
The Art of Communication

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Ask any person if they are a good listener and they will think about it for a moment and then acknowledge that they believe they are and, in all likely, defend their position.

Ask the same person if they think they are a good communicator and, again, they will emphatically tell you that they are.

In both instances, the unfortunate reality is that neither is true. None of us are really good communicators and most certainly are not good listeners. However, it is important to realize that it is really not our fault. It is the way we are created.

Most people believe that since they have been talking since their very early years they know how to communicate. Not true. Talking and communicating are not the same thing. A person can talk all day long and never actually communicate. To help understand this statement, consider that communication only occurs when understanding actually takes place between two or more people.

How many times have situations similar to the following occurred on the emergency scene (worse location for this to occur): captain to officer, “go to Broad and Main Streets and re-route traffic off of Broad onto Main” only to realize the officer misunderstood and re-routed traffic off of Main onto Broad”. Now you have a serious dilemma that may be very difficult to correct.

How could this have been avoided? One of the most critical factors in communications is the concept of seeking “feedback”, the realization that the person to whom you are communicating actually understood what was said.

Many people reject this on the basis “how could they not understand, everybody knows what the word means.”! If you have ever uttered those words or believe that everybody should know what you mean, consider this, in the modern dictionary there are twenty-five words that have over one-hundred different meanings per word. So it is very easy for a person to have a totally different meaning than you do for the same word. Thus, no communication actually occurs.

Another objection from fire chiefs, line officers, captains and lieutenants is they don't have time to seek feedback. When I hear this I am reminded of a statement by the Dutch, “We never seem to have time to do things right, but we always seem to have the time to go back and do it over again.” Obviously, if it's done right the first time we won't have to go back and do it over again.

When teaching or learning about communications, terms are used to help identify the process. The term “sender” is used to identify the speaker and “receiver” is used to identify the person to whom the communication is directed.

Another set of terms are used to identify how the process works. The terms used are encoding and decoding. Here's how they work. You are having a conversation with someone, as you choose and utter the words, you are forming a mental picture of what you just said, this is encoding. The person who is receiving your communication is then forming a mental picture of what they believe you said, this is referred to as decoding. The possibility of both mental pictures being identical is extremely rare. Feedback would have helped correct the problem by clarifying what you meant in order to help the receiver understand exactly what you meant.

In an interesting experiment conducted during the communication class, the students are given a word for which they are to write down a one word response for that word based on their understanding of that particular word. The class is then polled and asked to identify

what one word they wrote down. It is interesting to observe how many different responses were given for the same word. There are actually twenty words in the manual but we use approximately ten of them and the same thing happens for each word, many different interpretations, proving that not all people have the same understanding of a word.

While the communication class is listed as being for fire police officers, the hard reality is that everyone, fire officers, fire fighters, EMS personnel, could benefit from the program.

The Art of Listening

Just as with communications, many people claim to be a good listener. In the classroom students are asked to raise their hand if they believe they are a good listener. Believing it is a “trick” question, only a few hands are raised. Those doing so are told that they are “liars”. There was certainly no intent to offend anyone, merely citing a fact. No one is a good listener. Listening is an “active skill” which means that we have to force ourselves to actually listen to someone.

In the fire officer programs, emphasis is placed on communications as a vital part of an officer’s required ability. A fire officer must have good communications and listening skills to be an effective officer. When we face the fact that people would rather talk than listen, you get the picture. How many times have you engaged in conversation with someone and they immediately interrupt you or don’t give you a chance to finish your thought before telling you what they want to say.

If we take the time to observe people when we converse with them, we find all kinds of proof that no one really listens. We have to literally force ourselves to do so.

Perhaps the problem lies with the fact that many people confuse listening with hearing. Most married men have been told by their wives that they never listen.

When watching television and the commercials come on, you find that at that point you hear the commercials, but don’t listen. Children almost always remember the jingles that accompany a commercial, adults rarely do. How many times can you repeat someone’s name whom you have just met? You probably weren’t all that interested so you really didn’t listen when their name was mentioned and are embarrassed when you cannot recall their name. Unfortunately, it occurs more often than we care to mention.

Consider this conversation between two men:

- 1st man: “How are you?”
- 2nd man: “As well as can be expected.”
- 1st man: “Good. And the kids?”
- 2nd man: “The older one goes to the chair tomorrow.
The little one was lost on a scout hike.”
- 1st man: “Swell. The wife okay?”
- 2nd man: “She just ran off with the milkman.”
- 1st man: “Glad to hear it.
You’ll have to bring the whole family over one night soon.”

While this is inserted for its comic value, it must be remembered that many a true word is said in jest. The reality of the conversation does not escape the reader, we really don’t listen.

How important is this reality on the emergency scene? Mistakes occur because we didn’t listen, believing instead that we know what they meant so we move ahead and wind up making critical mistakes.

Part of the responsibility of all emergency responders is to understand that all of us are human and subject to human frailties. We may physically hear what someone is saying – but we do not pay attention to the message – hence – “in one ear and out the other.”