

The Dynamics of the Verbal and Non-verbal Communication Process in Professional Rapports

Cristina Mihaela Zamfir

“Ovidius” University of Constanta, Faculty of Letters, Romania

cristina_m_zamfir@yahoo.com

Abstract

The article is designed with two purposes in mind. First, it takes us through the essential aspects of communicating assertively by exploring the verbal and nonverbal communication patterns. Second, it aims to describe the art of building trust-based relationships through questioning and listening techniques.

The results emphasize that the best proof of the benefits of managing strong trust-based relationships lies in our own experience. In this respect, trust becomes a bilateral affair, a precondition for effective trade talks, job-related conversations with superiors, or signing successful contracts.

Key words: channels of communication, listening, questioning, trust-based relationships

J.E.L. classification: Z13

1. Introduction

The success of the communication process highly depends on keeping our messages as clear and concise as possible, in other words, having the emotional intelligence to be alert to people’s responses, feelings, and manage them constructively to be able to control situations without experiencing stressful pressures.

As far as the verbal and non-verbal channels of communication are concerned, they are bound together and help the process of interpersonal communication be more effective and focused. Strong trust-based rapports are profitable for speaker and hearer alike in order to reach integrative agreements.

To this end, practical examples of carefully worded/well crafted questions will be provided in the next sections to let the interlocutors know we are listening and understand their position.

Thus, the focus will be on how verbal and non-verbal communication operates; if we do not want our message to be distorted, we should keep these two channels of communication under constant observation.

2. Theoretical background

All forms of communication (building rapport with colleagues, holding interviews or staff appraisals, persuading, giving feedback, presentations, designing official documents, writing e-mails, letters or reports) are the end products of a complex process based on critical thinking.

The Finnish academic Osmo Wiio (1978) warns against the euphoria of believing that we have got the message right when, instead, we ignore at our peril the weakness in understanding others’ messages correctly. He forcefully points to the idea that our perception becomes incredibly sloppy in the way that we are too confident when we take communication for granted and seem to disobey some basic rules:

- 1) If communication can fail, it will.
- 2) If a message can be understood in different ways, it will be understood in just that way which does the most harm.
- 3) There is always somebody who knows better than you what you meant by your message.

- 4) The more communication there is, the more difficult it is for communication to succeed.
(Wiio, 1978 quoted in Pardey, 2007, p. 54)

Given that communication is an essential and dynamic process in our daily lives, it is governed by 5 main elements whose aim is to generate a desired outcome:

- ▶ The sender – the person encoding the message
- ▶ The message – what is being transmitted by various media
- ▶ The receiver – the person decoding the message
- ▶ The feedback – the receiver's response to the message
- ▶ The channel – the medium through which the message is transferred from the sender to the receiver.

The understanding of communication as the *emotional glue* which keeps people united in both personal and professional relationships rests upon some solid, guiding principles. The process can display the following characteristics:

- ◆ Dynamic – permanently undergoing change;
 - ◆ Continuous – after hanging up the phone, we are delivering the message that the discussion has got to the point where nothing more can be said;
 - ◆ Circular – communication has to be a two-way process. We take in the factual information, listen effectively and respond cognitively and emotionally;
 - ◆ Irreversible – we cannot change something back (we cannot 'unsay' words);
 - ◆ Complex – we cannot always be sure that our communication hits the mark given the multitude of meanings assigned to words in general. This stems from our backgrounds, education and experience.
- An example of workplace communication would be:

A manager (*sender*) approaches his subordinate (*receiver*) at a café meeting on the corridor and asks:
Have you seen my new office?

The employee replies:

No, sir. All ready to start working, I'm sure.

At first sight, this very simple example is a conversation about a person's office, but in fact it is far more profound. The manager's intention is to establish a friendly and relaxed atmosphere. The *real message* is:

You don't have to be tense. I'm opening up to you.

and the subordinate has replied to this by providing *feedback*:

That's great. I look forward to sharing this moment with you.

The manager's question denotes a way of creating a relationship with his employee as part of strengthening professional rapport.

Building our assertiveness by communicating clearly and articulately has a positive effect in overcoming any problems which might arise from non-assertive behavioural tendency. Such approach to integrating specific skills like questioning, listening, giving feedback, working with emotions, expressing yourself assertively, negotiating effectively, overcoming barriers or rolling with resistance into the process of building constructive and relaxed conversations is strongly advocated by Mills (2000), Robbins (2005), Barker (2006), Pardey (2007), Bonham-Carter (2013). In their view, the benefits of controlling our behaviour, emotions and thoughts as well as the ability to ask questions are instrumental to an effective communication.

3. Research methodology

This research has used two clear directions with the aim of making business communicators aware of the importance of consistency and openness to dialogue which have an impact on interpersonal communication, in the broad sense of the word. The emphasis was placed on both the verbal and non-verbal channels of communication and the questioning/listening techniques as primary communication skills.

The research methodology concentrated on showing and explaining verbal and non-verbal cues for a better understanding of the communicative and linguistic aspects of business interactions, on the one hand, and on carrying out a dynamic analysis of the different types of questions and the active listening skills used in face-to-face exchanges, on the other.

In this case, the objectives of the paper have been to describe the multi-layered nature of non-verbal communication, to provide examples of emphatic language in contrast to neutral speech, and enlarge upon questioning styles coupled with the function of giving feedback or reflecting back.

In the workplace, research has shown that most activities are bipolar: either personal-casual (behaving/talking informally with/to a colleague) or social-consultative (in formal dialogues with someone having a higher position or rank).

Therefore, priority is given to communicating assertively, listening to others with respect and honesty, and practising specific techniques which account for the desired results.

4. Findings

The results of the paper can be structured around two communication axes, i.e. the essential aspects of verbal (speech, tone of voice and emphasis)/non-verbal (body language cues) communication patterns and the process of building constructive conversations by exploring both questioning and listening techniques.

4.1. Channels of communication: verbal and non-verbal

Finding out *how* others see us will allow us to modify the signals we send out, both verbally and non-verbally. In Pardey’s (2007) words, “*How* you communicate with people affects the way that the message is received and understood. The most common medium - or channel - of communication is through speech, but this is a very complex channel and often combined with others” (Pardey, 2007, p. 57).

In normal conversation, the message is not only in the words, but also in:

- the speaker’s voice (choosing and speaking the right words)
- his face (the *eye contact* he made with the receiver)
- his body (the *posture* and proximity to the receiver)

In my opinion, we cannot delimit these two channels when having a face-to-face conversation with someone. To ensure that it ends positively, verbal communication puts forward a combination of elements where the emphasis placed on different words is the deciding factor. At the same time, non-verbal communication has a multi-layered nature in which the concept of body language can be decomposed into the following items: posture, proximity, hand gestures, face expression, eye contact.

The choice of clear and understandable words in conversation, on the one hand, and the use of technical language or jargon, on the other hand, can make a significant difference between informal and formal communication. A marketing director might tell his production workers that he *gives* them *more control* to build up sales models, but he wouldn’t stand up in a conference room full of business delegates and use these words. Instead, he is more likely to convey a professional message like:

e.g. Following a serious *market research*, my team decided to *empower the production line* to design sales *forecast* models so that we know our customers’ preferences and *target* these products.

Tone of voice and emphasis count a great deal when we care about how we sound (happy or disappointed) while stressing different words in the same sentence:

1. *I* thought you could arrive at your goal this month by planning well. (supportive statement; using the first person pronoun *I* as emphatic word)
2. I thought you could arrive at your goal *this month* by planning well. (being up in arms about someone’s performance)
3. I thought you could arrive at your goal this month by planning *well*. (using the adverb *well* as emphatic word; sounding disappointed).

It is the powerful effect of our voice to support an opinion that makes our argument strong and more emphatic. In contrast to neutral speech, where the key words that are stressed are generally nouns and verbs, in emphatic language pronouns and determiners are stressed if we wish to emphasize a particular point. The words stressed indicate the speaker’s intention.

Similarly, expression and eye contact can lift the barriers to effective communication and hence, reduce the risk of being cut off from contact with the outside world. The benefit to people who create an opportunity to make eye contact far outweighs this risk.

A person’s future career or position in an organization depends, sooner or later, on the relationship he/she establishes with someone from the senior management team. This type of relationship can reveal either dependency or vulnerability, or both of them. The unwanted consequences are that this kind of rapport tends to become more *emotional* rather than rational and that a more *directive* style of leading/managing slowly but surely prevents the employees from experiencing problems on their own.

◆ A *dependent* subordinate has limited access to decision-making until consulting his/her manager first, reduced personal autonomy, and an almost inexistent independence of mind.

◆ A *vulnerable* subordinate loses self-esteem, is likely to suffer (verbal) abuse from his superior and is laid down with distrust due to a lowered personal defence mechanism. However frightening it may sound, people don’t have to push the panic button and concede defeat. Since there are so many strategies and techniques at hand, they would better pull together the skills they need to be effective as organizational communicators.

4.2. The art of managing trust-based relationships through questioning and listening techniques

Strong trust-based rappings are profitable for speaker and hearer alike. As primary communication skills, questioning and listening techniques can help us gain mutual respect and be more confident in talking with our interlocutors.

Let us now take a look at the practical skills involved in interpersonal communication in order to overcome any problems which might arise from non-assertive behavioural tendency.

The results emphasize that standing up for ourselves and feeling confident by taking ownership of our words and thoughts involve following a reasoned approach to help us act and respond in a way that is conducive to our personal development. Priority is given to practising specific techniques for “changing our behaviour in situations where we have a tendency to act non-assertively” (Bonham-Carter, 2013, p. 1).

In this way, *questioning* serves as a springboard to broaden communication and make sure we have understood the message correctly. Mills (2000) argues that the power of questions not only clears out blockages and keeps the discussion flowing smoothly but also paces the interlocutor and persuades him to share our perspective even if he/she was reluctant to do it at the beginning: “Successful influencers use questions to plant ideas in the other party’s mind and then get him or her to nurture their ideas as if they were his or her own. [...] Most of us try to persuade others to accept our point of view with reasons, yet people are often highly resistant to this form of persuasion. Hence, successful negotiators use questions, rather than reasons, as their main persuasive tool” (Mills, 2000, pp. 190-191).

Two main questioning techniques used currently are *leading* and *rhetorical questions*. According to Pardey (2007), *leading* questions are “a hybrid of open and closed questions – they are open (because respondents can choose how they answer) but closed because they are based on an assumption about what has happened and so imply that only a certain type of answer is possible” (Pardey, 2007, p.71). They usually suggest what the respondent’s answer may be by overcoming his/her reluctance, or admitting to a possible failing.

e.g. - *You’ve taken part in several training seminars for the new network, yet still seem to have problems using it. Haven’t you found them very effective?* (the question causes the interlocutor to acknowledge his own weakness and admit to a possible failing. It is less critical than the more direct question: *Why didn’t you learn from the training seminars?* which would force the interlocutor on the defensive)

- *Were the seminars the usual waste of time?* (the question is too generalizing, judgemental, and implies that *all* training is not worth the time spent, which shows a complete lack of professionalism).

A simple exercise to help us persuade someone rather than obtain information from them is by asking *rhetorical* questions. Their effectiveness shows up in the way they encourage reflection and engage the listener’s mind (Mills, 2000; Pardey, 2007). They almost put the answer into the respondent’s mouth and influence the listener to accept “a narrowly predetermined conclusion” (Mills, 2000, p. 199):

e.g. *We all want a fair treatment, don’t we?*

You really felt proud of yourself, didn’t you?

Don’t you wish you could always be an inspirational leader?

Isn’t it a benefit to the company to have employees who are contributing to its profitability?

That’s not really the most careful way to raise the money, is it?

An accurate evaluation of verbal interaction is essential to negotiate from the best position possible (Mills, 2000; Chaney and Martin, 2007; Pardey, 2007). Business people who are mentally sharp know how to look behind the words using questioning and listening as their main weapon to emphasize the positives and win their interlocutors’ trust.

The paper reveals that the art of giving feedback or reflecting back is largely a function of assisting people to perform better. One can distinguish between the different types of feedback and acknowledge that *reflective listening* can be just as important as *reflecting content* and *feelings*.

The first type (*reflective listening*) is one of the best ways to prove that we have not only heard, but also understood the other person’s words. Unlike passive hearing, active listening is exercised through the techniques of questioning and reflecting. It *reflects* or *paraphrases* the content (the words) and feelings of the speaker.

The second type (*reflecting content*) is concise and briefly explains the speaker’s message. It also eliminates verbal scattering. As Mills (2000, p. 196) aptly puts it, “If you get too wordy, you can easily derail the speaker’s train of thought [...]. Don’t fall into the trap of simply parroting the other person’s words; reflecting is not parroting. Parroting stunts conversations, whereas reflecting encourages discussion. So don’t make the mistake of repeating the speaker’s exact words”. Making an effort to listen actively can be rendered by some useful phrases which reflect content:

- Showing interest: *Really?; That’s curious; Right/OK*
- Asking for details: *So what happened next? ; What did you do exactly?*
- Clarifying: *Are you saying...? ; Could you be more specific?*
- Summarizing: *So, you’re saying...; You mean...; It seems that ...; In other words...; It sounds like...; I guess...;*
- Repetition/Question tags: A) *We’ve introduced a 100% e-commerce operation. B) 100%? Have you?*

The third type (*reflecting feelings*) equally implies the listeners’ ability to see the problem from their interlocutors’ point of view. The emotional overtone during the discussions is often balanced with common phrases such as *I know how you feel, That must have been awful, Seems like you’re feeling unjust and frustrated* (showing empathy) to win them over. This reassures the speakers that we are listening and gains their friendship and confidence.

From my point of view, questioning styles largely depend on culture profile. While in some cultures, asking direct questions is no sign of offence, other cultures prefer to ask more polite questions, using vaguer terms which allow for more detailed answers.

Mill’s (2000) landmark statement on how self-persuasion works in meetings, negotiations, or sales deserves special attention: “With questions, you can control the issues you want to discuss – and also what you want to avoid. Using questions, you can set the mood and tone of a meeting, slow down or force the pace of a discussion, and bring a meeting back on track after losing direction” (Mills, 2000, pp. 190-191).

In agreement with Mills, Barker (2006) lays emphasis on the 3 main elements of the pattern-matching process of building rapport, i.e. verbal behaviour, vocal behaviour, and physical behaviour. According to Robbins (2005), creating the potential for improved communication can be achieved through a joint effort since communication cannot exist without the *transference* and *understanding* of meaning. His technique of questioning could be summarized as “providing clarification, ensuring understanding, and assuring the speaker that one is listening” (Robbins, 2005, p. 154).

5. Conclusions

Because most business interactions are based on keen observation, adaptability and patience, good coaches/sellers/negotiators must be careful to not mince their words, but to think before they speak and once they get into conversation, to do it in an agreeable, civil manner. They should constantly develop their active listening skills by learning how to reflect back (summarize or backtrack information) and reinforce understanding.

To prepare for a win-win approach, business professionals must adjust their questioning system accordingly. Communicating adequately is difficult when the business interests of the participants differ. Since the purposes of the interactions between people within the organization vary, so do the vocabulary, emotions and feedback that develop to achieve rapport.

The lesson to be learnt is that whatever strategy we adopt (questioning, observing, listening, reflecting back), we should always search for opportunities to ask quality questions and hence, encourage the other person to overcome whatever inhibitors.

6. References

- Barker, A., 2006. *Improve Your Communication Skills*. London: Kogan Page.
- Bonham-Carter, D., 2013. *Express Yourself: A Practical Guide to Assertiveness*. UK, London: Icon Books Ltd.
- Chaney, L.H. and Martin, S.J., 2007. *Intercultural Business Communication*. 4th Edition. New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Mills, H., 2000. *Artful Persuasion: How to Command Attention, Change Minds, and Influence People*. USA, New York: Amacom.
- Pardey, D., 2007. *Coaching*. Burlington, MA: Elsevier-Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Robbins, S.P., 2005. *Essentials of Organizational Behaviour*. 8th Edition. New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Wiio, O.A., 1978. *Wiio's lait - ja vähän muidenkin* (Wiio's laws - and some others). Espoo: Weilin + Göös.
- Zamfir, C.M., 2020. *Business at Work: Company Communication Patterns through a Linguistic Lens*. Bucharest: Universitara Publishing House.
- ****Longman Business English Dictionary* 2000. England: Pearson Education Limited.
- ****Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. 2015. Encyclopædia Britannica Online.