Communication Strategies

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Expressing Yourself Effectively

Speaking like a STAR

You can ensure any message is clear, complete, correct, and concise, with the STAR acronym.

This module will explore the STAR acronym in conjunction with the six roots of open questions (Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?), which will be explored in more detail later on in the workshop.

S = Situation

First, state what the situation is. Try to make this no longer than one sentence. If you are having trouble, ask yourself, "Where?", "Who?", and, "When?". This will provide a base for message so it can be clear and concise.
Example: "On Tuesday, I was in a director's meeting at the main plant."

T = Task

Next, briefly state what your task was. Again, this should be no longer than one sentence. Use the question, "What?" to frame your sentence, and add the "Why?" if appropriate.
Example: "I was asked to present last year's sales figures to the group."

A = Action

Now, state what you did to resolve the problem in one sentence. Use the question, "How?" to frame this part of the statement. The Action part will provide a solid description and state the precise actions that will resolve any issues.
Example: "I pulled out my laptop, fired up PowerPoint, and presented my slide show."

R = Result

Last, state what the result was. This will often use a combination of the six roots. Again, a precise short description of the results that come about from your previous steps will finish on a strong definite note.
Example: "Everyone was wowed by my prep work, and by our great figures!"

Summary

Let's look at a complete example using STAR. Let's say you're out with friends on the weekend. Someone asks you what the highlight of your week at work was. As it happens, you had a great week, and there is a lot to talk about. You use STAR to focus your answer so you don't bore your friends, and so that you send a clear message.

You respond: "On Tuesday, I was in a director's meeting at the main plant. I was asked to present last year's sales figures to the group. I pulled out my laptop, fired up PowerPoint, and presented my slide show. Everyone was wowed by my prep work, and by our great figures!"

This format can be compressed for quick conversations, or expanded for lengthy presentations. We encourage you to try framing statements with STAR, and see how much more confident you feel when communicating.

Asking Good Questions

Open Questions
We discussed open questions a bit when exploring the STAR model earlier. Open questions get their name because the response is open-ended; the answerer has a wide range of options to choose from when answering it.

Open questions use one of six words as a root:
- Who?

- What?

- Where?

- When?

- Why?

- How?

Open questions are like going fishing with a net – you never know what you're going to get! Open questions are great conversation starters, fact finders, and communication enhancers. Use them whenever possible.

Closed Questions

Closed questions are the opposite of open questions; their very structure limits the answer to yes or no, or a specific piece of information. Some examples include:

- Do you like chocolate?

- Were you born in December?

- Is it five o'clock yet?

Although closed questions tend to shut down communication, they can be useful if you are searching for a particular piece of information, or winding a conversation down.
If you use a closed question and it shuts down the conversation, simply use an open-ended question to get things started again. Here is an example:

- Do you like the Flaming Ducks hockey team?

- Yes.

- Who is your favorite player?

Probing Questions

In addition to the basic open and closed questions, there is also a toolbox of probing questions that we can use. These questions can be open or closed, but each type serves a specific purpose.

CLARIFICATION
By probing for clarification, you invite the other person to share more information so that you can fully understand their message. Clarification questions often look like this:
- "Please tell me more about…"

- "What did you mean by…"

- "What does … look like?" (Any of the five senses can be used here)

COMPLETENESS AND CORRECTNESS
These types of questions can help you ensure you have the full, true story. Having all the facts, in turn, can protect you from assuming and jumping to conclusions – two fatal barriers to communication.

Some examples of these questions include:
- "What else happened after that?"

- "Did that end the …"

DETERMINING RELEVANCE
This category will help you determine how or if a particular point is related to the conversation at hand. It can also help you get the speaker back on track from a tangent.
Some good ways to frame relevance questions are:
- "How is that like…"

- "How does that relate to…"

DRILLING DOWN
Use these types of questions to nail down vague statements. Useful helpers include:
- "Describe…"

- "What do you mean by…?"

- "Could you please give an example?"

SUMMARIZING
These questions are framed more like a statement. They pull together all the relevant points. They can be used to confirm to the listener that you heard what was said, and to give them an opportunity to correct any misunderstandings.

Example: "So you picked out a dress, had to get it fitted three times, and missed the wedding in the end?"

Be careful not to avoid repeating the speaker's words back to them like a parrot. Remember, paraphrasing means repeating what you think the speaker said in your own words.

Further Study

To learn more about communication, consider our in-person offerings such as, Communication Style: Creating Positive Relationships and Results, Communications, Increasing Your Influence, Negotiating Effectively, and People From Pluto: Effective Communication Strategies. Further trainings to develop Interpersonal Excellence will be shared here in the Leadership Café, on all of the competencies found in our Competency Guide. Subscribe now to The Learning Lab, an online platform featuring Business Skills & Productivity, Leadership Development, and Office 365, powered by Skillsoft Percipio and customized for UW learners.