Verbal Communication and Symbols

When we think of communication – the big, broad concept of communication – most of the time we are thinking about the verbal aspect of communication or what comes out of our mouth when we speak! Each time we say a word we are using symbols. Words are made up of letters which we know are symbols. When we combine the letters together we get a word and that word is also a symbol in that it represents a certain meaning for us. As we interpret the word we ascribe meaning to the word – we hear the word “teacher” and we interpret that to mean “a person who instructs” or we hear the word “school” and we interpret it to mean “a place to learn.”

Each letter or combination of letters is completely arbitrary – they are not connected to what they represent. You are using a computer to access this file. You know what “computer” means when you hear the term. Let’s pretend that you and your spouse refer to the computer as “The Big C” in front of the kids so they don’t know what you are talking about. You could just as easily call the computer “Fred” or “?>!@#$<” as long as you and your spouse both understood you were referring to the computer. Symbols are completely arbitrary until meaning is ascribed to a combination of letters by people.

Symbols are ambiguous which means their meanings aren’t clear cut or fixed. This is why language is so easily misunderstood between people. The word gay is an excellent example. Does gay mean happy or homosexual or both? It depends on who is saying the word, who is hearing the word, and what the context of the conversation is about.

Symbols are abstract which means they are not concrete or tangible. Symbols stand for something but they are not the actual object itself. For example, some holidays have certain symbols attached to them. Valentine’s Day is represented by a heart but the heart is just a shape. The abstract principle we associate with the heart is love which is a feeling that comes from inside us toward another person. Love isn’t tangible – you can’t touch “love.” It is only something you can feel! But, when we see a heart or hear the word love, we know what instantly what it means.

We use symbols define experiences, people, relationships, feelings, and thoughts. We may say something is hot which means that the temperature of the item might burn you if you touch it. We can use the same term “hot” to describe a person but the definition of a “hot” person is one who is sexy! Same word yet two completely different definitions! Totalizing is when we use a single label to represent an entire person. If we see a person and label them “Hot” we are really limiting that person. We don’t see that the sexy person might also be smart, intelligent, a lover of the outdoors, an avid hunter and any number of other more important defining characteristics!

We use symbols to evaluate all the time. Symbols are value laden. Every time we label something or somebody, we are engaging in a value judgment about the item or person. Think about how many time we say something is “bad” or “good” – that is using a symbol as a value judgment to evaluate the item! Loaded language is using words to deliberately slant the interpretation of the communication. For instance, by saying “bleeding heart liberal” I am loading the term “liberal” so that you will interpret it as
a person who supports any social justice cause. Likewise, “Christian Right Wing” is loading the term “Christian” to mean a Christian that is conservative and Republican.

Because of the amount of loaded language that is in our normal dialogue, we also used politically correct phrasing – or we make our language “p.c.” To make language politically correct means that we try to be as neutral as possible in our conversation. So instead of using loaded language like “queerer than a two dollar bill” or “flaming queen” to reference someone who likes people of the same gender, we just say “gay” or “lesbian” to be politically correct. By being P.C. we are avoiding the harmful effects of loaded language – the hurtful effects of language!

**Communication and Rules**

Verbal communication is guided by all sorts of rules. When we were small children learning to interact with our parents we were taught communication rules such as not to interrupt when others are speaking and to listen to our elders. As we grow up, we learn that certain types of communication are appropriate in certain situations. We learn what we can say to whom, who we should/shouldn’t talk to and what we should talk to them about.

**Regulative rules** specify when, how, where, and with whom to talk about certain things. In my family it was never considered appropriate to say the “F” word – the word was taboo - but when I went to college that four-letter expletive was as common as “crap” was in my family! For the first few months, the “F” word seemed harsh to my ears but as I grew used to hearing it, I even used it a few times. Today, I may use the term to express frustration in private but I wouldn’t dream of using it in a professional setting. I have a colleague who got fired for telling our boss to “F-off.” It is important to learn what is appropriate to say in public and what to say in private.

**Constitutive rules** define what communication means by telling us how to count certain kinds of communication. We know that applause is wonderful to hear if you are on stage if you have been entertaining an audience but applause accompanied by fingers pointing at you may not feel good if you have just fallen on a patch of ice. For some people, a loving gesture might be a kiss but for someone else it might mean holding hands. Every time we interact with someone new we have to figure out the constitutive rules as we communicate with them.

**Punctuation** is the mental mark of the beginnings and endings of particular interactions. For instance, if we attend a wedding service we know that when the wedding march begins, the bridal party will enter and we should be quiet during the service. When we see the kiss, we know that the service is over. Every time we answer the phone – we say “Hello?” to signal to the other person to start the conversation and we say “Goodbye” to signal the end of the conversation – we are engaging in the punctuation rules of verbal conversation. Like any of the other communication rules, we learn punctuation rules as we grow up. We may always greet our parents with a hug/kiss in the morning and we may end the day the same way when we say “Good night.”
Guidelines for Improving Communication

1. **Practice facework**: Facework is controlling the face that you present to others. This means that you know the rules of communication for a variety of situations and you behave accordingly. You should always err on the side of being conservative in any type of new social circle and especially in a work environment. Even if you are checking groceries at Walmart or working the drive through at McDonalds, you should be conscious of the face you are wearing for the public. Remember: People make judgments in the first 30 seconds they meet you about your entire character so always put your best face forward!

2. **Engage in dual perspective**: Dual perspective is recognizing another person’s point of view and acknowledging it as you communicate with them. You should always take the other person’s point of view into account in your communication which means you are conscious of the person’s background, age, gender, and ethnicity in the communication. If it is someone new you are interacting with, again, err on the side of conservativism in your communication until you know the person better. A great tactic to use when you argue with someone is to repeat the other’s perspective back to them. By outwardly saying it, you are acknowledging the other’s viewpoint and you make them feel valued – even if you don’t agree with what they are saying. If you and a friend are arguing about last night’s game, you might say “I understand that you think the forward on the Indian Hills basketball team is the best that we've ever had but I really think the guy who made the most points is the better player.” This is a basic communication lesson that is commonly shown on talk shows like Oprah and Dr. Phil – and it works because you are acknowledging the others viewpoint which means that the other person can’t claim you weren’t listening to them!

3. **Own your feelings and thoughts**: Nobody can make you feel anything or do anything. You are the only one who can feel or do anything in your life! But, when we communicate with others it is very common for us to place the blame for our feelings and our actions on the others in our life. Too often we say “you made me mad” when we should really say “I am mad.” By owning our feelings and thoughts we are not placing blame on another. Using I-language is empowering and much harder to argue with than if we play the blame game and use “you” language.

4. **Respect what others say about their feelings and ideas**: We need to let others speak for themselves. A common communication problem is when we talk for others. As a college instructor I get all sorts of calls from parents who are trying to solve their children’s problems – a financial aid issue or even registering for a class. The worst is a discussion about their child’s grade. They always get upset when I can’t talk and won’t talk to them about it – as instructors, we can’t because most college students are legal adults and there are privacy laws in place to protect student’s rights. We call these parents “helicopter parents” because they seem to be hovering over their children when the child isn’t legally a child anymore and should be solving his or her own problems. It is very important for people to learn to solve their own issues and to stand up for their own opinions but they can’t do that if others are always speaking for them. Now, there are times when it is necessary for a person to have an advocate who can be a voice for someone else – if it’s medically necessary due to physical impairment or mental disorder is one example of when it might be necessary to speak for someone else. This is why we have living wills so the voice of the patient is “heard.”
We also need to be aware that we may not truly know how another feels. Mind reading is a dangerous presumption that we should avoid. It is much more productive to listen openly rather than assume you know the truth! Listening and letting others have a voice is about respecting the other person and valuing their feelings, thoughts, and opinions.

5. Strive for accuracy and clarity: Try to use concrete, specific language when you communicate as this will reduce down the ambiguity and abstractness of language. I was dating a guy in high school who said to me “I think we should see more of each other.” What does that mean? Does that mean he wanted to go out on more dates, move in together, attend the same college, or see me naked? The language isn’t really clear! What he meant was that we should be “exclusive” and “date nobody else” – in fact he was getting ready to give me a promise ring at the time. Needless to say, I wasn’t anywhere near as committed to the relationship as he was which made me say, “I think we should see less of each other” and that pretty much ended that relationship for the time being. Many years later we reconnected and are great friends today – in fact, we can now joke about what “I think we should see more of each other” means as it refers to an event in our past!

We also need to qualify our language which means that we should avoid over generalizing our language. One way we over generalize is when we use static evaluations to refer to people, places or events. Static evaluations drive me crazy because they are statements that suggest that something is frozen in time – that it never changes. It is a common complaint in our community that there is “never anything to do.” I know this isn’t true because there is always an event at Indian Hills Community College going on – we are booked solid for the entire year with lots of free public events for people to attend. Kids are frequent users of static evaluations too. My children love to say “Our house is boring – there is NOTHING to do.” Yeah, right! Of course they don’t like to be reminded of the books we have to read, the video games they can play, the bikes they can ride or the cleaning/laundry they could help with. They don’t like it when I respond that I am never bored – there is always something to do! Instead of practicing static evaluations when we speak, we should strive for using indexing because this is more accurate communication. Indexing is when you tie a description to the evaluation or statement. Instead of saying there is “never anything to do,” say “There isn’t anything I am interested in participating in this evening.”