

Session 1: What are the purposes of communication?

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Introduction

All through your life you continually change how you speak and what you speak about. Each situation you find yourself in demands a slightly different method of communication from you. You can probably think of situations when your communication has faltered and scenarios which result in misunderstanding. You either adapt by seeking expert help – for instance, special training is sometimes available to prepare you for public speaking or similar tasks – or, more likely, you reflect and learn from experience. Over time you develop differing degrees of awareness of how to respond appropriately in different situations. The opening two sessions of this course will accelerate your learning from experience.



Figure 1 Communication is key.

In this first session of the course, you will be introduced to the purpose of small talk and non-verbal communication. However, you'll begin to develop your understanding of the purpose of communication exchanges by going in at the deep end. First, you will watch an example of communication under intense pressure in motor racing.

By the end of this session, you should be able to:

- explain the different purposes of communication, whether that be small talk or the main part of any dialogue
- identify how communication goes beyond words and consists of how you say them with non-verbal elements such as gestures, facial expressions and eye contact
- appreciate that we can't always hide our innermost feelings.

The Open University would really appreciate you taking a few minutes of your time to tell us about yourself and your expectations of the course. Your input will help to improve the online learning experience. If you would like to help, and if you haven't already done so, please fill in this [optional survey](#).

This course is supported and strongly recommended by [UK Coaching](#). Whether you're just starting out or have been coaching for years you will learn new skills and demonstrate that you have been proactive in your professional development.



1 Life and death communication in motor racing

In this first activity, you will watch a lively extract concerning life and death decisions during a motor racing pit-stop.



Figure 2 Communication in the pit-stop can be crucial.

Activity 1 Chris Hoy's motor racing pit-stop

Allow about 20 minutes

When multiple Olympic cycling champion Sir Chris Hoy retired, he took up motor racing and went to the Le Mans 24-hour race to compete. Watch the video of Chris Hoy's motor racing pit-stop but **please be warned that there is some swearing in this clip** so carefully choose where you watch it so as not to cause offence to others. In addition to Chris Hoy who is driving, there are two other main people interacting: the race engineer (coordinating radio communications) and the team principal leading the pit-crew. Using examples from this video make notes on the following questions:

1. How does the competition situation influence the purpose of the communication and the tone that is used?
2. How are relationships strengthened or threatened through this exchange?

Video content is not available in this format.



Restrict yourself to **20 minutes** for this activity. It would be easy to spend hours on it with a very in-depth analysis; instead restrict your time, give your initial responses to the two questions and then read the Discussion to reinforce your learning.

Discussion

1. This is a very high-pressure situation requiring fast decisions and communication during competition: a race track pit-stop needs to be quick. Their communication has an **information function** (e.g. 'replace all four tyres') and/or an **interpersonal function** in developing confidence and/or trust and rapport. Analysis of individual interactions when taken out of this intense competition context should recognise the needs of this demanding environment.
There are numerous examples of ambiguous communication or too much information or messages dominated by anger; this often makes these messages less effective. For instance, at one point Hoy has to say 'can you please stop talking, I'm going to have to come in ...' as he fears for his safety.
The first successful piece of **interpersonal** communication occurs when Chris Hoy (CH) comes into the pit-stop when his confidence has been threatened:
CH: 'I'm sorry about that, that's so annoying ...' [i.e. an apology to the team]
Race engineer: 'What's done is done, we can't change it, lets concentrate and we go again' [supportive and positive]
CH: 'copied' [I have received the message].
2. In terms of relationships being strengthened or threatened, you might have noticed some of the following examples. Throughout the exchanges tensions run quite high and the team leader's anger could harm the relationship with his race engineer and team colleagues. One outburst appeared ego-centred and perhaps unusual, e.g. 'F*** him [i.e. the race engineer], I know what I'm talking about'.
The penultimate exchange between team leader (TL) and race engineer (RE), however, demonstrates listening to each other in the heat of the situation and the working relationship being maintained:
TL: 'Are you going to tell him [Chris Hoy] that these [tyres] are cold?'

RE: 'Will do once you're done'.

After the pit-stop it is noticeable how the race engineer attempts to build rapport and confidence with Chris by asking 'OK Chris, how are you feeling, everything OK?'

Although we all communicate every day, this video and research into the topic demonstrate that communication and working relationships are a complex set of social skills and behaviours (e.g. Bowes and Jones, 2006). However, here in this course, it is broken down into parts – thereby making it easier to study – and you will revisit this video in Session 2 to make further sense of it.

Right now, at the beginning of this course, you should consider to what extent you use small talk when you catch up with someone. Is small talk pointless chit-chat or a social lubricant?

2 What is the point of small talk?

The technical name for small talk is phatic communication; for example, 'Hi, you OK?' or a comment about the weather. Questions or comments such as these are not meant to elicit detailed responses but they do serve a social purpose.

Activity 2 What is the purpose of phatic talk?

Allow about 20 minutes

Listen to a linguist, academic and psychotherapist discussing phatic talk. The audio starts with psychotherapist and writer Philippa Perry describing phatic talk as 'mundane information that has been exchanged between two people ...' What do you think is the purpose of the phatic talk in different sport and fitness settings?

Audio content is not available in this format.



Discussion

In the audio, they describe phatic talk as ritualised and a process that helps establish a relationship or a transition before the more detailed conversation starts. They describe it as establishing goodwill, collaboration and cohesion, provided those interacting reciprocate (join in) the dialogue. If they choose not to respond, this could be interpreted as being unfriendly or even hostile. In sport and fitness the topics that are chosen to be discussed are selected in order to make mutual agreement almost guaranteed, such as 'what did you think of the match/game/event at the weekend?' or 'how are your family?'

Phatic openings are invaluable means of establishing relations before getting down to the real purpose of the encounter.

3 More than words

Speech and phatic talk is enhanced through features such as the pace, volume, rhythm and intonation of speech (known as paralinguistic features). These, in turn, can shape meaning.

Activity 3 Phatic talk in action: Lauren's tennis coaching

Allow about 10 minutes

Watch this video of Lauren greeting a young tennis player.

As you watch the video, look out for how much mutual collaboration (contributions from both parties) and reciprocation (returning or mirroring the contribution) there is in the phatic talk.

Video content is not available in this format.



Discussion

The young tennis player instigates the interaction by smiling and asking 'how are you?' and this is mirrored by Lauren. Lauren gestures to the seat as a friendly invitation to sit down, hinting at her authority over him. Their conversation is up and running and Lauren asks him about how his week has been, his day at school and if he has been watching Wimbledon. The comment on the hot weather is safe ground they can easily agree on. Young people soon learn the ritual of these phatic openings even if they don't appreciate the purpose. The dialogue established, Lauren marks that the exchange is moving to a more instructional stage with 'brilliant ... good ... so', before explaining the focus of the training session.

You probably already appreciate some aspects of what we term **non-verbal communication**, but the next section will give you insight into its significance in building relationships and/or sustaining others' motivation.

4 Non-verbal communication in action

You may think that facial expressions – smiles, laughs, frowns – convey the way the speaker feels at that moment. You are indeed *partly* in control of feelings – or you can be, with practice. You may not be able to control your innermost emotions, but you are able to partly control the way you exhibit them; an important part of behaviour in working life.

Non-verbal communication includes several other features, such as gesture, proximity and eye contact. You will briefly examine each in turn in a moment.

Activity 4 Introducing non-verbal communication

Allow about 15 minutes

Watch the TED talk [‘Your body language may shape who you are’](#), in which Amy Cuddy explores the importance of non-verbal communication. Watch from 1 minute up until 3 minutes 27 seconds. As you watch, look out for:

1. Research examples that explain how long it takes for reasonably accurate first impressions to form?
2. How does the speaker use her hands and gestures in her talk? How much does it help or hinder her communication?

Discussion

1. Research suggests that it took between 1 second in one study (based on appearance) and 30 seconds in another (based on interactions with the sound turned down) for people to make rapid judgements or impressions that were fairly reliable.
2. She uses her hands to accentuate the rhythm of her speech and give extra emphasis to some words with more vigorous movements. There were also moments when she pointed inwardly to herself, indicating ‘me/I’ or reached outwardly to ‘you’, the audience. These inward/outward gestures enhanced her communication and are worth thinking about for your own use with groups.

In fact, evidence suggests that you can’t entirely hide your innermost emotions: our faces leak information (Yan et al., 2013). The following video clip explains how numerous micro-expressions can involuntarily flicker across your face in 1/25th of a second.

Video content is not available in this format.



5 Gestures

Gestures, as you have just seen in the TED talk example in Activity 4, are actions made with the head or the hands.



Figure 3 Heads, hands and eyes can convey a great deal.

Activity 5 What do your head or hands say?

Allow about 15 minutes

Observe a number of face-to-face conversations between two people without being overly intrusive. Considering the shifting roles of speaker and listener, who mainly uses head gestures and who mainly uses hand gestures?

Discussion

Hand gestures are normally reserved for the speaker. The listener is normally restricted to a head gesture, such as nodding, which is important since it is able to signal to the speaker that the listener is understanding what is being said. Nodding is a sign of active listening, and it provides encouragement to the speaker and is important for the success of an interaction.

The topic of hand gestures is too large to discuss here. However, we can say that they can be either helpful for emphasis or, in contrast, overused and a distraction. Sometimes – as in the case of pointing at someone – they can even be seen as overbearing.

6 Proximity

Proximity concerns the distance people stand (or indeed sit) from each other in given situations. Anthropologist Edward Hall introduced the concept in 1969; he recognised four basic degrees of intimate, personal, social and public space.

Activity 6 What is your personal space limit?

Allow about 10 minutes

Watch up until 2 minutes 45 seconds of the following video in which a comedian tests Hall's four degrees of space with members of the public. This clip is not a scientific experiment but its purpose is to stimulate you to reflect on the following question: in a sport or fitness workplace, might proximity considerations be different in any way – if so, how?

View at: [youtube:sgJ24hknbHs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sgJ24hknbHs)



Discussion

While a coach or instructor whose proximity was too distant might be perceived as uncaring, at the other end of the scale legitimate touching and manipulation of adult athletes into the appropriate position might be appropriate if there is consent (Kerr et al, 2015). For example, it would be common practice to ask 'is it OK if I move you into position?' or similar.

The following information on the NSPCC website offers guidelines for [how physical contact between adults and children in sport can take place appropriately and safely](#).

7 Eye contact

The role of eye contact (its presence or absence) in face-to-face interaction is crucial. Eye contact during a neutral conversation lasts just a couple of seconds at a time.

Eye contact behaviour varies slightly in groups. If you are addressing a meeting, or coaching a team, eye contact can be vital for imparting a sense of inclusion, and also for holding attention. The speaker often ensures that everybody receives a share of the gaze.

Experienced coaches will know that prolonged eye contact in certain group situations can fulfil other functions, such as giving specific emphasis to part of a group.

You will have an opportunity to apply your initial learning to the communication exchanges in Chris Hoy's motor racing pit stop video at the start of Session 2, delving a bit deeper into what was said in speech and non-verbal communication. Non-verbal communication is a form of feedback between those in a conversation and therefore interpreted by people and thus they respond accordingly. The following observation is from an Open University student:

I find Skype really difficult as I find the conversation cues difficult to read because there is no eye contact – in fact, I would far rather use face-to-face or phone.

8 This session's quiz

Check what you've learned this session by taking the end-of-session quiz.

[Session 1 practice quiz](#)

Open the quiz in a new window or tab then come back here when you've finished.

9 Summary

The main learning points from this first session are:

- Communication often serves two purposes: conveying information and/or an interpersonal function. The interpersonal function relates to developing confidence, trust, rapport or alternatively more negative signals towards others.
- Phatic talk openings to dialogue are important in establishing goodwill, collaboration and cohesion between people.
- Communication involves not only the words you use, but also the accompanying paralinguistic features such as pace, volume, rhythm and intonation of speech, all of which add to meaning.
- Non-verbal communication features include gestures, proximity and eye contact that contribute to effective communication.
- Hand gestures are often used by speakers to accentuate the rhythm of their speech and give emphasis to certain words. They can also be used to point inwardly to magnify the first person (i.e. 'me', 'I', or 'personally') or outwardly to those listening (i.e. 'you').
- Head gestures are often used by listeners in a dialogue to show they are listening.
- You can partly control the feelings you exhibit but hiding your innermost emotions can be hard: our faces leak information as numerous micro-expressions involuntarily flicker across our face.

In the next session, you will explore how to get your message across effectively with particular reference to how your written messages can have most impact. Communication is also about the impressions you give to others when interacting with them: how does the persona you convey have an influence on your communication?

You can now go to [Session 2](#).

References

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Acknowledgements

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Audio-visual

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