

Are you Listening to me or ... just Hearing me?

By Alfonso Bucero

Communication is a critical skill for project managers. Some leaders are able to listen to and other people are always hearing instead of listening to their membership. Some project managers do not spend enough time understanding how they communicate to his project team and rest of project stakeholders. Effective communication among team members is a key for project success. Because of time unavailability many people use written communication much more than verbal, but many times we are not conscious about body language communication is more than 65%. I learned, over the years that not all project managers are conscious about the amount messages he/she may transmit to their people with his body language; and mainly how those messages may affect them positively or negatively.

To communicate well and being a good listener is not easy but it is not impossible, it takes time, learning from your mistakes and practice, practice and practice. In my experience as a project manager I consider effective communication skills are a critical element in your career as a project manager. We all must use a variety of communication techniques to both understand and be understood. If we want to be effective we need to assess our communication skills periodically.

Have you thought about what are your communication goals in the project you are managing?

Probably your goals are related to: change people behavior, or to get action, to ensure understanding, to persuade some team members or stakeholders or perhaps to get and give information. In any case you always will have some distortions in communications:

There are several factors that affect the sender and the receiver in Communication. For example when we talk about the sender we need to take into account willingness, time, location, cost/consequences, competition. When we talk about the receiver we need to take into account cost/consequences, role expectations, behavior consistency, sensitivity, timing, appropriateness, belief systems, motivating factors. What is true is that we need to improve our communication as 70 % of our communication efforts are: misunderstood, misinterpreted, rejected, distorted or not heard. Communication is critical success factor, the majority of your perceived ability comes from how you communicate.

Are you listening to me or hearing to me? Based on my experience I use a questionnaire to assess my listening skills. The questions are focused on your ability of being concentrated on what the other person is telling you and observing your behaviors or reactions.

In order to have good communication my best practices are as follows:

- Listen to Understand
- Understand before speaking
- Speak to be understood
- Seek understanding before proceeding
- Repeat

How to improve your listening skills?

- Recognition
- Not being judgmental
- Stop egocentric communication
- Prepare a plan to improve your listening skills

BODY LANGUAGE

A critical part of your communication skills is to understand better and better the Body language. Women are better observers than gentlemen. And practice is the key. Some of my observations when presenting, talking or leading a meeting are as follows. Please take them as my observations managing projects. They never are very accurate because depending on many environmental circumstances. My observations are as follows:

- **I'm the boss.** Interlacing your hands behind your head, while leaning back in a chair with one leg crossed, sends the signal that you feel comfortable and dominant. Only the senior person in a meeting should do this.
- **I know what I'm talking about.** Steepling your fingers means you are confident and focused.
- **I'm confident.** Pointing your thumbs skyward means you have a positive outlook. It conveys both confidence and optimism
- **I'm insecure.** Hiding your thumbs indicates that you're not very sure of yourself. Sticking them in your pockets also makes you look insecure.

- **I'm listening, comfortable and receptive.** A slight head tilt exposes the neck, which people do when they feel they are in a friendly environment. This posture projects a sense of ease.
- **I'm uncomfortable and doubtful.** Touching the neck shows that you are experiencing emotional discomfort or doubt.
- **I'm insecure and concerned.** Covering the dimple at the base of your neck means you are fearful or worried.

Some of the techniques I use to improve my listening skills are as follows

PARAPHRASE – Restate what was said in your own words

SUMMARIZE – Pull together the main points of a speaker

QUESTION – Challenge speaker to think further, clarifying both your and their understanding

Adding color to your communication

- Images – Describe, relive
- Show, don't tell
- Use audience's senses
 - Sight
 - Sound
 - Touch
 - Taste
 - Smell

Improving Communication

- Don't use "cliches"
- Brevity
- Sincerity

- Don't praise yourself
- Avoid argument
- Be tactful
- Silence
- Enunciation – Clear, loud, syllables, flexibility of tone

Best practices

For distinct enunciation, every word, every syllable, every sound, must be given its proper form and value.

Think of the mouth chamber as a mold, in which the correct form is given to every sound.

Will you please move your lips more noticeably?

The teeth should never be kept closed in speech.

Through practices, we can learn to speak more rapidly, but still with perfect distinctness

Ways to gain effective conversation

- Good use of your language – avoid errors
- Improved vocabulary – overlook v oversee
- Avoid old phrases
- Use humor
- Add interesting story
- Improve clarity of voice – practice

Conclusion

Effective communication skills are a critical element in your career as a PMI volunteer.

We need to assess our communication skills periodically if we want to be effective.

The majority of your perceived ability comes from how you communicate.

You always can improve your listening and communication skills preparing an action plan.

Understanding body language is very helpful.

Learning and practice is the key.

About the Author



Alfonso Bucero

Author



Alfonso Bucero, DEA, PMP, PMI Fellow, is founder and Managing Partner of BUCERO PM Consulting, based in Madrid. Alfonso was the founder, sponsor and president of the PMI Barcelona Chapter until April 2005, and belongs to PMI's LIAG (Leadership Institute Advisory Group). He was also the President of the PMI Madrid Spain Chapter. Alfonso has a Computer Science Engineering degree from Universidad Politécnica in Madrid and is studying for his Ph.D. in Project Management. He has 29 years of practical experience and is actively engaged in advancing the PM profession in Spain and throughout Europe. Alfonso is a contributing editor and international correspondent for PM World in Spain. Alfonso Bucero can be contacted at alfonso.bucero@abucero.com.