

KNW-148

COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY 1

Modified from original Waller County ARES training article.

During an emergency, it is especially challenging and important to communicate accurate information clearly to the target audience. Disaster victims generally look for someone who can communicate valuable guidance, provide leadership, and lead them in problem solving. When you successfully fill that role, you act to reassure victims that their government and private organizations are working toward community recovery.

Finely tuned communication skills are also important tools during the emergency planning phase when educating the public about preparedness.

It is easy to take communicating for granted because it is a daily activity. How much thought have you given to communication? Are you aware that:

- The average worker spends 50 percent of his or her time communicating?
- Business success is 85 percent dependent on effective communication and interpersonal skills?
- Forty-five percent of time spent communicating is listening?
- Writing represents nine percent of communication time?
- One-fourth of all workplace mistakes are the result of poor communication?
- A remarkable 75 percent of communication is nonverbal?

We can examine the basic components of communication: sending and receiving messages. Sending and receiving are not simple actions. In fact, how you deliver information and how you listen to others can dramatically alter how others respond to your message. Although communication is complex, it can be analyzed and refined.

Immediately before, during, and immediately after an emergency, emergency and response personnel must respond quickly. Time to communicate is limited, and often a specific message that must result in practical action must be relayed to a large group. A very simple model that sends the message efficiently and elicits the desired response will be most useful.

As speakers, we sometimes focus exclusively on the information that we want to relay. But your listener or reader may understand your message, understand only a portion of your message, or miss your point entirely even though you transmitted the information accurately by your standard. It is not enough merely to deliver a message. The message must be received for communication to be successful.

When you focus only on yourself, you often forget to listen, and as a result, the chances for successful communication are poor. Listening is the basis of effective communication and entails much more than just hearing sound.

Think about the last time you noticed someone obviously not paying attention when you were trying to communicate. What specific behaviors did the person exhibit that led you to believe that he or she was not paying attention to you? What impact did the person's behavior have on you?

Perhaps you felt alarm that your important message was not getting through properly, or frustrated that your audience was not "getting it." You may have been offended by your listener's inattention or felt an urge to repeat your message.

When you listen empathically, you don't just hear words. You hear thoughts, beliefs and feelings. Empathic listening is highly active and requires hard work. Following the steps below will help you to improve your listening skills.

The first step is to decide to listen and concentrate on the speaker.

Then, use your imagination and enter the speaker's situation. Concentrate and try to imagine his or her frame of reference and point of view.

Observe the speaker's vocal inflection, enthusiasm or lack of it, and style of delivery. These are essential components of the message. If you are speaking face-to-face, pay attention to the speaker's facial expressions and other nonverbal cues for more insight into the message.

Listen without interruption. Note key phrases or use word associations to remember the speaker's content.

Use paraphrasing or clarifying questions to confirm that you received the intended message. Check your perceptions of how the speaker is feeling to put the text of the message in emotional context.

Finally, provide feedback to the speaker.

Roadblocks to effective listening can be external or internal. External roadblocks (e.g., noise, an uncomfortable temperature or seating, or an inappropriate location) or internal. Try to be aware of external roadblocks and offset them if possible.

Internal roadblocks include a variety of conditions or reactions within the speaker or audience, such as:

- Emotional interference.
- Defensiveness.
- Hearing only facts and not feelings.
- Not seeking clarification.
- Hearing what is expected instead of what is said.
- Stereotyping.
- The halo effect (i.e., the tendency for something to be influenced by a loosely associated factor)
- Automatic dismissal (e.g., "We've never done it that way before.")
- Resistance to change.

There are numerous variables involved in the communication process. Some of these variables are described below.

- Differences between the sender and receiver affect the odds of successful communication.
 - **Attitudes:** How different are the attitudes between the sender and the receiver?
 - **Information levels:** Is the sender or receiver significantly more informed than the other?
 - **Communication skills:** The greater the difference in the sender's and the receiver's communication skills, the less likely it is that communication will be successful
 - **Social systems:** provide a context or background for interpreting messages. If the sender and receiver do not share a similar social system, successful communication is more of a challenge.
 - **Sensory channel:** The five senses (i.e., seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling) are the basic channels of communication. Using more channels increases the chance that communication will be

successful. Does the person attending a meeting via a conference call have the same communication advantages as on-site attendees?

- Differences in communication styles often create an extra challenge. General behavior patterns of our personalities form our personal communication styles. These patterns can be productive, nonproductive, or even counterproductive, and the interplay of these styles affects the communication's effectiveness.

Imagine a relatively shy gentleman, in a public place, who needs to locate ice for an injured wrist. Would it be more challenging for him to communicate his need to four boisterous people playing video games or to someone quietly reading a book to a child? While he may be successful with either group, the difference in communication styles will pose more of a problem with the first group.

- Differences in previous experiences create a filter through which we hear the world. Inference, judgment, and generalization can become as significant as facts. The statement "There is a dog in the room" will be heard differently by someone who has been bitten than by someone with a well-loved pet.

In an emergency, people depend on information for physical and emotional comfort. To be effective, emergency communications must be timely, accurate, and clearly stated.

Emergency vs. Day-to-Day Communication

Whenever we communicate, we must consider the differences between emergency and day-to-day communications.

Emergency information is important

Studies show that during an emergency, information is as critically important to people as food or water. Not only can accurate information mean the difference between life and death, it can provide reassurance that response and recovery are truly underway.

Timeliness is essential

If official answers are not available, rumor and speculation quickly fill the information vacuum. Then, not only must you disseminate correct information, but you also need to counter the misinformation that circulated.

Make sure your message is clear. When communicating in an emergency, you should always:

- Present the information in sequence; present the reason for the message, the supporting information, and the conclusion.
- Avoid jargon, codes, and acronyms.
- Use common names for all personnel and facilities.
- Omit unnecessary details.
- Speak in sync with other related authorities.
- Keep messages consistent across various media.
- Word the message precisely, making every word count.

Next week we will continue on, discussing types of communication.