

COMMUNICATIONS SKILLS

A MUST For Effective Volunteer Leadership

By Mary Beck Proudfoot

Among executives of all types, the Director or Coordinator of Volunteer Services must be the most skillful at the job of communication, as the greatest reward offered to the volunteer is the psychic paycheck which must be transmitted through some form of communication. According to Fischer and Strong, "No matter how varied his skills, in the final analysis the job of every executive or supervisor is COMMUNICATION... (This is) the 'X Factor' in the manager's job... which means the difference between success and mediocrity".

Communication has been defined in many ways. I propose that communication is the interchange of ideas between two or more persons. One person sends an intentional message and expects the receiver(s) to react to that message. By design this definition places a great emphasis on the receiver of the message as a part of the communication system. If the receiver does not react, or does not in fact receive the message, then I contend that there has been no communication. Communication is not simply the statement of facts and views:

Mary Beck Proudfoot is Coordinator of Volunteer Services, Pueblo County Department of Social Services, Pueblo, Colorado.

Three elements are involved: a sender, a message and a receiver. We often mistake the form of communication for its substance, and as managers we have a tendency to talk too much and listen too little.

What happens in every life context is that an emotional filter is slipped between the words delivered by the first person and the mind of the second person. Also a mental block, habits of mind or attitudes or beliefs, omits (filters out) all or part of what is being said.

How then, do we as managers of volunteer programs communicate? The style of leadership is the first place we will direct our attention, as this style and the way communication is handled directly affects each other. One of the best measures of the effectiveness of administrators is the effectiveness of their communication. And the effectiveness of the communication is determined by the atmosphere or organizational climate in which the employees work. Determine communications as they exist between manager and staff; staff and volunteers; staff and client; volunteer and client; and volunteer and volunteer; and you have determined the effectiveness of the organization.

The style of management determines the value that is placed on communication and the time given to it. In the classical or authoritarian style of management, the emphasis is on production of goods and services. Communication is mainly downward, that is, the more rigid you make your organized hierarchy the less apt you are to get good upward communication. In this situation any upward communication is filtered by the upward chain of command so that the message is frequently deleted or changed if and when it reaches top management. In the army, which is a classic authoritarian style of organization, privates traditionally do little communicating with generals. The climate is usually defensive as opposed to supportive in such organizations. Also in this system, the informal and grapevine types of communication flourish. *It is interesting to note, however, that studies have found the grapevine not only fast but also, on non-controversial information between 80 and 90 percent accurate.*

In the human resources or participative style of management the emphasis is on the human values while attaining the goals of the company. Huseman, et. al., states that the basic human wants of an employee (or volunteer) are recognition and communication. That is, the person wants to be recognized as having value, dignity and worth; that he has the ear of the supervisor and that he has a sense of belonging. Communication is upward, downward and vertical in this type of organization. The best way to ensure upward communication is for the manager to take concrete action based on such communication. The supervisor who invites requests for help or information and then disregards them is proving that he is not interested. It is also the surest way to stop the flow of upward communication.

The Volunteer Director must study the organization or agency he/she is working in to determine the avowed and actual style of management. Just because the organization is non-profit and human services oriented, it does not follow that the organization's style of management is participative. The medical model of a hospital is probably the most authoritarian or classical organization in existence. Churches, welfare departments, schools, all have traditionally been very authoritarian. Volunteering was frequently limited to the more menial or routine jobs in these institutions, and if volunteering was allowed at all.

The Director is also faced with the dilemma of selecting the kind of leadership style he/she feels the most comfortable with for the management of the volunteer services program and then fitting that into the style of management of the organization. Many times a volunteer program can be the opening wedge for a more participative style of management, as the director selects modes of communication to communicate with volunteers, staff, agency administration, clients and the community. Wilson states that as directors of volunteers, we have the responsibility to be the catalyst to see that open and healthy communications exist between all of these affected segments of the program. It is conceded that we must be authoritarian in some matters, but this makes it even more imperative that we be more democratic in those matters where volunteer participation is appropriate.

Although there is no research to defend it, I am assuming that most Volunteer Directors feel they operate with a participative leadership style. It is disturbing to note that one study of the flow of communications in several organizations concludes that it is likely that we feel we use subordinates' ideas and opinions in solving job problems more than they think we do. It is well for us to take stock of ourselves as objectively as possible to see how the flow of communication is really going. Is the climate defensive or supportive? Do boards and committees really make decisions or are they merely rubber stamps? Are there mechanisms for upward communication, and do we really act on communication when it comes to us?

In continuing to deal with the sender of communications, let us next examine the place of language in the communication system. Language and words are our tools. If one has ever had the experience of visiting a country where English is not spoken, the necessity for a common language is vividly demonstrated. At a lovely beach in Venezuela one vacation, my husband and I became separated from our interpreters briefly. A very attractive lady came by and started talking to us in Spanish; by gesture we indicated we could not understand her. She continued talking (perhaps repeating what she had said earlier) slowly, distinctly and louder... much louder. Neither of us was able to grasp what she said. Finally we smiled at each other and went our ways with the only idea communicated that we did not understand each other.

Even when we have a common language, we still have trouble understanding and frequently communication does not take place. *In interpersonal communication we should try to discern what the speaker means rather than just what the words he uses mean.* One of the premises of linguistic thought is that NO WORD HAS EXACTLY THE SAME MEANING TWICE. To insist dogmatically that we know what a word means in advance of its utterance is nonsense. All we can know in advance is approximately what it means. In several studies it is indicated that 500 of the most commonly used words in English have 14,070 dictionary meanings. That is an average of 28 meanings per word! If you want a practical demonstration of this, have each member of a group separately write down ten sentences using the word "set". Compare notes and see how many different meanings the group finds for this one simple word.

Many things affect word meanings, environment being one of the greatest. Allen, et al., says that even within a culture or sub-culture the influence of environment on communication is highly personal and individual.

One of the main reasons for the inability of a white, anglo-saxon, middle-class female director to recruit and place minority and sometimes low income volunteers is that she simply does not communicate. Words sometimes have such radically different meanings to the director and the minority person, that they literally communicate little better than we did with our Spanish speaking lady in Venezuela.

In upward communication the semantics barrier is greater for the subordinate. His superior, probably having worked at one time on the subordinate's job, knows the attitudes, the language and the problems at that level while the person communicating upward is not familiar with the supervisor's work and responsibilities. This may happen between the volunteer and the social worker, the nurse, another staff person. This statement also indicates the reason for the success of programs where the volunteer has been through the same problems as the client or patient. Alcoholics Anonymous immediately comes to mind.

In turning away from the language code used in communication, the other code which must be considered is the non-verbal communication of the sender. In an encounter between two people, if the non-verbal communication does not match the words, people are more likely to believe the non-verbal. The non-verbal actions and expressions give

a clearer message to the receiver than the words. Regardless of the words or the purpose for speaking, the speaker's face will convey a message.

But non-verbal communication is not limited to just facial expressions or body movement. The room or environment also communicates. The way messages are arranged, the appearance of the paper, bulletin board, etc. A dirty, unpleasant room as a meeting place for volunteer training; a crowded, cluttered work area for the volunteer; and unreturned telephone calls lets the volunteer know he/she is not very important and that the work they are asked to do is not highly regarded. Non-verbal behavior defines and regulates the communication system as well as the specific content communicated.

Now let us turn to the message part of our communication triad (the sender, the message and the receiver). Why are messages sent and what specific function do they serve? Redding's system summarizes an organization's rationale for message flow using the three categories; *task messages, maintenance messages and human messages.*

In volunteer administration, an example of *task messages* would be orientation meetings with volunteers concerning the organization; the determining with staff of areas of service that can be done by volunteers; and the job descriptions as they are defined and explained.

Maintenance messages help the organization to remain alive and perpetuate itself. Reporting hours, messages concerning the meetings of committees and boards, and statistic gathering are examples of the maintenance messages.

Of the three, the Coordinator or Director must make the *human messages* the most effective communication. These are the rap sessions with volunteers who deal with clients/patients; the problem solving with the unhappy placement; the encouragement of staff to say the word of appreciation or to invite the volunteer to coffee; and the inclusion of the volunteer in staffings relating to the client with whom he is dealing. All of these activities lead to more open and effective communication.

In this paper I am not going to deal with the way messages should be presented nor the different forms of media for different kinds of messages. This is not to say that these are not important, but that

they should be dealt with in depth elsewhere.

Let us go on in more detail with the third part of the communication triad--the receiver. Listening is probably the most grossly underused and unrecognized form of communication. There is an old proverb that says, "Nature gave us two ears and only one mouth so that we could listen twice as much as we speak".

A function of listening is "feedback", which has been described by Thayer as the information or cues utilized by the originator to judge how successfully he has communicated. I am contending that if the sender gets no cues then there is no basis for him to assume that communication did in fact take place. Probably the greatest cause of failure in communication is that we ASSUME that everyone knows what we are talking about and that we ASSUME that we know what others are talking about without asking questions to make sure. Be assured that feedback is no frill. Rather, it is an indispensable part of communication.

One of the most compelling demonstrations of the need for feedback is done rather easily. Divide a group into teams of three. One member of each team is designated as the sender, another the receiver and the third person as an observer. Give the senders and receivers identical sets of a few Tinker Toys. Several sets can be made up from one small can of the toys. It is important in the first go around that on a given team, the sender and receiver each have the same number of each kind of objects in the set. Seat the sender and receiver on each team back to back with instructions to each not to turn to see what the other is doing. The receiver is not to ask questions, respond in any way or give any feedback to the sender. Then instruct each sender to start to build an object with his set of Tinker Toys, telling his receiver what he is doing. Each receiver is to build an identical object to that of his sender. The observer simply observes his team and reports later on what has happened. After several minutes, let the senders and receivers see what they have done. Then do the same thing over again, only this time let the receiver talk back to and question the sender. In this instance usually the object the receiver builds is much more similar to what the sender has built.

Then, to demonstrate how difficult it is to deal with people from differing cultural groups, do not give the sender and receiver identical sets, - have a few pieces in each set not like anything in the other set. Do this without feedback first, then with the receiver able to ask questions and clarify. This is a tremendous training lesson for volunteers who will be dealing directly with clients or patients.

Gathering feedback and listening involves risk on the part of the speaker. Sometimes negative feedback is devastating to a person, particularly if he is somewhat insecure. If the Director or Coordinator is a person who does not like negative feedback, then the volunteers and staff will send back only the good reports, if they bother to give any at all. People do not like to give negative feedback, particularly to a superior. If feedback, even, positive, is greeted with indifference or defensive mechanisms, then it will stop going to the superior.

Listening, as defined separately from feedback, is in and of itself an art to be studied and acquired. The listening receiver is every bit as much a part of the communication triad as either the sender or the message. A skilled listener develops a sensitivity which enables him to break out of the shell of individual isolation, to share the experiences and emotions of others. One of the greatest drawbacks to listening is that the average speaker talks at a rate of 150 to 200 words per minute and the average listener can receive 700 to 1,000 words per minute. During the gaps, the receiver thinks of other things, loses continuity and develops other bad listening habits.

Most of the communication time (variously estimated at 45% to 63%) is spent in listening and only 22% to 30% in talking. Yet, think of how many more speech classes are offered students than listening classes. Or how much more often we praise a "good" speaker than a "good" listener. The manager practicing listening inclines toward democratic or participative management, that style characterized by a willingness to bring subordinates into planning, creating, decision-making processes.

We have a tendency to both see and hear what we want to see and hear and what we expect to see and hear. These are the two largest blocks to listening. In order

to avoid such blocks it is suggested that we listen patiently before making a judgment and refrain from hasty disapproval by word or non-verbal actions. There is no point in arguing with the speaker before he makes his point clear, or in paying attention only to the manifest content or words. One last piece of advice on listening probably is both the most important and the hardest. Listen to what the speaker does not want to say, or cannot say without help.

Dr. Ralph Nichols lists ten of the worst listening habits. Although developed for a group listening to a speaker, most are adaptable to two-person communications as well.

1. *Calling the subject uninteresting.*
2. *Criticizing the speakers' delivery.*
3. *Getting over-stimulated. (Making up a rebuttal after a point and not hearing the rest of the speech.)*
4. *Listening only for facts. (Listen for ideas.)*
5. *Trying to make an outline of everything we hear.*
6. *Faking attention to the speaker. (Good listening is not relaxing.)*
7. *Tolerating or creating distractions in the audience.*
8. *Evading difficult material.*
9. *Letting emotion-laden words throw us out of tune with the speaker.*
10. *Wasting the differential between speech-speed and thought-speed."*

One has to be very creative to overcome these bad listening habits. There are some ways to use the time between hearing words rather than let the brain wander off into another territory. Summarize what has been said previously; perhaps making notes will keep you on track provided you do not become engrossed in the note taking; or think of the applications of what is being said to your own job, organization or life.

Above all, avoid becoming an apathetic, sophisticated, or opposing listener. You may be justified, but this does not lead to a constructive outcome. (If you really

hear the boss's monotonous remarks, you can still learn something--even if only how to avoid duplicating his or her miserable performance.)

In summary, volunteers stay with an organization or leave it, generally, on the following basis: the work itself; recognition; a sense of achievement; the amount of responsibility they are asked to assume or advancement. Most of these reasons are a direct result of, or enhanced by how we communicate with them. *Effective communication is elusive if it is not studied and practiced constantly. It is not something we can learn once and use the same way forever. It is active, dynamic and subject to constant change. As we change every day due to our experiences and the changes in our world, so does that other person with whom we try to communicate. So the way we handle the tools of communication must change also.*

In the final analysis, the one person we need to know best for effective communication is ourselves. Our own self-concept will determine how we present our message and whether or not we can take the risks of listening. How willing we are to share ourselves will determine how able we are to get others to share themselves, which is the basis for recruiting volunteers.

Carl Rogers says that what we do, how we dress, what tasks we undertake and what tasks we decline are determined not so much by our actual powers and limitations as by what we believe to be our powers and limitations, that is, our self-concept.

Sometimes we even conceal from ourselves and from others our deeper reasons for doing things. We justify our actions by grand rationalizations. The more realistic we are about ourselves, the more realistic and accepting we can be of others. Since volunteering is essentially in the people-helping setting, let us listen to Carol Rogers' observation: *the optimal helping relationship is the kind of relationship created by a person who is psychologically mature. Or to put it another way, the degree to which I can create relationships which facilitate the growth of others as separate persons is a measure of the growth I have achieved in myself.*