



## EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Oftentimes when we think about effective communication, the first quality that springs to mind is speaking ability. However, several other characteristics play a part in effective communication – listening skills, tone of voice, body language, and ability to empathize.

### LISTENING

Good communication starts with the ability to listen. Effective listening means being present, keeping an open mind, and being respectful of others. The following suggestions are just a few ways to improve your listening skills:

- Focus on what is being said.
- Look directly at the person who is speaking.
- Let the speaker finish before you speak.
- Listen for the feelings behind the words and watch for nonverbal cues.
- Give the speaker your full attention – focus on what the speaker is saying, not on how you are going to respond.
- Be open to the speaker's message.
- Ask questions to clarify what you do not understand.
- If you are uncertain about whether you correctly understood the speaker, explain what you understood to the speaker (paraphrase) and ask the speaker if you have understood correctly.

### TOPE OF VOICE AND BODY LANGUAGE

More than half of all human communication is nonverbal. When talking with another person, be aware of your tone of voice, eye contact, and body language. If you feel harried or anxious when you speak, you may sound short or abrupt. If you are not feeling patient or well balanced, your tone of voice might sound condescending or angry. Your

gestures, such as hands and arms moving frenetically, may distract the listener from your intended message.

For listeners, a speaker's facial expression is often the key determinant of the meaning they give to a speaker's message. When you speak, your face communicates your attitudes, feelings, and emotions more clearly than any other part of your body. Eyes squinting or glaring, eyebrows furrowed, face flushed red, or a frowning mouth may communicate to the listener that he or she is at fault for your uncomfortable state. The listener may become insecure or defensive, making it likely that whatever you are trying to say is lost.

Listeners are more likely to judge your sincerity and credibility based on your nonverbal behavior and whether it is consistent with your words than on your words alone. If you are feeling anxious or upset, take a deep breath before you speak. Question yourself about your mood. Take an internal look at how you are feeling and why. This will give you a "mental time out" – enough time to reframe what you want to say and how you are going to say it, taking into consideration to whom you are speaking. Organize your thoughts so you can explain why you are upset.

### EMPATHY

Empathy is the ability to connect with another person and to share in another person's emotions or feelings. As lawyers we pride ourselves as wordsmiths, but at times, our emotion, enthusiasm, and passion may cause us to forget to consider our audience. Effective communicators recognize that differences in cultures, personality, status, education, or perception may become stumbling blocks to communication. Valuing differences and keeping them in mind can help people communicate more effectively.

*Shari R. Gregory, MSW, JD*  
OAAP Attorney Counselor



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Issue No. 50

JUNE 2003

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## **TIPS FOR IMPROVING COMMUNICATION**

1. Give listeners cues to tune you in – address them directly, pointedly, and maintain eye contact.
2. Remember nonverbal cues.
3. Avoid responding immediately to emotionally charged words.
4. If you are feeling emotionally charged, give yourself a mental time out before responding.
5. Consider the person you are talking with as well as the situation.