



Book The Clarity Factor

The Four Secrets to Being Clearly Understood

Ray DiZazzo
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Recommendation

Meet Gloria, harried boss, wife and mother. She's an intelligent, competent and well-intentioned person, so she can't figure out why Marty, her terminally put-upon employee resents her, why her husband Bill ignores her, or why conversations with her teenage son Todd always turn into shouting matches. Through a series of enlightening interactions, Gloria shows readers how seemingly hopeless relationships can be resurrected when communications improve. Author Ray DiZazzo uses hypothetical examples to illustrate his tips for clear communications. His narrative won't win any literary awards, but it is surprisingly effective at teaching readers how to communicate better. *BooksInShort* recommends his book to all managers, because your job hinges in large part on communicating effectively. Now is that perfectly clear?

Take-Aways

- Speaking and listening effectively will bring you money and happiness.
- Without realizing it, many executives develop poor communications habits.
- The "Clarity Factor" involves a four-step process: focusing the message, winning the listener's attention, breaking down personal barriers and listening.
- Some people communicate verbally with effectiveness and clarity. Some don't.
- To communicate clearly, you must know what you want to say before you say it.
- Make certain that your listener is willing and able to receive your message.
- Navigate your listener's emotional barriers, which are known as distortion factors.
- Open listening is the final step in communicating clearly.
- To communicate effectively, analyze every message you send before sending it
- Clear communications save time, reduce stress and avoid unnecessary frustration.

Summary

You Are What You Communicate

Journalists and broadcasters aren't the only professionals in the communications business. No matter what your profession, communication is your most important skill. Speaking and listening effectively can bring you monetary reward and personal happiness. Executives of large companies routinely cite communication skills as significant for advancement. In marriages, poor communication is a major factor leading to discontent and divorce. Speaking and listening well are critical for professional and personal success. Yet, few people spend time analyzing and improving their communications skills.

“Regardless of what each of us does for a living, we are all in the communication business.”

Without realizing it, many executives communicate poorly. To project a tough, no-nonsense, results-oriented image, they often communicate tersely. This approach yields confusion (subordinates and colleagues aren't sure what the executive means), frustration (misinterpretation leads to wasted effort) and bruised feelings (the executive's communication style ignores the listeners' points of view and emotions).

“How clearly we speak and listen directly affects not only the opportunities that come our way but also the level of personal satisfaction and happiness we achieve as human beings.”

Clarity avoids frustration, reduces stress, saves time, makes communication rewarding and enjoyable and produces a feeling of connection with others. This last advantage is especially important. We all want others to hear and understand us.

A Simple, Four-Step Process

A verbal communication is more or less clear depending on how effectively you, as the speaker, state your piece. A verbal communication is a message. The speaker is the sender, while the listener is the receiver. The clarity factor measures how effectively the speaker communicates according to these criteria:

- Focusing the message.
- Motivating the listener to pay attention.
- Breaking through any personal barriers in the listener.
- Listening effectively.

“Proper use of verbal communication skills can not only calm and streamline your day-to-day life but also expand your sensitivity to the subtle dynamics that govern all human interactions.”

With these steps, any speaker can communicate in a way that any listener can understand, no matter what emotional barriers might have existed before. Subtle nuances govern human interactions. Communication is a recipe whose ingredients include words and body language. The clarity factor is an unnoticeable but indispensable ingredient in creating comprehension on both sides of a communication. When this ingredient is missing, however, communication muddles.

Step One: Bringing the Message into Focus

To communicate clearly, you must know what you want to say before you say it. You can accomplish this by:

- Thinking about the message. The sender sharpens the focus of the message by contemplating what needs to be said and deciding exactly how to say it.
- Removing emotions. Filter out your own emotions to ensure objectivity. This removes the possibility that you will distort your message and, thus, increases its accuracy.

“Very few managers have the luxury of planning every comment they make. But with a little practice, we can all make a quick analysis of our words a habit - a mindset just like objectivity.”

Conduct these two checks before you utter a word, in any context - whether it's in an e-mail, at a staff meeting, in an employee gathering or at a lunch with a client. Repeat this exercise until it becomes an effortless habit. Objectivity is very important at this point in the communications process. You must acknowledge your feelings about your listeners and adapt the message accordingly.

“The Clarity Factor is about people - what our words really mean, how we really feel when we say them and, most of all, our intense desire to be heard and understood as human beings.”

Consider the case of Gloria, who finds that her employee, Marty, is a chronic malcontent. When Gloria gives Marty an order, she typically speaks like this: "Martin, I need the Connor files, ASAP." This is terse and not especially specific. With an effort to improve her clarity, Gloria analyzes this message. Then she rephrases it in a precise way that masks her negative feelings toward Marty. Here's her second try: "Martin, I need one figure - the bottom-line equipment depreciation total from the Connor account - as soon as you have a few seconds, please." This second, improved message saves Marty time. He needs to find only one document, rather than an entire bulky file. Also, Marty just feels better about this request, largely because the tone is less demanding and the word "please" is present.

“One hundred percent clarity is impossible. A receiver will always include some of his or her own personality in interpreting what you say.”

After contemplating her communication patterns with Marty, Gloria realizes that his poor attitude toward her has some validity. He is always resentful of her requests, but Gloria remembers that she felt the same way about bosses she had in the past. They appeared arrogant and demanding, which frustrated her because she felt that they didn't know what they wanted. She realizes that poor communication is the root of resentment.

“In order to speak with clarity, the person talking must first clarify his or her thoughts at the source, in his or her own mind.”

Harried managers who don't take the time to analyze their messages beforehand can send unfocused messages like these: "Why is it you're always late?" "I need it soon." "You need to improve your productivity." "We've got to cut our costs right away." "If you don't improve your customer relations, we're in trouble."

Step Two: Making the Listeners Listen

Now that you've decided exactly what you want to say, make sure that your listeners are willing and able to receive your message. For listeners to hear your message, they must momentarily make you, as the speaker, their highest priority. You can magnify your listeners' attention in three ways:

- Interest - Make sure the subject of the message will interest your listeners.
- Importance - Be certain that the message is significant.
- Attention - Ask your listeners to interrupt what they are doing to pay attention.

“The next step is to motivate the listener into giving top priority to the speaker.”

(Note that you haven't yet delivered your message. You merely have set the stage for the verbal communication.)

Consider one of Gloria's interactions with her husband, Bill, who is working at his desk at home. Gloria says, "Todd got in trouble at school again, Bill. We should discuss it." Bill just grunts, barely acknowledging Gloria.

“The Clarity Factor is a subtle, essential element that makes verbal communication productive and rewarding when it's at its best, creating brilliant clarity of word and thought.”

Now, view this in the context of a message you can evaluate. All messages can be graded in two ways: 1) On the clarity factor, or the effectiveness of the message itself, and 2) On the "Receptivity Quotient," or the willingness of the listener to receive the message. In this particular communication, Gloria's words are not wrong, in and of themselves. They earn a clarity factor of 88%. But Bill isn't paying attention to the message, so the receptivity quotient is only 2%. Gloria's immediate impression is that Bill is uncaring and arrogant.

“Once the person speaking has the listener’s attention, the message can be sent. The object is to assure that it gets through as closely as possible to the way the speaker has visualized it.”

But Gloria realizes this isn’t the case - Bill does care about their son. She also recognizes that Bill places a high priority on work. He ignores her not out of spite but because he’s doing something that, to him, is more important. So Gloria modifies her message to magnify the listener’s attention. She says, "Bill, please stop what you’re doing and listen to me. We have to talk about something very important." The clarity factor of this message remains high, while the receptivity quotient shoots up to 92%. The difference is that Gloria asks for Bill’s undivided attention.

Step Three: Breaking Down Emotional Obstacles

Now that you know what you want to say and have gained your listeners’ undivided attention, it’s time to send your message. Keep in mind, though, the obstacle of distortion. What you as the speaker mean to say isn’t necessarily what your listeners hear. To reduce distortion, you must navigate distortion factors, including your listeners’ deep-seated opinions, values and experiences. You can do this several ways:

“The idea is to learn to penetrate or overcome barriers in other people - or in yourself if you’re receiving the message.”

Use precise words - Visual language is the opposite of vague language. Visual language uses specific details to convey a message. For example, don’t merely say, "The job is super." Instead, say, "The job has great hours, high wages and lots of personal reward." A speaker using vague language would say, "She’s getting really old." But a speaker using visual language would phrase the message this way: "She’s 89, weighs only 92 pounds and sits hunched over in a wheelchair." A speaker using vague language would say, "My new car is beautiful." But a speaker using visual language would phrase the message more precisely: "My new car is a deep, shiny blue with graceful lines and dark leather upholstery."

Use analogies that give your listeners a frame of reference - A vague speaker would say, "He was a tall guy." A more powerful statement would be: "He was so tall, he could be Magic Johnson’s body double." The vague message of "She’s really mad" is more colorful when you say, "She’s so mad she threw the telephone at the wall." Or a vague speaker might say, "He’s very smart." A metaphor would be more effective: "He’s a 27-year-old Albert Einstein."

Ask if your listeners understand your message.

Revise the message if the listeners don’t understand.

Gloria has a strained relationship with her teenage son, Todd. Their attempts at communication invariably end in confrontation. Consider the following example of a message from Gloria to Todd: "When are you going to quit being so negative and destructive, and start listening to me?" This message is bound for a dismal receptivity quotient. To Todd, as the listener, the words are judgmental and accusatory, implying that he is "negative" and "destructive." Gloria rethinks her message and tries an alternative: "Todd, you need to stop thinking about everything else and listen to what I have to say. It’s more important than you realize." This message rates a receptivity quotient of 73%, largely because it removes the emotion and blame from a simple request to conduct a conversation.

Step Four: Listening with Clarity

This step requires you to consider a role reversal, because as the speaker you must make sure that you remove the emotional barriers you have about your message and interpret the message as you intended. The keys to listening effectively are:

- Empathy - Your listeners must put themselves in your shoes.
- Imagination - Try to visualize what you wish to communicate.

When Gloria asks Todd to listen to her, he asks her to listen to him in the same way. She’s defensive at first, but then realizes that the only way to repair their relationship is to listen to her son without distorting his message through her own opinions, values and experiences.

Open listening proves contagious. After Gloria listens openly to Todd, he listens to her concerns. Their pattern of unpleasant and

ineffective communications had prevented either one of them from listening to the other without barriers, so both had deep-seated negative feelings. The result of listening with empathy is that Gloria and Todd could come to view each other positively again, which was certainly a big relief to Bill.

About the Author

Ray DiZazzo is an author, consultant, columnist and speaker. *The Clarity Factor* is his seventh book. He has taught communications skills to employees of GTE and J.D. Power and Associates and to the executive staff of the Kent City Council in England. DiZazzo lives in Southern California.
