Communication

According to George (2001) the communication in an organisation depends – to a large extent – on those in a leadership position.

While everyone has a responsibility for communicating effectively, your role as a student representative makes you the communication link between College staff and your peers.

In fact, the student representative’s role in establishing and maintaining effective communication and working relationships is crucial.

In you role, you will also need to network with other student representatives (be they Course Reps/ESA/CSSA Reps, etc.) to coordinate feedback and ensure follow up on action items you raise. Thus, your communication skills are crucial to your ability to communicate successfully upwards, laterally and downwards as part of your role.

What is Communication?

When you communicate and idea of intention, you are trying to share your meaning with others. In your role, the effective communications of information and ideas is fundamental to your success.

Your role is to communication information that is timely and clear to both students and staff. This requires you to give clear messages and get feedback from your listeners to ensure understanding.

Barriers to Communication

Successful communication requires the “sender” and “receiver” to negotiate a shared meaning. However, effective communication of a shared meaning can be hindered by internal and external barriers.

Barriers are any factors that can alter or interfere with the communication process.

Barriers to communication include:

- Selective perception
- Age/experience
- Prejudice
- Status
- Physical features
- Distance
- Language
- Inconsistent non-verbal signals
Selective perception
We do not all perceive the one scene in the same way. Perception is how your brain interprets what
your senses tell you. It is a function of the target, the situation and your experience and
expectations. Perception may be influenced by:

- Attitude to the sender/receiver (i.e. like, dislike, respect, empathy, knowledge, experience)
- An individuals’ emotional state at the time
- A sender’s tendency to leave out information and a receiver’s tendency to mentally fill in
gaps to make the massage more understandable
- Past experience which leads to expecting to hear the same message in a similar
circumstance. Strong emotional needs can influence a listener to hear what they want to
hear.

Age/experience
A vast difference in knowledge, skills and feels between the sender and receiver of a message can
increase the difficulty of communicating.

Prejudice
Individuals tend not to listen to those they dislike or consider to be inferior in status, experience of
knowledge. Statements or information that conflicts with the listener’s knowledge, opinion or values
also tend to be ignored.

Status
The relative status of the participants in the communication process can influence the effectiveness
of the communication. People tend to listen with more attention and place higher credence on the
statements of leaders and experts than comments made by those they consider being of lower
status.

Physical features
Physical features and appearance (e.g. height, dress) can influence the sending and receiving of
information.

Distance
Facial expressions and gestures play a big part in understanding messages. These important
elements are missing when communicating via phone or email.

Language
Words mean different things to different people. Some communications structure their sentences in
a vague and ambiguous manner so that what they can say or write is not what they mean. Technical
jargon is a barrier to communication when it is used outside a specialist group (unless the
communicator clearly explains the meaning of the jargon).

Inconsistent non-verbal signals
If part of a message is sent in one code (words) and part in another (body language) the two must
match otherwise receivers become confused or distrust the message and the sender.
Communication Skills

Listening
Successful oral communication depends upon both speaking ability and listening ability. However, the ability to listen is too often taken for granted.

Student Representatives should be aware of their listening ability and continually work to improve it, as the costs of poor listening are potentially enormous.

Hearing vs. listening
Hearing is a passive process that occurs even when we are asleep and describes the physical reception of sounds.

In contrast, listening requires you to pay attention to the sounds around you in order to determine their meaning.
The L.I.S.T.E.N technique for effective listening

Listening requires you to discover the intentions and meaning of others. This technique can help you to become a more effective listener.

- **Look Interested**
- **Inquire with Questions**
- **Stay on Track**
- **Test your Understanding**
- **Evaluate the Message**
- **Neutralise your Feelings**
Look Interested
- Face the speaker and keep eye contact
- Stay relaxed
- Maintain an open posture and lean forward slightly

Inquire with Questions
- Clarify the speaker’s meaning: use a variety of question styles (open, closed, probing)
- Ensure you get the full story.

Stay on track
- Focus on your purpose in listening
- Don’t prejudge – wait for the complete message.
- Try to discover the main theme of what is being said

Test you Understanding
- Paraphrase the key points the speaker has been making.
- Ask clarifying questions

Evaluate the Message
- Identify the speaker’s message
- Analyse what is being said – facts or opinions, flaws, evidence
- Analyse how it is being said – voice, speed of delivery, body language

Neutralise your Feelings
- Try not to become emotional
- Keep an open mind and stay calm

Feedback

Feedback is probably the most direct way of knowing if your communication has been understood or of checking if you have interpreted someone else’s meaning correctly.

The value of feedback is that you can use it to focus attention on the things that are right – or wrong – in your communications and behaviours and those of others.
Providing Feedback
Giving feedback can be as simple as a head nodding or smiling, showing you are focussed on the other person, or as detailed as giving specific verbal feedback on behaviours.

The feedback you give should be focussed, helpful and non-threatening. The more defensive a person is, the less likely it is that they will hear and understand your feedback correctly.

Tips for giving helpful feedback
- Focus on the person’s behaviour, not personality (e.g. “you were very vocal in the meeting”, not “you’re a loud-mouth”).
- Focus your on feedback actions that the person can change. It does no good to point out to someone “students don’t like this lecturer because he has big ears”.
- Use descriptions rather than judgements (e.g. you speak very softly in lectures, which makes it difficult for students to hear you” instead of “you’re a terrible public speaker”.
- Refer to a specific situation rather than general behaviour (e.g. “In the lecture last week, students were concerned that the content was rushed over and there was not enough time provided to ask questions” rather than “your lectures are always hurried and you never leave time for students to ask you questions”).
- Focus on the present situation rather than on the past.
- Focus your feedback on sharing your perceptions and feelings rather than on giving advice, this leaves other people free to decide how to use your feedback.
- Do not force your feedback on other people. If the person is defensive or not interested in your feedback, consider other means of having your feedback acknowledged (e.g. if you are a class representative and a lecture is dismissive or defensive of the feedback you are providing, you can escalate this information to the SRC as well as to the Program Convenor).
- Do not give feedback lightly. Makes sure you are willing be responsible for what you say and to clarify as much as the receiver requires.

Assertion Skills
Assertiveness is a way of relating to other people that gains mutual respect and fosters clear, open and honest communication. It involves appropriate, congruent verbal and non-verbal behaviour.

You can use assertion skills in the following circumstances:
- Persisting in communication without becoming side-tracked by excuses, reasons or apologies.
- Initiating a discussion especially in a different situation
- Accepting and acknowledging error or mistakes without feeling guilty or defensive
- Turning down a request or making a request.

Appropriate assertiveness requires you to listen carefully to other people, summarise the conversation and ask questions to clarify understanding. In this way, you are showing respect for yourself and other people while you solve the problem presented to you or achieve the goals you’ve set.
The “I” message

An “I” message is a straightforward speech pattern that allows you to take responsibility for your perception of the situation and avoids making others feel defensive. The basic “I” message has three sections:

1. The action
   
2. Speaker’s response
   
3. The preferred outcome

   When (this happens) (non-evaluative)

   I (get/become/feel) (no-blame description)

   I’d prefer it if... (a description – not advice)

The Art of Having Challenging Conversations

Most of us have at least one conversation that we know we ought to be having but we are putting it off because it is likely to be challenging for us. Even though only a small proportion of our total relationships involve challenging conversations, they determine our effectiveness and consume a great deal of time in planning, worrying, regretting, griping, talking with others and so on.

To the extent that we have effective ways of dealing with difficult conversations we have more mental and emotional energy to do our work and live our lives with vitality and engagement.

Being able to speak and listen in ways that build engagement, commitment and learning with anybody gives us tremendous power to shape our own lives.

One way to understand the skills required for success in challenging conversations is outlined by Jentz (2007). The three skill sets are:

1. Structuring the conversation (facilitating the purpose, process and timing of the conversation)
2. Giving good information (giving information assertively and openly)
3. Listening reflectively (listening deeply for meaning and testing one’s understanding of the other’s perspective).

Structuring the conversation

At the beginning and throughout the conversation, you can be much more effective if you are able to openly discuss the purpose, process and timing of the conversation. Even for the really challenging conversations, this is your best opportunity to get engagement from the other party by giving them the opportunity to have input into why and how the meeting is conducted.

- **Purpose** is the outcome one hopes for from the conversation - e.g.
  
  A. For me to hear your point of view or
  B. For you to hear my point of view
  C. To come to a shared perspective
  D. To decide on what to do next
- **Process** is the way the conversation occurs – e.g. “how about I speak first about the situation, then I will listen while you tell me your perspective, then we will see if we can develop a way forward”.

NB: “to have a discussion” is no a purpose, it is a process. To get to purpose, ask “why am I really having this discussion”.

The beginning of a challenging conversation should almost always involve a structuring statement. However, structuring can occur at any time *during* a conversation to bring it back on track or defuse strong emotions.

**Preparation for effective structuring**
- What is my real purpose?
- What is my procedure?
- What is my time period?
- Can I get this information out early in the interaction and confirm it?
- Can I give this information without using judgemental language or tone?

**Giving good information**
Challenging conversations almost always involve speaking assertively about your own experience of the situation. The most critical thing to remember in order to do this effectively is to keep separate the ‘facts’ you are perceiving and the sense that you are making of those facts.

For example, “The students in your class are tired of your laziness” mixes up the facts with your interpretation, whereas “when you show up late to lectures and tutorials, the students in your class get annoyed because interferes with their learning, as well as their opportunity to discuss content with you” keeps the facts and the interpretation separate.

Keeping these aspects separate is sometimes hard to do because we *assume* others see the world the same way we do. However, the biggest reason for conflict is because people do not see the world the same way. Keeping facts and interpretations separate helps lower defensiveness and allows new learning.

For example, saying “because you have been avoiding me, I have felt less like working with you” assumes that the other person has been avoiding you. This statement is likely to evoke defensiveness, particularly if the person has other reasons why they have not had time to spend with you.

Some people argue one should not report on feelings in a formal/ work environment. Of course, you have to decide what is most useful and appropriate for the circumstances you’re faced with and there are no rules about this. It is important to remember, however, that feelings carry information and if you do not report feelings to others, crucial elements of the story may be missed.

Imagine that a subordinate of yours is feeling dissatisfied with their work. Would you prefer them to share their feelings with you openly or keep them hidden? Why?
So giving good information is about reporting your own observations and experience/interpretation (e.g. feelings, consequences, interpretations, wants/needs and goals) separately. It is about reporting your own meaning making as provisional and open to alternative perspectives.

**Preparation to Give Good Information**
- What are the facts, related both to the context and my concern?
- What sense do I make of these facts in terms of feelings and consequences to others and myself?
- Do I need to consult with others about my facts and related sense before the interaction?
- Can I give this information assertively (not judgmentally) while seeking to test it, learn, and change if I get better information?

**Listening Reflectively**
The most important thing you can do to have more successful challenging conversations is to listen in a different way. Most of us think listening is a passive activity, but, listening reflectively is more difficult. As with structuring and giving more information, effectiveness comes more from your attitudes and willingness to take the perspective of another than from specifically what you say.

Listening reflectively involves two parts. The first part is to closely track what the other person is saying to see if you can determine the sense that they are making of the situation. To build trust and understanding, it is particularly useful to deliberately listen (and watch) for three things: a) intentions, b) feelings and c) requests for action. The second part is to check and play back your understanding in your own words to the other person to make sure that you have correctly understood their perspective. Listening to gain an understanding naturally involves asking questions to build on what they have already said. This will increase awareness and clarify perspectives by bringing into the conversation what is “between the lines.” This not only allows you to proceed on the right information, it builds trust and caring in the relationship because everybody wants to know that they have been heard.

**Preparation to Listening Reflectively**
- The most important preparation for listening well is to examine our attitude or orientation towards the other. How can I develop and sustain an attitude of real curiosity and interest in the other’s point of view.
- What might be the interest and intentions of the other person here?
- How will I know if I stop reflectively listening?
- How can I listen to understand, rather than dismiss the other person’s views reactively with arguments or reassurance?

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technical Orientation</th>
<th>Adaptive Orientation</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What’s the problem?</td>
<td>What is this person actually trying to say to me?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What’s wrong?</td>
<td>What is their intention?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What am I going to do about it?</td>
<td>What tacit hope or fear is the person trying to communicate?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What needs fixing?</td>
<td>What do I hear in the tone, and what does it seem connected to?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What reasoning is the person offering to explain their behaviour?</td>
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Roles and Responsibilities of the Course Representatives

Course Representatives
The primary responsibility of a Course Representative is to collect feedback about the course – the good, the bad and the ugly - from your classmates and to present this information to the Course Convenor or Student Services/or Associate Director (Education). You will also be responsible for disseminating information relating to <course code> back to your classmates from Meetings throughout the semester.

If there are multiple classes within your course (particularly for the larger courses), you are expected to make yourself known within each class (including introducing yourself to the tutors).

Feedback
The aim of collecting feedback from your classmates is to improve the overall learning experience within each course. As a student leader, you are expected to be proactive in your information-gathering and to encourage feedback from as many of your peers as possible (talking to only a small or select group of classmates will not accurately reflect the overall opinion of the class).

While the most common form of feedback that you are likely to encounter is criticism and complaints about the course/ the lecturer or tutor/ the assignments/ etc., (which is certainly important and needs to be acted upon in collaboration with the SRC the relevant lecturer/convenor), we also want to hear about the positives of each courses - what aspects of the course you and your classmates find enjoyable and interesting, we can apply them to future intakes.

How you choose to collect student feedback is up to you. You may wish to provide your classmates with your email address so they can make contact with you outside of lectures and tutorials, arrange small group meetings, develop very short, periodic surveys for your classmates to complete at various touch points throughout the semester. However you decide to go about collating this information, we encourage you to keep the following in mind:

- Confidentiality: There may be some instances (particularly where a complaint is concerned) where you will be required to protect your classmates’ personal information when reporting the issue to the SRC or to the Lecturer/ Tutor. It’s important that your classmates know that if they come to you with a concern, they won’t be subsequently “targeted” or disadvantaged as a result.
- Hearsay and Conjecture: Be mindful of second or third-hand feedback. As a Course Representative, you may need to do a little bit of investigating to piece together the whole story before reporting claims to the SRC or the lecturer/convenor.
- Objectivity: As difficult as it sometimes is, ensure that your reports are as factual and objective as possible.
Responsibilities

- Liaise regularly with other Course Representatives and/or course participants, collating a concise report that can be shared at scheduled Meetings.
- Provide advice and support, manage student feedback and escalate issues of concern where appropriate/applicable.
- Report feedback/action items from Meetings on a regular basis.
- Present, as fairly as possible, students’ ideas and concerns to the council
- Respect all faculty and administration.

Need Further Advice or Support?
You have a comprehensive support network at your disposal – your ANUSA/PARSA Reps, your ESA or CSSA Reps and of course, Student Services – if you have any questions or concerns about your role now or throughout the semester, please do not hesitate to make contact with us.