

# A LINE ON LIFE

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## Getting the Message Across \*

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Effective communication is crucial in most settings. With muddled communication, group effectiveness is impaired, trust is lost, feelings are hurt, and poor decisions are made. Effectively relating to others depends on good communication. How can we improve our communication?

**1. Make your statements clear.** Communication is clearer if it answers the questions of "*who, what, when, where and why.*" Merely stating, "*I need someone to help me,*" is unclear. It would be much clearer to say, "*Bill, could you please help me lift this heavy box up on the table now?*" This makes it easier for others to know what you expect of them.

**2. Be decisive.** Avoid overuse of "*wiggle words*" that make you sound full of self-doubt (e.g., "*I guess, kinda, sort of*"). Don't overuse intensifiers like "*really, absolutely, super, awesome.*" Omit absolute terms like "*always*" or "*never.*" They may sound more decisive, but they are clearly contradicted if only *one* exception is found.

**3. Eschew the meretricious utilization of polysyllabic locutions. (Don't overuse big words.)** Big words may make you sound as if you know more. However, if they are overused, it often indicates insecurity – you are trying to impress someone. The same is true of excessive use of **jargon** or **slang** – specialized terms used by specific groups. These words can lead to more effective communication within a specific group, but it should not be used with outsiders. Only those familiar with computers would understand, "*My PC has 96 meg of RAM and 2.4 gig of HD.*" Big words, jargon and slang tend to exclude others and make them feel rejected. These words can reduce understanding.

**4. Avoid evaluative terms, especially negative ones.** Examples range from "*terrific*" to "*terrible.*" Even compliments can be unclear communications. Suppose I was told, "*You did a terrific job yesterday!*" If I wanted to repeat that performance, I wouldn't know what to do. "*I appreciate how well you revised those contracts yesterday,*" gives me a better idea of what is being praised.

At the other extreme, "*That's a stupid-looking tie*" suggests that anyone who likes the tie is stupid. Likewise, the statement, "*That's a dumb idea,*" does the same for ideas. Even though we don't agree with others, we can still respect them. A better statement could be, "*We may have problems*

*doing it that way. What would happen if we...?"* This leads to fewer hurt feelings and more effective decision-making.

**5. Use people's names and titles.** In your relationships, interaction goes more smoothly, if you use the names of people around you. (When you meet *many* people, it becomes a little difficult to remember all their names.) If you do not know a person well and the situation is formal, it is more appropriate to use the person's last name and title (e.g., Mr., Mrs., Doctor, Captain, Dean). (Many people have worked very hard to gain these titles.) First names (without titles) are used in informal situations or when you have a close relationship. Sometimes these people will give you permission to use their first name, indicating a closer, more informal relationship.

Beside *what* you say, *how* you say it is important for effective communication. In talking, several nonverbal cues can indicate more self-confidence. This makes your message more believable.

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## **Nonverbal communication can either add or detract from the words you say.**

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**6. Use an expressive tone in your voice.** If you know your subject well or believe what you are saying, you are likely to speak in an expressive, animated manner. Energetic speech with good inflection adds to your credibility. In contrast, using a very high-pitched voice indicates nervousness.

**7. Speak fluently.** Don't stammer, pause frequently, or keep repeating yourself. These habits, along with overuse of "*ah*," "*uhm*" and "*you know*," imply uneasiness or incompetence. Try to collect your thoughts before you speak, so you can fluently express yourself.

**8. Speak relatively quickly.** A brisk rate of speaking holds your audience's attention. It also suggests competence and confidence. However, if it is extreme and sounds "*pushed*," nervousness is implied.

**9. Use nonverbal postural cues that emphasize what you are saying.** Voice qualities are not the only nonverbal cues. Eye contact, facial expression, posture, hand gestures and manner of dress also communicate. In our culture, **eye contact** adds to your message. Don't look at the ceiling or the ground while you are talking. If talking to several people, shift eye contact from listener to listener, so each will feel involved. **Hand gestures**, at the very least, should not take away from what you are saying.

Picking your fingernails or drumming on a table indicate nervousness. In contrast, hand gestures can add to what you are saying by indicating aspects like size, shape and direction.

These are only some of the factors for effective communication. If you already use these methods, you are probably an effective communicator. If not, you can observe others who you think are good speakers. Pick out what mannerisms make them seem more effective. Practice their methods when you are speaking to become more effective.

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\* Adapted from Dennis Coon's *Introduction to Psychology: Exploration and Application*, Brooks/Cole Publishing, 1998, pages 727-728.