

*Enhancing*  
**Public Skills**  
*of*  
**Women**  
**Politicians**

edited by  
Adebimpe O. Okunade



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## 2

# Effective Communication Skills

Adenike Onibokun

### DEFINITIONS

Communication is an ongoing, mutual, simultaneous interaction in which people relate to one another. It is the way in which one human being makes contact with another. People are social species and need one another; they need to know and be known by others. The way in which people accomplish interaction goals is through the process of communication. When communication goes awry, people feel only partially known and often misunderstood. Perception and understanding of others are sometimes distorted. Alienation, loneliness, bitterness, and frustration are common outcomes of distorted communication and perception. "To communicate" is, according to the dictionary, "to make known" and "to be connected". This is precisely what communication is all about — making oneself and one's ideas, thoughts, and feelings known to another individual and finding out that person's thoughts, ideas, and feelings.

Communication can also be defined as "a process by which information is transmitted through a common system of symbols, signs or behaviour. Effective communication requires individuals to clearly understand what is being communicated. Effective communication also requires both interest and skill. The skill can be learned; interest must come from within the individual.

### WHO IS THE COMMUNICATOR?

Communicators are people who enter into relationships with other people. Without communication, people will be

unable to function. During the course of a single day, we interact with others to share information and beliefs, exchange ideas and feelings, make plans, and solve problems. Sometimes this is done interpersonally, sometimes in a small group, and sometimes in a public forum. However, no matter how communication occurs, it is essential in helping us to initiate, develop, control, and sustain our contacts with others. We are all interpersonal (on-to-one) small-group (one-to-a-few) and public (one-to-many) communicators. Every time we knowingly or unknowingly send a verbal or non-verbal message to a friend, lover, relative, stranger, audience, employee, co-worker or group, communication takes place, (Klemmer and Snyder, 1972). In effect, communication is the deliberate or accidental transfer of meaning. It occurs whenever someone observes or experiences behaviour and attributes meaning to that behaviour. It does not matter whether the observed or experienced behaviour is intentional or accidental, conscious or unconscious. As long as what someone does is interpreted as a message, as long as the behaviour of one person affects or influences the behaviour of another, communication is occurring. Thus, each facet of our lives, from birth to death, is dependent on and affected by our communication skills.

### TYPES OF COMMUNICATION

Communication takes place in two forms — verbal and non-verbal.

#### Verbal Communication:

A symbol is anything that takes the place of, stands for, or refers to something or someone. The meaning a person attaches to a symbol is unique to the individual. A symbol by itself is meaningless. Human beings communicate through the use of symbols called words. Words are sym-



bols that have consistent meanings because of tradition and universal usage. Language, attributing meaning to words, is unique to humans. Verbal language refers to spoken or written words. Verbal communication occurs through words, spoken or written. Taken alone, verbal communication can convey factual information accurately and efficiently. Meaning is derived from the way the words are arranged in sentences and not from the words themselves. Non-word verbalizations are called paralanguage and are components of verbal communication. Paralanguage includes cries, laughter, moans, and signs. Tone of voice, pace of speech, and voice inflection are all part of paralanguage.

#### LIMITATIONS OF VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Verbal communication is a less effective means of communicating feelings or nuances of meaning, and it represents only a small segment of total human communication. Another limitation of verbal communication is that words can change meanings with different cultural groups or sub-groups because words have both denotative and connotative meanings. The denotative meaning of a word is its actual or concrete meaning. For example, the denotative meaning of the word, 'bread' is "food made of flour or grain dough that is kneaded, shaped, allowed to rise and baked". The connotative meaning of a word, in contrast, is its implied or suggested meaning (Berko, Wolvin, and Wolvin, 1981). Thus, the word 'bread' can conjure up many different connotative or personalised meanings. Depending on a person's experience, preferences, and present frame of reference, he or she may think of French bread, rye bread or *pita* bread. When used as slang, "give me some bread" may be understood to mean "give me some money". Thus, the characteristics of the speaker and the context in which the phrase is used influence the specific meaning of verbal language. The two levels of meaning in language — the

denotation and connotation — are also both affected by culture (Samovar and Porter, 1985).

#### NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION (BODY LANGUAGE)

Non-verbal language refers to communication that is generated from symbols other than words. Non-verbal communication is conveyed by body language, gestures, eye movements, facial expression, personal appearance, and dress. Body language or the message conveyed through body movement, is an all-important component of non-verbal communication. How a person stands or sits will betray an attitude and meaning either congruent with or divergent from the verbal communication. Gestures, movements of the face, body or limbs, express ideas or emotions. A wave, for example, is a gesture that generally conveys "hello" or "goodbye".

Eyes are highly significant vehicles of communication. Eye contact conveys the degree to which a person connects with another. Eyes are closely connected to facial expressions. Smiles and facial muscles often reveal messages far more powerful than words. One may look angry, sad, or depressed. Facial expressions often convey significant messages and cannot be overlooked. The first impression communicated from one person to another is *via* personal appearance. How a person dresses and the neatness of the attire convey definite messages.

Non-verbal communication may be conscious or unconscious. When a non-verbal message is conveyed unconsciously, the verbal message which accompanies it may be invalid; and when the verbal message is inconsistent with the non-verbal expression of the message, the non-verbal expressions assume prominence and generally are perceived as more trustworthy than the verbal content. Eye contact and facial expressions appear to be particularly important in signalling our feelings (Cooper, 1990;



Harrison, 1989). Throughout life, individuals respond to the expressive qualities of another's face, often without even being aware of it. Research suggests that individuals who make direct eye contact while talking or listening create a sense of confidence and credibility, whereas downward glances or averted eyes signal submission, weakness, or shame (Duryea, 1991).

### CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS

Most non-verbal behaviours are culturally specific and contextually bound. They are learned unconsciously through observation of the behaviours of significant people. Sometimes a cultural taboo tends to inhibit non-verbal behaviours. For example, different cultures have distinct rules about eye contact. Africans culturally tend to avoid eye contact when listening. There are cultural differences in the meaning attached to the use of touch. For example, some native Americans use touch in healing, so that casual touching may be taboo (Giger and Davidhizar, 1990b).

### GENDER DIFFERENCES

Gender differences in communication have been shown to be greatest in terms of use and interpretation of non-verbal cues (Hyde, 1990). In contrast to males, women tend to demonstrate more effective use of non-verbal communication (Cotton Huston, 1989). Females are more likely to be better decoders of non-verbal expression (Keeley-Dyreson, Burgoon and Bailey 1991). Empirical studies have documented sex differences. For example, women smile more than men; whereas men prefer a greater interpersonal distance between themselves and others. Women are taught at a young age to keep arms, hands, and legs close to their bodies, especially when sitting.

### FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE COMMUNICATION

Hereunder are some of the factors affecting communica-

tion. Through communication, people reveal themselves to one another, sometimes in mutually understood symbols and sometimes in symbols that are misunderstood. Interactions are influenced by one's cultural and religious background, sex role, social class and value system. The level of relatedness that exists between individuals, the emotional climate, the content exchanged, and the environment where interaction occurs are all factors that contribute to the outcome of the communication process.

### Culture and religion

Culture is communication and communication is culture. Cultural variables include norms, customs, rituals, myths, religious traditions, and symbolic behaviour. Preconceptions and generalizations evolve from cultural definitions of what things mean. For example, persons visiting Nigeria may not understand the significance of *Egungun* festival of the Yoruba unless its cultural significance has been explained to them. Symbols such as crosses or stars that communicate allegiance to a particular religious belief would be meaningless without knowledge of the significance of the symbol. The costume or dress a person wears may communicate the nation to which he or she belongs. Depending on cultural background, a handshake may express a greeting or be an invasion of one's body space. To communicate effectively one needs to understand the cultural context of the interaction.

### Sex roles

Language has played a significant role in stereotyping male and female roles. Commonly used words such as 'chairman', 'manpower' and 'bachelor' traditionally refer to men while 'apron-strings', 'nurse' and 'home-keeper' are words that have been associated with women. As traditional roles change, the language is evolving with words that are not sex specific.



### Social class

Social class greatly influences communication particularly in the area of semantic reaction. A semantic reaction is a spontaneous human response or image a person forms when confronted with symbols, especially words. Semantic reactions can be changed by substituting more positive and less provocative phrases. Social class examples include 'janitor' for which one may substitute "sanitary engineer"; 'poverty' for which one may substitute "low income"; and a 'prison' becomes a "correctional facility".

### Perception

A perception is a highly personal and internal experience of one's environment. A perception is processed and received through the senses and is a person's way of sensing interpreting, and comprehending the word. What a person sees or hears, however, is not always exactly what is there but rather may be a misperception. Perceptions are influenced by past experiences, which prepare people to see persons, places, and things in certain and sometimes distorted ways. Perception may form an obstacle to communication. Two people can experience the same interaction and view it in two completely different ways. The meaning of an event may differ because a person's perception of the event differs. People need to know how their perceptions influence the way they understand other persons, places and things.

### Values

A person's value system influences the way that person communicates. Someone who values politeness will express this in numerous symbolic ways. If a person values education, this will be communicated in numerous ways.

### Level of relatedness

Another factor that influences communication is the relatedness that exists between individuals. Husband and wife

will relate differently than two persons who are strangers. Whether the emotional climate is comfortable or tense will affect what gets communicated and how the message is received. At a cocktail party a man may interact with his boss in a very different way than at a board meeting and with the same words conveying very different messages.

### Content of the message

The content of the message can either change or defuse the atmosphere of a communication. When someone talks about death or loss, certain feelings are aroused that can affect how the message being communicated is sent or received. Subjects regarded as taboos will likewise affect interactions, often creating tension and resulting in distorted communication.

### Context of the message

The place where an interaction takes place will influence the communication process. Saying, "I love you" in a crowded room will have a very different message than when it is said at a table for two at a quiet night spot. The context or place of the communication is an integral component of the message.

## WHAT IS EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION?

People sometimes say that communication is effective when a person gets his or her point across. This is but one measure of effectiveness. More generally, communication is effective when the stimulus as it was initiated and intended by the sender, or source, corresponds closely with the stimulus as it is perceived and responded to by the receiver.

If we let S stand for the person who is the sender or source of the message, and R for the receiver of the message, then communication is whole and complete when the response S intends and the response R provides, are



identical (Goyer, 1970)

The greater the correspondence between our intention and the response we receive, the more effective we have been in communicating. At times, we hit the zero mark; that is, there is absolutely no correspondence between the response we want to produce and the one we receive; just like a drowning man who signals wildly for help to one of his friends on a sail boat only to have her wave back.

### COMMUNICATION BARRIERS

As human beings we never cease to communicate, however, that which we communicate is not always clearly understood. A variety of internal and external factors influence the manner in which the message is sent, received, and comprehended. If the communicator is unaware of these factors and their influence on the communicative process, the end-result is a breakdown in the communication process.

Some of the factors that impede communication include:

- lack of eye contact;
- lack of time;
- interrupting the speaker;
- changing the subject midway;
- insults and lack of respect;
- lack of ability to relate to sender or receiver;
- lack of attention;
- complicated or unclear message;
- language barrier;
- lack of interpersonal empathy or sensitivity;
- wrong timing of messages;
- lack of trust;
- poor state of mental and physical health;
- accents, pronunciation or word connotations;
- distraction; as well as
- lack of sensitivity to both verbal and non-verbal content of communication.

### SKILLS THAT CAN ENHANCE EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Among the various skills and techniques required for effective communication are listening and silence techniques.

#### 1. Listening:

This is the art of paying attention to the speaker. Many people hear and do not listen, that is, they hear only what they want to hear. To listen demands a great deal of effort and concentration. It also requires sensitivity to words, tonal qualities, silence, hidden messages with significant content, generalizations, and unrecognised feelings. To listen, the individual must actively seek to reduce environmental and personal distractions. Listening, like observation, requires objectivity and accuracy. There are four major types of listening processes: defensive, selective, deliberate and empathic.

*Defensive listening* is the process of hearing by either filtering the messages so as to hear only that which is perceived or to place personal and negative values on the message. This type of listening inhibits spontaneity and rapport. The sources of defensive listening are often guilt, shame, fear, and feelings of inadequacy or worthlessness.

*Selective listening* is an inherent practice attributed to human nature. We all like to hear what we want to hear, even though it may not have been said by the other person. We also have the habit of hearing only part of what is being said or communicated. Selective listening is detrimental to the interactive-interventive process because it severely limits message reception.

*Deliberate listening* is essential for therapeutic effectiveness. It is a process in which the individual commits himself/herself intentionally and with forethought to the interpersonal experience. Receptivity and openness are



key components to deliberate listening. One often hears the expression, "I heard every word he said" to emphasise that the listener got the message clearly, distinctly, and without error; and demonstrate the absence of defensive and selective hearing. It represents a type of hearing that excludes placing personal value judgements upon what is being said. Attentiveness is the essence of deliberate listening.

*Empathic listening*, as the term suggests, the listener tries to demonstrate empathy for the speaker. All of us like to feel that a person is being sympathetic during times of difficulty. Empathic listening can also be described as listening "between the lines". When we listen between the lines, we heighten our awareness and interpersonal sensitivity to the entire message a person may be trying to communicate. Empathic listening serves as a reward or encouragement to the speaker. It communicates one's caring and acceptance, and reaffirms the person's sense of worth. This style of listening seems to be most important in terms of strengthening or improving a positive interpersonal relationship between the parties involved.

## 2. Silence:

Silence, used deliberately and judiciously, is a powerful communication strategy. It allows the speaker to think, and it is often beneficial for the listener to step back momentarily and process what he/she heard before responding. Too often, a quick response addresses only a small part of the message and/or gives the speaker an insufficient opportunity to formulate fully a complete idea. A short silence to get in touch with one's personal anxiety is appropriate before responding. On the other hand, long silences become uncomfortable. The silent pause should be just that a brief disconnection followed by a verbal comment. Silence is used to accent an important point in a verbal communication. Brief silence, following an impor-

tant verbal message, dramatizes the significance of the speaker's statement.

## RELEVANCE OF PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNICATION TO WOMEN POLITICIANS

We shall discuss how one can use the principles of effective communication to enhance one's public skills as women legislators and politicians. In the process of communication, an individual must be a good speaker and a good listener for communication to achieve the intended or desired result.

*As a speaker:* The following are some of the skills that will aid a speaker to convey his/her messages better:

*Simplicity of message* – the message should be simple, brief, clear, timely, relevant and straight to the point.

*Manner of speech* – a good speaker should have a reasonable control of her emotions when conveying a message.

*Knowledge of audience/listeners* – it is important before speaking to consider the socio-cultural and educational background of the people to whom you want to convey a message.

*Attitude towards audience* – the speaker should always respect the audience.

*Boldness* – the speaker must have a positive self-concept, be assertive and avoid being shy.

*Speed of delivery* – the speaker must not be too fast or slow.

*Knowledge of subject matter* – a person wishing to give information must have relevant, current and correct facts on issues to be discussed.

*Feedback* – the speaker should be sure to get feedback through questions and answers from the audience to ensure understanding.



*As a listener:* Effective listening demands:

*Attentiveness* – avoid looking in other directions when someone is talking to you. A good listener maintains eye contact with the speaker.

*Uninterrupted speech* – do not interrupt a speaker before the speech is over. This may irritate the speaker and he/she can lose concentration.

*Appropriate expression* – when a person is saying something that is serious, sad or depressing, it is wrong to laugh or smile as this can upset the speaker, and may feel that you have little or no concern about the situation.

*Avoid changing topic* – avoid changing topic unnecessarily when someone is talking. It is good to ensure that any topic that is being discussed is thoroughly completed before moving to another topic.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, being a communicator, simply communicating frequently or having many person-to-person contacts each day, does not mean that one is as *effective* a communicator as one can be. To function effectively in interpersonal small group or public communication, one has to acquire the following skills:

1. Ability to understand and communicate with oneself;
2. Knowledge of how and why the person and those with whom one relates see things the way they do;
3. Capacity to listen and then process the information one receives;
4. Sensitivity to 'silent' messages that one and others send;
5. Knowledge of how words affect self and those with whom one relates;
6. Understanding of how relationships develop;

7. Understanding of how feelings and emotions affect relationships;
8. Ability to handle conflict and by learning how to disagree without being disagreeable;
9. Understanding of others' beliefs. Values and attitudes affect the formulation and reception of messages and the development of speaker-audience relationship;
10. Desire to apply all these skills and perceptions to each communication experience.



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