

Chapter 7— Effective Listening and Conflict Resolution

Effective Listening

- Expressing our wants, feelings, and opinions is an important part of being assertive, but is only $\frac{1}{2}$ of communication.
- The other $\frac{1}{2}$ is listening and making a genuine effort to understand what the other person is communicating back.
- Lacking in effective listening skills leads to a higher likelihood of misinterpreting what others are saying.
- Listening to others tends to encourage others to reciprocate and listen to you.

Effective Listening

- **Self-listening** is when you listen to only part of what someone is saying, think about what you are going to say, trying to anticipate what the other person is saying.
- Effective listening is not agreeing, but rather taking time and leaving room for others while reserving the right to disagree, make the final decision, or express your feelings and viewpoints.
- If you are preoccupied with other things, it's better to be honest and let the person know that you can't listen to them at this time and arrange for a later time.

Effective Listening

- **Silent listening** is using body language to communicate attentiveness while saying nothing except for "I see," "Go on," etc.
- This communicates interest, but doesn't let the other person know that you are getting their message accurately or to check out the degree to which you have accurately heard the other person.
- Active listening techniques such as paraphrasing and feedback of content allow you to check out what the person said **and** the feeling behind the communication to ensure you've heard them correctly.

Paraphrasing

- Paraphrasing is using your own words to describe the speaker's basic message.
- Examples of paraphrasing language are:
 - From your perspective...
 - The way you see it is...
 - Your point of view is...
 - It seems to you...
 - What you'd like me to know is...
 - So, if I'm hearing you...
 - I guess what's important for you to get across to me is...
- When paraphrasing feelings, use a feeling word such as sad, glad, mad, scared to describe your perceptions of the speaker's state.
 - I.e. "I get the impression that you're irritated with what I just did. Am I right?"
 - "It looks like you're feeling proud of what you accomplished."
- Make sure to be tentative in your guess at what they are saying (the content) and especially the underlying feeling.
- So, you won't want to say something like, "Don't you tell me that you're not feeling mad!"

Using Door Openers

- When you assertively refuse a request, give criticism, or express your feelings or opinions, the other person may hesitate to directly express their negative reactions.
- When a person clams up, misunderstandings or breakdowns in communication cannot be openly dealt with.
- 3 Methods to Ask for Reactions in a Nondemanding, Nonjudgmental Way:
 1. Asking for reaction.
 2. Asking for message received.
 3. Asking for reaction based on body language.

1. Asking for Reaction

- Do it in a straightforward manner such as:
 - What's your reaction to what I've said?
 - How do you feel about my saying no?
 - What do you think of what I've said?
 - It would help me if you would tell me what reaction you have.
- Asking for the reaction relieves you of trying to guess and worrying about what's going through their mind.
- It also shows that you value their reaction, they are entitled to express their reaction, and that you believe effective communication is a two-way street.

2. Asking for Message Received

- People often have negative reactions to a message because they have received it incorrectly.
- There are many reasons for "not getting the message."
 - The receiver may receive our communication through a distorting filter, hearing suggestions as personal criticism, hearing requests as demands, or hearing lack of agreement as personal disrespect.
- Sometimes the speaker doesn't communicate the message clearly. P. 184 example.
- Examples of ways to ask:
 - I've been talking for a while; what's the basic message you've gotten from me?
 - What's the message you think I'm trying to get across to you?

4 Steps to Take When Discussion Gets Heated

- 4 Steps to Take When a Discussion Gets Heated:
 1. Call for a Stop Action—stopping the interchange and focusing on the **process** of the discussion itself.
 - I.e. commenting on how the discussion has gotten heated.
 2. Ask for information on the message that was received.
 3. Identify the source of the misunderstanding.
 4. Clarify what you meant to communicate.

3. Asking for Reaction Based on Body Language

- Often it isn't what a person says, but what they do that leads us to misinterpret their reaction.
- Ask for an interpretation of the gestures that led you to think that the other person was reacting strongly to your statement, describe your feelings (optional), and request that the person express their reactions directly.
 - I.e. your tone of voice leads me to believe that you are upset with me. I would like to hear what's on your mind. Would you be willing to share it with me?
 - I.e. I'm noticing that you're frowning and I'm not sure if that means you don't understand what I've said or that you disagree. It would help me if you would tell me what your frown means.
- It is more likely that the other person will respond to your question regarding specific body language than to a general question about feelings such as "You seem angry."

Negotiating and Problem-solving

Negotiating Agreements

- In all relationships there will be times when two people have conflicting expectations about how each should act toward the other.
- Effective listening skills and the ability to give and take when confronting a problem are important.
- Some common misconceptions regarding conflict include:
 - Conflict must be my fault
 - Should be able to handle conflict so the problem never returns
 - You must win the conflict in order to be OK
 - Any compromise means losing and being less powerful
 - Conflict should be avoided at all cost
 - Your solution is the only worthwhile one
 - All conflicts must be resolved
 - Compromise inevitably leads to bad feelings
 - Long-standing or important conflicts can be handled easily in one discussion
 - In any conflict, there is a right and a wrong party
 - The party who is right must/will get what they want
 - Being unsuccessful in resolving a conflict means being inadequate

Negotiating Agreements (cont.)

- These misconceptions must be challenged and changed so they don't interfere with your ability to resolve conflicts.
- Some conflicts can be resolved by simply explaining how you feel or what you want.
- Others can only be resolved with persistently assertive behavior.
- In other situations it is more appropriate and effective to discuss and *problem-solve* conflict rather than to continually repeat wants or feelings.
- Problem-solving is often the best way to deal with an ongoing conflict that hasn't been resolved because what we want interferes with the other person's needs or goals.

A Problem-Solving Model

- To negotiate agreements that both parties can live with, it is important to negotiate the conflict by what objectively makes sense—taking into consideration the needs and feelings of both parties.
- **Step 1: Defining the problem**
- This is more than admitting a problem exists, but also defining it in terms that are clear to both parties.
 - Ex. pp. 189-190
- One way to state the problem is to clearly describe specific objectionable behaviors, their effect, and/or give a positive suggestion.
- If the other person is globally complaining about your behavior, you can ask, "Can you give me an example of when I've done that recently? What specifically do I do that bothers you?"
- Another alternative is to state the problem in terms of unmet needs rather than positive solutions to meet those needs.

Step 2: Generating possible alternatives

- Brainstorm possible options without evaluating them yet.
- Some possibilities include:
 - What are some of the possible solutions to this problem?
 - Let's see how many ideas we can come up with.
 - What are some things we might do?
 - There must be lots of ways to solve this problem.
 - What ideas do you have for solving this problem?
 - What are some solutions we might try?

Step 3: Evaluating the solutions

- Examine the solutions so that all parties assertively express their feelings about the proposed solutions and which ones are unacceptable.
- When rejecting a solution, explain what the negative effects are, why it doesn't fulfill your needs, or why it seems unfair.
- The process of evaluating the solutions may be started by:
 - It seems like we have generated all the solutions we can think of. Let's look at them now and see what we think.
 - Are any of these solutions unacceptable to you?
 - Which of these solutions would best help us both to meet our needs?
 - Which ones do you like best? Which one do you like least?
- The goal is to identify a solution that meets the needs of both parties.
- If either party has strong objections to a particular solution, it should be eliminated.

Step 4: Making the decision

- Once a solution has been identified as satisfactory to both parties, both people should picture how it will be carried out.
- Some suggestions for phrasing it are:
 - If we accept this solution, what do you think the effect would be?
 - We seem to agree on this one. Do you think it would solve our problems?
 - Where could we fail if we implement this solution?
 - If we try out this solution, what would it look like?
- If the parties can't find any mutually satisfactory solutions, have another brainstorming session or use an alternative strategy.

Step 5: Determining how to implement the decision

- Problem-solving efforts may lead nowhere when the decisions don't get implemented.
- Sometimes the parties never specify when the decision will be implemented, who will do what, or how failure to follow through with the decision will be handled.

Step 6: Assessing the success of the solution

- In their desire to resolve the conflict, people sometimes underestimate their needs or agree to solutions that are unrealistic for them and then have a hard time carrying out the agreement.
- After a reasonable length of time, check on how satisfied both parties are with the agreed-upon solution.
- Some ways of phrasing these include:
 - Are you satisfied with the way the solution is working out?
 - Do we need to make any modifications in our agreement?
- If the person has not carried through on the agreement, discuss what happened and find ways of dealing with the obstacles interfering.

Overcoming Blocks to Negotiating Agreements

- **Clamming Up or Refusing to Discuss the Conflict**
- Use the door openers of:
 - Asking for reaction, asking for message received, or asking for reaction based on body language.
- **Selling a Solution and Not Listening**
- When the other person tries to sell you on their point of view, give feedback about the message that is coming across.
- Some examples include:
 - "I realize that your solution is very important to you, and if I'm to have an investment in working out the conflict, I'll need to have my desires heard and considered also."
 - "The message I'm getting is that there's only one solution for this problem and that's yours and that you're not interested in what I have to say. I would like my views considered too."

Overcoming Blocks to Negotiating Agreements

- **Summarizing Self**
- Each person simply keeps restating their position.
- When a disagreement reaches this kind of impasse, it's as though each person thinks that **if only** the other person would understand how logical their point is, there wouldn't be any problem.
- The result is that neither person is listened to, and both feel misunderstood.
- One approach to this problem is the Stop Action technique:
 1. Call for a Stop Action—stop the interchange and focus on the process.
 2. Ask about the message that was received.
 3. Identify the source of the misunderstanding.
 4. Clarify what you meant to communicate.

Overcoming Blocks to Negotiating Agreements

- **Cross-Complaining**
- This occurs when every time a person brings up what they think is a reasonable issue, it is met by a stronger countercomplaint that makes it impossible to resolve either issue.
- Even though it feels like “tit for tat” and the other person is often countercomplaining in order to defend themselves and attack the other person, the complaints are often *legitimate* ones.
- One way out of it is to paraphrase the content of the complaint and the feelings of the other person, list the complaints that both parties have with each other, and make an agreement to deal with one complaint at a time during the problem-solving discussion session.

Alternatives to Assertion

Alternatives to Assertion

- Sometimes listening skills are ineffective. Knowing what the problem is can cause frustration if you cannot negotiate it.
- When it is not appropriate to be assertive, the risks of assertive behavior are too great, or assertive communication efforts have not produced positive changes in the other person's behavior, you still have at least two alternatives:
 - You can change the environment or
 - You can change yourself.

Changing the Environment

- When assertive behavior isn't effective or appropriate, you can sometimes change the physical surroundings.
 - I.e. "child-proofing" your home so that you won't have to constantly reprimand or limit a young child's behavior, getting a second TV when there are frequent arguments about what program to watch, etc.

Changing Yourself: Alternative A: Developing Other Ways of Taking Care of Yourself

- Develop ways of taking care of yourself and meeting your needs without requiring others to change to accommodate you.
- Figure out how you can get your major needs met without support, change, or input from others.
- Some questions to ask:
 - What do I want?
 - What makes this want important?
 - How am I currently trying to get this want fulfilled?
 - How is this method working out
 - What are some things I could do to fulfill this want?

Changing Yourself. Alternative B. Reanalyzing the Problem and Determining Whether You Are Protecting Others from the Consequences of Their Behavior

- When people are protected from the natural consequences of their behavior, they have little motivation or reason to change.
- This doesn't mean creating new negative consequences, but simply letting others experience the natural consequences of their behavior.
 - I.e. You are repeatedly telling your child to take their coat when going outside in the rain. One day you don't remind them and they get a cold.
- Going out of your way to punish someone's undesirable behavior can be effective in decreasing unwarranted behavior.
- Use this alternative with caution since it may produce undesirable side-effects.
 - It can arouse emotions such as anxiety and aggression on the part of the other person.
 - If they are strongly motivated to continue the undesired behavior, they may continue it as soon as the punishment is discontinued, especially if they don't have any more constructive behaviors to replace it with.

Changing Yourself. Alternative C. Reanalyzing the Problem and Determining Whether the Person Has the Skills to Engage in the Desired Behavior

- People can be unresponsive to assertiveness because they are unable to do what someone wants them to do. If this is the case, redirect your efforts.

Changing Yourself: Alternative D: Reanalyzing the Problem and Determining Whether Assertive Expressions of Irritation are Actually Increasing the Desired Behavior

- In some cases assertive expressions of irritation actually make the problem worse rather than better--particularly when the other person enjoys seeing you upset, irritated, or thrown off balance.
 - I.e. Kids acting up to get parent's attention or elementary school students acting up to irritate the teacher. The adult's irritation can be a kind of reward or reinforcer.
 - In such cases it is more effective to ignore (or extinguish) the undesired behavior (as long as it's not dangerous or the type that must be responded to) and catch the person being good instead of being bad.
- Remember: when you ignore or extinguish a behavior, that behavior usually gets worse for a while before it gradually becomes more acceptable.

Changing Yourself: Alternative E: Using Listening, Understanding, and Discussion

- Sometimes simple listening and increased understanding of other people is more effective and a better alternative to standing up for yourself.

Changing Yourself: Alternative F: Using Empathy

- Express empathy (not sympathy) rather than irritation.
- Empathy
 - Communicating your attempt to understand the other's thoughts, feelings, behaviors, etc.
- Sympathy
 - Communicating agreement, commiserating with, feeling sorry for, etc.