted – unless they are clarified. For instance, a person says, *"Call me later and we'll discuss it."* Do they mean fifteen minutes from now, one hour from now, tomorrow, or next week? These statements, in addition to thousands of others not mentioned here, can have a variety of meanings. They generate misunderstandings.

Unfortunately, we frequently use these statements in everyday conversation and expect the other person to understand clearly what we mean. The same is true when other people are communicating with us. Unless statements such as these are clarified and confirmed between the two communicating parties, there is great likelihood the message received will not be the same as was intended. This is the foundation of errors, misunderstandings, and strained relationships. Through the simple use of feedback skills, these highly ambiguous statements can be transformed into

specific, effective communications.

The lack of feedback shows up in the workplace as errors, botched plans, political in-fighting, lost productivity, lost profits, and, ultimately, lost jobs. If that seems extreme, think about the errors that you see everyday – shipping errors or delays, delivery of the wrong parts or the wrong paperwork, budget overruns, marketing plans that miss the target, new products that flop, employees who don't live up to their potential. Studies show that the lack of clear communication is a major factor in every organizational problem. Feedback and clarification can take the ambiguity out of promises, agreements, schedules, policies, and procedures.

The use of feedback in communication is often taken for granted. In the management process, no other communication activity is so widely used yet so misunderstood. Feedback may be the most important aspect of interpersonal communications if conversation is to continue for any length of time and still have meaning for the parties involved. Without feedback, how does each person really know what the other person is talking about and communicating? The effective use of feedback skills helps insure the accurate transmission of your message.

Whenever you verbally, or visibly react to what another person says or does, or seek a reaction from another person to what you say or do, you are using feedback. Effective two-way communication depends on it.

*(For more on this topic, check out **Nonverbal Communication 10-Page eReport.**)*

Types of Feedback

Feedback comes in a number of forms. There is verbal, nonverbal, fact, and feeling feedback. Each serves a specific purpose in the communications process.

Verbal Feedback

Verbal feedback is the type we are most frequently aware of and most often use. With verbal feedback, you can accomplish a number of favorable objectives: **1)** You can use verbal feedback to ask for clarification of a message. **2)** You can use verbal feedback to give positive and/or negative acknowledgements to the other person. **3)** You can use verbal feedback to determine how to structure a presentation that will be meaningful and effective for the other person.

To improve the accuracy and clarity of a message during a conversation, use clarifying feedback statements such as the following:

- Let me be sure I understand what you have said.
- Let's see if I can review the key points we've discussed.
- I hear you saying...
- I think I hear you saying that your central concern is...
- As I understand it, your major objectives are....

Clarifying feedback statements can also end with the following:

- Did I understand you properly?
- Did I hear you correctly?
- Was I on target with what you meant?
- Were those your major concerns?
- Can you add anything to my summary?

Using feedback for clarification is probably the most critical use of feedback in the workplace. There is only one way to know if the message you're receiving is the same as the message being sent: asking for clarification, or restating the message in your own words and asking for verification of your understanding. Obviously you can't clarify or verify everything that is said during the day. If your co-worker says that he's going to get a cup of coffee and you ask for

clarification, the results you get probably will not be positive. You need to know when to use feedback. Some typical times are: when you have any doubt about the meaning of the message or about how to proceed, when the message is highly complex, when you're dealing with an important process or project, and when the message deals with information that is new to you.

(To test your listening skills, check out [Alessandra on The Power of Listening downloadable mp3](#).)

Verbal feedback should also be used to give positive and negative acknowledgements to others. When a person does something positive, that behavior needs to be positively reinforced. Simple statements are in order, such as: "The project report you did was clear and concise – nice job."; "You made it really easy for the committee to understand the issues."; "I really appreciate the extra effort you put in."; and "You're doing an excellent job staying within budget." Tell the person specifically what you recognize and appreciate.

Given in a timely and consistent manner, this type of feedback lets the person know what kind of performance is required. It encourages them to continue with similar performance.

On the other hand, when behavior requires negative feedback, offer it in a private, constructive environment. Ignoring inappropriate performance tends to prolong it, as silence is construed as tacit approval. No one likes to be criticized, so negative feedback should be directed only at the performance – not the person. Whenever possible, negative feedback should be sandwiched between positive feedback.

For example, use phrases such as: "It's obvious that you put a lot of effort into this report. The issues are so complex, that it would help if we had a one-page summary." "Your work is extremely accurate but when you come in late, it puts us all behind schedule." "I appreciate your help folding the brochures. Since they will be going to customers, it's important that they are extremely neat. Could you redo these?" Make sure you give the person enough specific

information that they can correct their performance in the future.

By asking simple questions, you can determine whether a presentation is working, whether to proceed in the current direction, or modify your approach. For instance, if you think you are going a bit too fast for the other person to comprehend your message, you might simply ask: “I sometimes get carried away with my enthusiasm and move along too quickly on this topic. Would it be more helpful to you if I covered these issues a bit more slowly?” The same can be done if you are getting the impression that you should speed up your presentation. Questions such as, “Shall we explore that issue some more?” allow you to determine the other person’s interest and understanding of the conversation.

Answers can help you avoid capriciously cutting the topic too short or dragging it on too long. You are simply asking for direction. “Would you like me to go into the details of this project, or “Do you have some other questions that you’d like to ask me first?” allow you to determine the person’s present state of mind and level of receptivity. Without this information, you may get into the details of the project when, in fact, the other person does have a number of questions she would have liked to ask first. In this situation, the person is probably dwelling on her questions and not paying attention to what you are explaining. Through questions such as the preceding, you can determine how to tailor your delivery style and presentation to fit the needs of each individual person. Although this takes a bit more time in the short run, it saves much time in the long run, because it prevents communication problems and improves receptivity, understanding, and productivity.

(To learn more about this topic, check out Using Space and Time 15-page PDF eReport)

Nonverbal Feedback

Many of us can remember when the word “vibes” was in vogue. Both good and bad vibes are the result of a direct form of nonverbal feedback. By using their bodies, eyes, faces, postures, and senses, people can communicate a variety of positive or negative attitudes, feelings, and

opinions. You do this consciously or unconsciously, just as others do the same with you. The sensitive, perceptive communicator uses the nonverbal feedback they’re getting from the other person to structure the content and direction of their message. The outcome is a positive continuance of their interaction and increased trust and credibility in their relationship.

The amount of nonverbal feedback you receive and send is not as important as how you interpret it and react to it. Nonverbal signals help you realize when you are losing the other person’s interest. With this sensitivity to and perception of the person’s nonverbal feedback, you can react by changing your pace, topic, or style to recapture the person’s attention, interest, or trust.

Nonverbal feedback is extremely important in the manager/employee relationship. Too often ineffective communications between managers and employees result in “mixed messages.” This simply means that while one message is being verbalized, something totally different is being stated through vocal intonation and body language. These mixed messages force the receiver to choose between the verbal message and the intent signaled by the body language. Most often, they choose the nonverbal aspect of the message. When a person receives mixed messages from you, it immediately creates tension and distrust. Right or wrong, the person feels that you are purposely hiding something or that you are being less than candid. Unfortunate managers and employees often do not realize they are sending mixed messages to each other. The resulting miscommunication takes a terrible toll on work relationships. It is extremely important to keep your nonverbal feedback and your verbal feedback in sync.

It is also important to use a process called acknowledging. This is nothing other than projecting nonverbal (and verbal) feedback to the speaker. It lets the person know that their message is getting through to you, and it also lets them know how you feel about that message. People do not like to speak to people who do not respond or show any emotion. They want and seek feedback. Make a concerted effort to give them that feedback, especially nonverbal forms.

(For more on this, please see Alessandra on Nonverbal Communication Downloadable MP3)

Fact Feedback

Fact feedback is asking a specific, closed question or making a specific statement of the facts as you know it and asking for verification. This type of question is meant to elicit specific data and information. If the facts are worth asking for, they are certainly worth being heard accurately. This is where fact feedback comes into play. There are also times when you are relating specific information that needs to be received as accurately as possible, and again, fact feedback can help.

When you are depending on other people's facts and they are depending on yours, it is critical to get and give the information exactly as intended. When you want clarification, agreement, or correction, fact feedback is called for. Fact feedback is also used in translating messages and interpreting words or phrases. The following messages contain words or phrases that are unclear. They are perfect candidates for fact feedback statements:

- Due to recent layoffs, all employees are expected to work harder.
- There will be a short wait for a table.
- Don't spend too much time on that job.
- In this company, we are liberal and democratic.
- Major credit cards are accepted.
- We will be visiting Philadelphia and New York City. We expect to open our first unit there.

Examples of requests for fact feedback would be:

- What exactly do you mean by "working harder?"
Should we plan on putting in longer hours?
- How long is the wait? Will the wait be more than 15 minutes?
- How much time should I spend on the job? Is there a deadline?
- What do you mean by "liberal and democratic"?
- Which major credit cards do you honor? Do you take Visa?
- Which city will have the first unit?

If something can be misunderstood, chances are it will be. Use fact feedback to keep your messages clear and make sure you are receiving the message as it is intended.

Feeling Feedback

A firm understanding of the wording and phrasing, of messages is obviously important. However, this increased accuracy in communications still only stays on the surface of the discussion. It is also important to know why the person is saying the things they are saying. What are the underlying causes and motivations behind their messages? How much personal feeling does their message carry for them? How do they really feel about what they're saying to you? Do they know whether their message is really getting through to you – at the feeling level? Are they aware that you really care about what they are saying to you? All these questions underscore the importance of feeling feedback in two-way communications. Feeling feedback is especially important in organizations – perhaps because it is so seldom requested. The old business school of thought believed that feelings had no place at work. Personal lives, feelings, and emotional involvements were to be taken care of outside of the workplace. Now we know that it is impossible to put our feelings in a little box as we walk into the office and pick them up again as we leave. Research has shown that one of the most effective ways to handle organizational change is to let the people "chat" about how they feel about the change. Just the process of talking about how they feel helps them adapt to the change.

Organizations are a complex web of people working to achieve a common purpose. As organizational life becomes more complex and more demanding, it requires the full commitment of each member to achieve the organization's goals. Full commitment requires an environment of trust that allows each person to express his or her thoughts and feelings openly. Organizations that request, and provide, a high level of feeling feedback understand that the feelings of each person are a critical part of the communication process. It is as important to understand the feelings inherent in a message as it is to understand the facts of the message.

Feeling feedback should be two-directional. You need to

make a concerted effort to understand the feelings, emotions, and attitudes that underlie the messages that come to you. In addition, you should clearly project feeling feedback to the other person to let her know that her message has gotten through to you – at the feeling level.

The following statements are candidates for feeling feedback questions:

- I'm tired of all the politics around here.
- My last review was a joke.
- "Quality" is just another management fad.
- No one cares about my problems.
- Another reorganization – probably just another name for a layoff.

Examples of requests for feeling feedback would be:

- How are the "politics" here affecting you?
- What's bothering you about your last review?
- Why do you feel that management isn't committed to the quality program?
- What would make you feel like the organization cared about your problems?
- How do you feel about the reorganization?

Fact feedback is simply a meeting of the minds, whereas feeling feedback is a meeting of the hearts. Feeling feedback is nothing more than the effective use of empathy – putting yourself into the other person's shoes so that you can see things from her point of view. When you can really experience the other person's true feelings and understand where she's coming from and at the same time project this emotional awareness to her, it serves to reinforce rapport, lower interpersonal tension, and significantly increase trust. Probing questions, supportive and understanding responses, and an awareness and projection of appropriate nonverbal signals are the key tools used in sending and receiving feeling feedback. Often, until you and the other person understand how each other truly feels, the "facts" don't matter at all. Improve the accuracy of communications through fact feedback – and improve the rapport of your relationships by practicing empathy through feeling feedback.

The Keys to Effective Feedback

If you took a few moments and really thought about it, you could probably recall numerous times you could have smoothed over problems in communications simply by using the forms of feedback that we have discussed. Effective communication between two people is not easy. You really have to practice to make it work. The proper use of questioning skills helps. Using active listening helps. Sensitivity to nonverbal behavior helps. Without feedback, however, all of these skills are for naught. Through the effective use of feedback skills, you can create a good communications climate. The following general guidelines will help you use your feedback skills more effectively.

Give and Get Definitions. The interpretation of words or phrases may vary from person to person, group to group, region to region, or society to society. When people believe or assume that words are used for one and only one meaning, they create situations in which they think they understand others but really do not. The words you use in everyday conversations almost inevitably have multiple meanings. In fact, the 500 most commonly used words in our language have more than 14,000 dictionary definitions. For instance, according to Webster, a person is considered 'fast' when she can run rather quickly. However, when one is tied down and cannot move at all, she is also considered 'fast.' 'Fast' also relates to periods of not eating, a ship's mooring line, a race track in good running condition, and a person who hangs around with the 'wrong' crowd of people. In addition, photographic film is 'fast' when it is sensitive to light. On the other hand, bacteria are 'fast' when they are insensitive to antiseptics.

The abundance of meanings of even "simple" words makes it hazardous to assume to understand the intent of a message without verifying and clarifying that message. These assumptions often lead to subsequent misunderstandings, breakdowns in the communications process, and decreased trust. Therefore, during the process of questioning and listening, use feedback.

Don't Assume. Making assumptions invariably gets you into trouble. During interpersonal communications, it is dangerous to make the assumption that the other person either thinks or feels as you do at that moment. The other

person may have a frame of reference that is totally different from your own. She reacts and perceives according to what she knows and believes to be true, and that may be different from your reactions, perceptions, and beliefs.

Do not assume anything in communications. If you do, you stand a good chance of being incorrect. Don't assume that you and the other person are talking about the same thing. Don't assume that the words and phrases you are both using are automatically being understood. The classic phrase of people who make assumptions is: "I know exactly what you mean." People, who usually use that statement without ever using feedback techniques to determine exactly what the other person means, are leaping into a communication quagmire.

Use more feedback and fewer assumptions, and you'll be happier and more accurate in your interpersonal communications.

Ask Questions. Questions have many uses. Earlier we discussed a number of these. Remember to use questions to test for feedback. A good rule of thumb is: "When in doubt, check it out." One of the best ways to check it out is through the effective use of questioning skills. Clarifying questions, expansion questions, direction questions, fact-finding questions, feeling-finding questions, and open questions can be used freely during conversation to test for feedback.

Speak the Same Language. Abstain from using words that can easily be misinterpreted or mistranslated, especially technical terms and company jargon. These terms, which are so familiar to you, may be totally foreign to the people with whom you speak. Simplify your language and your technical terms so that everyone can understand you, even when you think the other person knows what the terms mean.

Stay Tuned In. Constantly be on the lookout for and recognize those nonverbal signals that indicate that your line of approach is causing the other person to become uncomfortable and lose interest. When this happens, change your approach and your message accordingly. This fact

was stated earlier, but it is so important that it cannot be repeated too often. Observe the other person. Be sensitive to the feelings they are experiencing during your interaction; above all else, respond to those feelings appropriately.

Give Feedback on the Behavior, Not the Person. This relates to the appropriate use of positive and negative acknowledgements. When someone does something especially well, give them positive feedback, and relate it specifically to the action or behavior that was performed. When they do something especially bad, give them negative feedback specifically directed toward the action or behavior that you would like corrected. Do not under any circumstances criticize the person personally because of an inappropriate action or behavior. This is not only degrading but also counterproductive. Many ineffective managers, upon learning that one of their employees has done something wrong, criticize that employee personally: "You're an idiot"; "That was really stupid"; "You can't do anything right, can you?" These statements constitute inappropriate feedback. After a while, the employee starts believing these statements, and they become self-fulfilling prophecies. How can an employee improve performance on a particular task or behavior unless she knows specifically what behaviors or actions she must improve? So, direct your praise and criticisms specifically toward your employee's behavior and actions, not toward the employee personally.

(For more on this topic, see Mastering Your Message—5-Hour Audio Program on downloadable MP3's)

Withholding Feedback

There are times when it's best not to give feedback. Bite your tongue and restrain your body language and facial expressions in these situations. A few months ago, I was visiting a married couple. While waiting for the husband to finish getting dressed for an appointment, I was chatting with the wife in the dining room. All of a sudden, the husband came into the dining room in what appeared to be a huff. In a loud and harsh vocal intonation, he asked his wife, "Where did you get this shirt cleaned?!" While "asking" this assertion, he was shaking the collar of the shirt and seemed to be peering at his wife. The initial in-

interpretation of this was that the husband was rather upset about the condition of his shirt. Most spouses would tend to act rather defensively, and some would even counterattack. His spouse was an expert in withholding her own feedback, while at the same time asking for feedback from her husband. In a gentle voice with no disturbing body language, she simply told her husband: "I got it done at XYZ Cleaners. Why do you ask?" His reply almost floored me. He said it was the first time that any cleaners had done his shirt properly. He asked her to take his shirts to that specific cleaner from now on. Clearly, there are times when it is best to withhold any feedback until you use effective feedback to clarify the intent of another person's message.

CONCLUSION

Feedback can reduce interpersonal tension and create a sense of trust and credibility between you and your supervisors, employees, customers, suppliers and other co-workers, if used properly. Use feedback to help clarify messages, uncover an important need or problem, provide feedback to others, and to make sure your presentation is being clearly received. Use feedback to improve your relationships by letting the other person know what is going on in the relationship. Most of all, use feedback to improve your part of the conversation.

Feedback is an important part of communication in the workplace. As you develop these skills, you will find them an important part of every aspect of your professional life, including negotiations with bosses, employees, and customers; personnel issues; interviewing; problem-solving sessions; and building consensus to insure efficient implementation of decisions.

Through feedback, you can determine which areas to spend more time on and which ones need less time. It is important to confirm all uncertain verbal, vocal, and observable cues through feedback. The proper and effective use of feedback skills leads to improved communication. This increased sense of mutual understanding will lead to less interpersonal tension, increased trust and credibility, and higher productivity. Everyone wins when communications are clear and open.



Tony Alessandra, PhD, CSP, CPAE

Building Customers, Relationships, and the Bottom Line

Dr. Tony Alessandra helps companies build customers, relationships, and the bottom line. Companies learn how to achieve market dominance through specific strategies designed to out market, outsell, and out service the competition.

Dr. Alessandra has a street-wise, college-smart perspective on business, having fought his way out of NYC to eventually realize success as a graduate professor of marketing, an entrepreneur, a business author, and a keynote speaker. He earned his MBA from the University of Connecticut and his PhD in marketing from Georgia State University.

Dr. Alessandra is president of **Online Assessments** (www.OnlineAC.com), a company that offers online assessments and tests; co-founder of **MentorU.com**, an online e-Learning company; and Chairman of the Board of **BrainX**, a company that offers online digital accelerated learning programs.

Dr. Alessandra is a widely published author with 14 books translated into 17 foreign languages, including **Charisma** (Warner Books, 1998); **The Platinum Rule** (Warner Books, 1996); **Collaborative Selling** (John Wiley & Sons, 1993); and **Communicating at Work** (Fireside/Simon & Schuster, 1993). He is featured in over 50 audio/video programs and films, including **Relationship Strategies** (American Media); **The Dynamics of Effective Listening** (Nightingale-Conant); and **Non-Manipulative Selling** (Walt Disney). He is also the originator of the internationally-recognized behavioral style assessment tool **The Platinum Rule™** (www.PlatinumRule.com).

Recognized by *Meetings & Conventions Magazine* as “one of America’s most electrifying speakers,” Dr. Alessandra was inducted into the Speakers Hall of Fame in 1985. He is also a member of the Speakers Roundtable, a group of 20 of the world’s top professional speakers. Tony’s polished style, powerful message, and proven ability as a consummate business strategist consistently earns rave reviews.

To learn more about Dr. Alessandra and his services, visit [**www.Alessandra.com**](http://www.Alessandra.com).

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