Communication Skills

Active Listening

As mentioned earlier, many people equate "communication" with "speaking", but communication actually begins with listening. Active listening is a way of attending, or paying attention, to the verbal and non-verbal aspects of a message in order to fully grasp the sender's meaning before responding. Active listening is also referred to as reflective listening because the person receiving the message paraphrases the message and repeats (or reflects) it back to the sender for their verification or clarification.

Active listening involves verbal and non-verbal feedback. The person receiving the message should ask questions to be sure they understand the message, but should also demonstrate through their body language (facing toward the speaker, keeping posture open) and facial expressions (making eye-contact, smiling, nodding) that they are engaged with and focused on the sender and the message in a non-judgmental way. Do a self-check on your active listening skills: if you are planning your response while the other person is still speaking, you are not listening actively!

Verbal Communication

Basic speaking skills are essential for success in college. Students must be able to express themselves clearly when asking questions or presenting their ideas and opinions, and must be able to relate to others socially and academically. Verbal communication includes not only the words you say, but how you say them. Your tone of voice, formality or informality, and the speed and directness of your speech all impact the effectiveness of your verbal communication.

Strong verbal skills are invaluable not only to your success as a student, but also are integral to making the most of your education after you graduate. Successful internship and job candidates demonstrate verbal communication through the interview process, and the Stony Brook University Career Center is a great resource for practice and improvement with these skills.

Written Communication

Written communication consists of your written and/or typed work, including correspondence with University faculty and professionals, potential employers, internship supervisors, and peers, as well as your assignments (tests, term-papers, homework, etc.).

Clarity is a key element in written communication – you are not there to clarify or provide feedback to the reader, so your work must speak for itself. You will participate in activities and assignments that will contribute to an ongoing improvement of your writing skills throughout your undergraduate career, so focus on the basics from the beginning:

- Use appropriate grammar and sentence style, and always check for errors in structure and spelling.

- Clearly state your purpose questions, concepts, ideas and opinions. Be sure to provide appropriate details.

- Do not use abbreviations or "texting spell." The recipient of your written communication may not know what the abbreviation means or they may form unintended opinions of you by the spellings you use.

Here are a few examples of how written communication skills may impact effective communication between students and University professionals:

- A student sends an email to a professor that says, "I don't understand the assignment." They don't include their name, class, or SBU ID. The professor does not respond.

- A student sends an advisor an email request for a letter of recommendation. The student includes their name and Stony Brook ID number, but they do not provide details on the opportunity they are applying for, or what qualities (personal, academic, etc.) they hope the advisor can describe. The advisor responds to the student with a request for additional information, but by the time the student answers back the deadline has passed and the student has missed the opportunity.

Working in Teams

Working in teams brings all of the communication skills and attributes we've discussed (active listening, verbal and written communication) into play. Students must navigate between different roles (group leader or member, etc.) and different responsibilities: oral presentation, writing or organizing components of assignment, conveying details to other members.

As with the other aspects of communication we've explored, clarity in communication between team members is absolutely essential for a successful group project and experience. When participating in a team assignment, it is important for students to clarify the instructions, as well as the details on how members will be graded by their instructor or supervisor. Team members need to communicate with each other to define goals and to determine who will be responsible for various aspects of the assignment. Here are some examples of how work done in teams can be impacted by communication issues:

- An instructor gives a group assignment to his class, and assigns students to specific teams. The students on team A decide among themselves that three of the four members will do individual sections of the project, and the fourth member will be responsible for organizing and submitting the assignment. At the end of the semester, one of the students meets with their academic advisor to discuss the grade of F they received for the class; the student relates that although he did his part, the person responsible for submitting the project did not do so, and as a result all team members failed the assignment.

- A student is placed on a team for a group assignment; she quickly falls into the role of leader, and the other members seem comfortable following her instructions. After the project is submitted, the team members are surprised to find out that their rating of other group members' participation on the team, including willingness to collaborate and individual initiative, will factor into their final grades for the project.

Communication issues can contribute to conflicts within group work. We'll explore ways to use communication to avoid and resolve conflicts later in the chapter.