

Skills 360 – Improving your Communication Skills (Part 1): Clarifying

Discussion Questions

1. What do you usually say when you don't hear what someone has said?
2. Do you feel comfortable interrupting a speaker to ask for clarification?
3. When you are speaking, how do you prefer that people ask you for clarification or explanation?

Vocabulary

Miscommunication: failure to communicate clearly; "Miscommunication about expectations can cause arguments between clients and contractors."

Precisely: exactly or accurately; "Our new project management software can tell us precisely how many hours we've spent on each task."

To throw in: to include or add, informally; "If we agree to buy six of these machines, would you throw in a seventh at reduced cost?"

Implied: said, expressed, or suggested indirectly; "Harry said he'd go along with whatever we decide, but his implied message was that we don't really listen to him."

To arise: develop or start to happen, especially for problems or situations; "With a good crisis management plan, an organization can feel prepared to deal with whatever challenges arise."

"Have no fear": we say "have no fear" to mean "don't worry," especially because we have a solution for a problem or way of avoiding trouble; "If you think this new system looks complicated, have no fear; our video tutorials will teach you everything you need to know."

Minefield: a situation with many possible difficulties or problems; "Social media sites may find themselves in a legal minefield if they don't actively protect users' privacy."

Diplomatic: able to talk well with people in a way that doesn't upset them or make them angry; "A good facilitator can remain diplomatic even when meeting participants are upset or confrontational."

To catch: to hear or understand; "Sorry Dave, I couldn't quite catch that last sentence. What did you say?"

Blunt: very direct and honest in speaking; "Okay, let me be blunt here: your design is really terrible and we need to start from the beginning again."

Rude: not polite; "Jacob's way of speaking sounds a bit rude to the older employees but he's really a nice young man with good ideas."

“When in doubt”: when we give advice, we sometimes say “when in doubt” to mean “if you are not sure about what to do”; “The manual includes step-by-step advice for installation, and when in doubt, just call tech support.”

“Chances are”: it is probable or likely that something will happen; “Whatever type of small business you are starting, chances are you’ll need some good business advice.”

To follow: to understand, especially a complicated explanation or process; “If you use too many slides or a small font, your audience might not be able to follow your presentation.”

Contingency plan: a plan for what to do if something – especially something unwanted – happens in the future; “Now that we have our own servers, we need a new contingency plan to guide our response to a server failure.”

To paraphrase: to take what someone has said or written and express the same idea in different words; “Now, to paraphrase something a great boss once told me: if you don’t take risks, you won’t see any rewards.”

To acknowledge: to recognize and mention something; “Until management acknowledges the problem with employee morale, nothing is going to change around here.”

To restate: to say something again, especially in different words; “I’d just like to restate an idea that Jim brought forward last meeting: our marketing hasn’t kept up with the times.”

To confirm: to make sure something is true, correct, or acceptable; “So, just to confirm, you don’t agree with the plan to relocate?”

To soar: to increase quickly or be at a high level; “Oil prices soared after news of the crisis in the Middle East and slow-downs in extraction and refining.”

To overhaul: to completely change something; “The company has decided to overhaul its entire compensation and benefits program to attract younger workers.”

To echo: to repeat what someone has said or an idea someone has expressed; “The chairman’s positive outlook on the economy echoes what many economists have been saying recently.”

Aggressive: if a person is “aggressive,” he acts as though he wants to fight or argue, while if a plan or method is “aggressive,” it does anything possible to succeed; “Our aggressive cost-cutting measures will mean the loss of hundreds of jobs.”

A word of warning: we sometimes say “a word of warning” before telling someone about a possible danger; “Just a word of warning before you talk to these investors: they hate to hear unrealistic sales forecasts.”

To cast doubt on: to make something less sure or believable; “Several independent studies have cast doubt on the company’s claims that their products are 100% safe.”

To get bent out of shape: to become angry, upset, or insulted; “Shareholders appear bent out of shape since senior executives were found guilty of financial mismanagement.”

To recap: to say again what has happened or been decided; to summarize; “It’s a good idea to recap your main ideas right at the end of your presentation.”

To go hand in hand: to happen or exist together and be closely connected; “Throughout our sixty years in business, we’ve found that profits and a commitment to quality go hand in hand.”

Transcript

Hello and welcome back to the Skills 360 podcast. I'm your host, Tim Simmons, and today I want to continue our look at how you can improve your communication skills.

Communication between people is never perfect. Even with the people closest to us, who you might think we can understand very well, there is **miscommunication**. Sometimes we don't hear things correctly, or we don't hear them at all, and sometimes people don't express ideas **precisely**. That's enough to complicate the situation, but then we can **throw in implied** meaning and our own understanding of what's being said **indirectly**. Add to that the challenges that **arise** when you're working in your second, or third, or fourth language, and it might be surprising that we understand each other at all!

But **have no fear**. There are ways to work through the **minefield** of communication and make everything clear. And that's exactly what we'll look at today: clarifying what people have said. There are basically two reasons to clarify: first, when we don't know what someone *said* because we didn't hear them; and second, when we don't know what someone *meant* because we didn't understand them.

Let's begin with clarifying what someone said. When you don't hear someone, you can simply tell them, politely of course. Use **diplomatic** expressions like "Pardon me?" Or, "I'm sorry, but I didn't **catch** that." Or, "Would you mind repeating that please?" Avoid short and **blunt** questions like "What?" or "What did you say?" These questions seem **rude** to many people. And **when in doubt**, too formal is a better mistake than too *informal*.

Now, if you heard what someone said but you don't know what it *means*, make sure they know that. If you use the expressions we just looked at for when you didn't hear someone, they might just repeat what they said. But if you didn't understand the first time, **chances are** you won't understand the second time. So how do you make it clear that you haven't understood? Well, avoid just saying "I don't understand." That feels too blunt and direct. Instead, try, "I'm not sure I **follow** you." Or, say a speaker uses the expression "**contingency plan**" and you don't know what that means. You can say, "Could you explain what you mean by contingency plan?" Or, "What exactly do you mean by contingency plan?" These kinds of expressions let the speaker know that you haven't *understood*, not just that you haven't heard.

Okay, so in some cases you might think you understand, but you're not sure. So you want to clarify by checking your understanding. The first thing you can do is **paraphrase** what someone has said and ask for confirmation that your interpretation is correct. Paraphrasing just means saying the same thing but in different words. And you can do this by **acknowledging** what someone has said, **restating** it, and **confirming** with a tag question. Here's an example: if someone says "we anticipate that the share price will continue to **soar**," you might say "I see, so you're saying the stock will remain high, right?" Or if someone says "our marketing strategy needs a complete **overhaul**," you can say "okay, you mean we need to change our strategy, right?" If you're correct, the speaker will let you know. And if you're incorrect, he will explain. Notice that the tag question "right?" is a yes/no question. Yes/no questions

make it easy for the speaker to confirm your understanding or provide further explanation if you misunderstood.

Another technique for clarifying what someone has said is **echoing** to get confirmation or more explanation. This means repeating the key idea with question intonation. So if someone says "this year's recruitment drive needs to be more **aggressive**," you might say "it needs to be more aggressive?" In this way, you're inviting more detail or examples. And the speaker might come back with "yes, last year we missed our goal. This year we need to work extra hard to make sure that doesn't happen again." Now you can be sure what the speaker meant.

Now, here's **a word of warning**: some of the questions we use for clarifying can also be used to **cast doubt on** someone's ideas or opinions. We act surprised and ask for confirmation to show that we disagree or don't believe what someone has said. Sometimes our intonation makes it clear what our purpose is, but it's often best to make it extra clear by adding something like "just to clarify" or "just so I understand here" to the beginning or end of a question. You don't want someone **getting bent out of shape** because he thinks you disagree him.

Okay, now let's **recap**. When you don't hear someone, just politely let them know. If you don't understand, tell the person, but don't be too blunt or direct about it. And to avoid misunderstanding or invite greater explanation, you can use paraphrasing or echoing. So, now you've got clarifying techniques to go along with the listening techniques we learned last time. Remember, listening and clarifying **go hand in hand**. And with these tools and a spirit of understanding, you can improve your communication skills.

That's all for today. If you'd like to test yourself on what we've just covered, have a look at the **myBEonline.com** website. There you'll find a quiz about today's show as well as a complete transcript.

So long. And see you again soon.

Review

1. What are two basic reasons to ask for clarification? [Select all that apply.]
 - A You don't know what the speaker meant.
 - B You are not familiar with the topic of discussion.
 - C You did not hear clearly.
 - D You doubt whether the speaker can be believed.
 - E You weren't listening to the speaker.

2. Which of the following would be polite and effective ways to get someone to repeat something? [Select all that apply.]
 - A What did you say?
 - B Huh?
 - C Pardon me?
 - D What's that?
 - E I'm sorry, but I didn't catch that.
 - F Say that again, I didn't hear you.

3. If a speaker says "These designs are horrendous", and you don't know what "horrendous" means, what would be the best response?
 - A I don't understand.
 - B What exactly do you mean by "horrendous"?
 - C I'm sorry but I didn't catch that.
 - D Horrendous?

4. Which of the following statements and questions follow the suggested pattern for confirming that you have understood something? [Select all that apply.]
 - A Okay, as I understand, you want a more youthful image.
 - B So, what you're saying is that we need a more youthful image, right?
 - C Right, so do you want a more youthful image or not?
 - D Okay, you mean our image needs to be more youthful, is that right?
 - E So it seems clear that you're pushing for a more youthful image.

5. What is the purpose of echoing, or restating, what someone has said?
 - A To invite explanation.
 - B To demonstrate agreement.
 - C To indicate that you have understood.
 - D To confirm that you have heard correctly.

6. How can we make it clear that our clarification questions are not meant to cast doubt on or disagree with someone's statement?
 - A By using question intonation.
 - B By smiling and appearing positive.
 - C By apologizing.
 - D By stating directly that we are looking for clarification.

Review Answers

1. What are two basic reasons to ask for clarification? [choose 2]
A You don't know what the speaker meant.
C You did not hear clearly.
2. Which of the following would be polite and effective ways to get someone to repeat something? [choose all that apply]
C Pardon me?
F I'm sorry, but I didn't catch that.
3. If a speaker says "These designs are horrendous", and you don't know what "horrendous" means, what would be the best response?
B What exactly do you mean by "horrendous"?
4. Which of the following statements and questions follow the suggested pattern for confirming that you have understood something? [choose all that apply]
B So, what you're saying is that we need a more youthful image, right?
D Okay, you mean our image needs to be more youthful, is that right?
5. What is the purpose of echoing, or restating, what someone has said?
A To invite explanation.
6. How can we make it clear that our clarification questions are not meant to cast doubt on or disagree with someone's statement?
D By stating directly that we are looking for clarification.

Online Practice

Click the "Launch" button to open the **online practice**:

Launch Quiz