
Speak So Others Listen

There are those who command attention when speaking and others who barely get noticed. If you feel you're in the latter category, take heart! Communication skills are just that - *skills*. They are teachable, learnable behaviors. With a little practice, you can improve your interpersonal communication. Start by focusing on these areas:

30-Second Rule. You have thirty seconds or less to make a first impression. The clock starts ticking the moment someone encounters you. That could be your voice-mail message, noticing you in a waiting room, or overhearing you on a cell phone. Whatever happens during that time sets the groundwork for future interactions. Think about what message you broadcast about yourself on a consistent basis. Appearing friendly, open, and approachable sets the stage for others to listen to what you have to say at that moment and in the future.

Incorporate Names. The most important thing you can ever say to a person is his or her name. As soon as you are introduced, shake hands, make eye contact, and repeat the name immediately. Refer to people as they have introduced themselves. Unless they've offered up a nickname, do not take it upon yourself to change "David" to "Dave." If it's a difficult name, repeat it until you get it right. Then, throughout the conversation, and in all future conversations, use the person's name. Not only does it show respect, it naturally makes people perk up and listen, since the message is intentionally being aimed at them.

Own Your Message. The way you phrase your message has a lot to do with how people respond. Owning your message means saying, "I" when speaking about your feelings or opinions instead of placing responsibility on others. For example, you might say, "I am unhappy about this situation, and I have some suggestions," instead of, "You are making me unhappy, and you better do something about it."

Show Interest in Others. Who do we listen to? Those who listen to us! The best communicators know that when you take an interest in others by asking questions and remembering important details in their stories, you create a natural bond. Keep your conversations balanced. If you're doing most of the talking, then you're not allowing others to shine. The way to be commanding is not to dominate, but rather reciprocate the gift of listening.

Use Silence. That's right! Don't be afraid to pause and breathe. Listeners need time to reflect on what you're saying. Just like we need "white space" and punctuation on the written page, we need pauses when we speak. Talking non-stop is a huge turnoff. Having the confidence to pause for a few seconds in between sentences commands attention rather than diverts it.

Note: You have our permission to print and pass along to others.

***Susan Fee** is a professional clinical counselor, speaker, coach, and author. She owns a thriving freelance writing business and speaks to organizations nation-wide. Her clients included companies like Disney, United Airlines, and Motorola. She continues to explore new and diverse ways to use her talents, and encourages her clients to do the same.*