

Chapter 9

COMMUNICATIONS / LISTENING

RULES OF COMMUNICATION

“The words we speak are very powerful. The perception of many people is that the chaplain speaks for God”. *Senior Chaplain Terry Morgan, PCLEC*

- Learn to listen.
- Be open and honest.
- Be tactful, considerate, and courteous.
- Be clear and specific.
- Be realistic and reasonable.
- Do not preach or lecture.
- Do not use excuses and do not fall for excuses.
- Recognize that each event can be seen from different points of view.
- Do not allow discussions to turn into destructive arguments.
- Let the effect, not the intention, of your communications be your guide.
- Accept all feelings and try to be understanding of them.
- Know when to use humor and when to be serious.

LEVELS OF LISTENING

"True listening is a manifestation of love." *Senior Chaplain Terry Morgan, PCLEC*

Level Three³: Listening in spurts.

This is the "tune in - tune out" type of listening, only hearing bits and pieces of what is being said. We "must" pay attention to the person seeking help from us.

Level Two²: Quiet/Passive Listening.

With this type of listening there is not a great deal of body language in the listener. Typical of this type of listening is that the eyes glaze over and/or the head nods but the "listener" is not really listening but instead is drifting off and distracted. The person speaking begins to perceive that they are not being heard.

The antidote for either one of these levels of listening is honesty. Tell the person what you were doing and apologize for drifting away. Tell them why you are apologizing, "I really want to hear what you have to say".

Level One¹: Active Listening.

At this level of listening you are observing body language. You are evaluating the underlying feelings beneath what is being said. You are not just hearing the words but you are listening for the content, the sub-text of what is being said, and reading the emotions.

When you enter the scene the FIRST thing you will see is their body language. Watch for signs of physical distress such as shock, grabbing the chest, rubbing the chest (are they having chest pains), excessive perspiration, color either pale or ruddy, respirations such as gasping or hyperventilating. Pay attention to what they are doing with their hands, watch for clenched fists or a working jaw which indicates anger.

Part of reading their body language is reading their needs. Make them more comfortable. Bring them water, get them into the shade, have them sit down or whatever will bring them comfort.

Allow expressions of emotion, sometimes the person will be better able to continue after having expressed their emotions. Listen without judging or making assumptions.

Mirror back what has been said, repeat back what you have just heard. Be sure you understand by asking simple, clear questions.

Listen, don't let the mind wander, don't rehearse thoughts or the next thing to say. You don't have to agree with the person, don't use that disagreement as an excuse to keep you from listening. Don't criticize, just listen, you can say, "please help me understand."

Avoid interrupting, as the saying goes, "if you can't improve on silence, don't". This is a "ministry of presence" which means that if we cannot fix the situation we can at least "be" there with the person to help them through it. However, too much silence can make the person feel as if you are not interested in what is happening to them. People in crisis need someone to provide structure for them, this is where sensitive listening and mirroring back can help.

Remember, the person communicating to us has a message to convey.

We should ask ourselves, when and with whom do I actively listen?", and bring that level of listening to the person who is in front of us at the moment and needs our help.

Keep practicing your listening skills!

IMPAIRMENTS TO LISTENING

Some of the impairments to listening are fatigue, hunger, dehydration*, and illnesses. Know your limitations and know when to ask for help. (*Dehydration causes the liver to work harder thereby placing more stress upon the body)

COMMUNICATING IN TRAUMATIC SITUATIONS

Perception is reality, it is not what you "said" but what they "heard".

The following is a good model when communicating in a traumatic situation, or any situation for that matter. SOLAR (square-on, one-on-one, level, attentive and range) is an easy acronym to remember and is defined as follows:

(S) Square-On: Give them "full face" listening. If possible, get them to a quieter place. Keep a relaxed posture as much as possible. If you are calm that will be transmitted to the person you are listening to and it may help them to calm down.

(O) One-on-One: Males don't usually stand square on, as it makes them uncomfortable but you can face the female square on. When sitting try to sit slightly to the left of the person you are listening to while still facing them.

(L) Level: Get on the same level as the person being listened to with no obstacles between you. This will help you to pick up on their body language more easily. Pay attention to eye contact, tone of voice, posture, and emotional tone. Crossed arms may indicate defensiveness or "I'm not listening and I don't want to listen." (Learn to discern between defensiveness and a comfortable body posture.)

(A) Attentive: This is level one active listening. Practice your active listening skills by being attentive to their verbal and non-verbal communication cues. You are in support mode (listen) not advisory role (telling).

(R) Range: Be aware of a person's personal space. In a crisis situation, what used to be their private zone now has strangers in it and they will be sensitive to your invasion of their personal space as well. If a person steps back from you or stiffens in posture or looks away, it may indicate that you have invaded their personal space and they are more comfortable with a little more distance.

Learn to speak softly. Look them in the left eye, if possible. Looking a person in their left eye while gently talking to them will physiologically change their brainwave patterns. This in turn can calm them down.

LISTENING /RESPONDING STYLES

Several years ago noted psychologist Carl Rogers conducted a series of studies on how individuals communicate with each other in face-to-face situations. He determined that communication styles could be broken down into the following categories; evaluative, interpretative, supportive, probing and understanding. He found that 80% of all communications fell into one of these categories with the remaining 20% being incidental communications and of no real importance.

From his observations of individuals in different settings he found that the communication styles were used with the following frequency: 1) evaluative, most used, 2) interpretive, 3) supportive, 4)probing, and 5) understanding, least used. He also determined that if a person used one category of response as much as 40% of the time, then other people see him as always responding that way.

Examples of the response categories:

Evaluating

Judging negatively, disapproving, blaming, name calling, criticizing. ("You shouldn't feel that way," "You aren't thinking straight,")

Supporting

Reassuring, excusing, or sympathizing. ("I know how you feel", "Don't worry", "You have to be strong".)

Interpretive:

Diagnosing, psychoanalyzing, reading-in, offering insights. ("You really don't mean that," "What you need is...", "I know what you need,")

Probing

Questioning, cross examining, prying, interrogating. ("Why didn't you..", "Who", "What", "Where", "When", "How".)

Understanding

The listener hears the message that the person communicating is attempting to convey and restates that message back to the speaker in fresh words ("are you saying...?"). The speaker is now encouraged to expand upon the ideas, feelings, and attitudes first expressed. Even when the listener has misunderstood the speaker at first, it is when the message is restated to the speaker and subsequently corrected that the communication achieves greater clarity.

It is the "understanding" response that best conveys, to the person being listened to, the interest of the listener and conveys the listener's desire for an accurate understanding of what is being said.

12 Roadblocks to Communication

Comparing

This can be competitive and lead to emotional responses. ("Why can't you be like ...?" "When I was your age.")

Placating this is pretending that you made a connection with them. ("I know how you feel.") You really don't know how they feel, you are, in reality, lying to them.

Mind Reading

Anticipating what they are going to say. Finishing their sentences.

Rehearsing

Practicing what you are going to say while they are talking to you. (This is a person who does not care what they are saying).

Derailing

Changing the subject, if it is something they do not want to talk about the subject will change suddenly. Be aware of underlying issues when this happens.

Judging

This is negatively criticizing, blaming. ("You brought this on yourself so you have only yourself to blame.")

Filtering

Interpreting what they say, jumping ahead of them (speeding up the conversation). This is somewhat like "comparing" and/or "mind reading".

Identifying

You may have had the same experience. This is somewhat like "filtering" in that you begin to interpret what they say through your own experience and fail to listen to and to acknowledge "their" pain.

Sparring:

Don't be argumentative. ("Do you realize that...?" "You shouldn't feel that way." "Well, the facts are...")

Advising:

Telling them what to do or how to feel. ("Why don't you just do...?" "I think it would be best if you...")

Being right

This is like sparring.

Dreaming

That glazed look to the eyes.

The goal of listening is to let the person express what they need to express; that is the beginning of the healing process for them.

This to Say

"This has got to be so painful"

"I can't even imagine your pain"

"Is it all right if I help you with...?"

"It is okay to have strong reactions to what has just happened"

"I am honored that you are allowing me to share your tears" (Give them permission to cry)

Things Not to Say

"I know how you feel"

"It could have been worse"

"You have to be strong"

"Your anguish won't change things"

We are there to be strong for them. Remember, we are a ministry of presence. If you can't improve on the silence, then don't. Learn to be comfortable in the silence.

When the Chaplain hears the Worst

How does the chaplain handle it when hearing the things that are hard to hear.

For the person who has just seen or been through the horrible or who has been carrying within them the awful, hidden secrets of their lives; the very act of opening up and speaking of those things aloud is like lancing an infected wound. All of the horror and all of the poison comes spilling out.

In cases like this it is good to think in the terms of the "universal precautions" taken by emergency responders.

- Glove up - be prayed up. Cover yourself and that person in prayer. ("God, protect my heart")
- Be aware of your physical reactions. You may feel your heart rate and/or your blood pressure going up. When this happens use "Combat Breathing", taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, this will calm you down and give you time to pray. Drink water, give water.
- Remember, you are there for them, turn your emotional switch off; don't become emotionally involved.
- Know your limits.

Cultural Issues in Communications

Be aware of the different customs among different cultures regarding non-verbal contact such as eye-contact or leaning forward, distances for interaction or touch. Be aware of some of the customs regarding male-female contact, for example, in Russian or Ukrainian households, a male chaplain should not touch the women who live in that home. Also, a female chaplain should not give a death notification to a Muslim family, only a male chaplain should give that notification.

Communications within the Chaplaincy

The Chaplaincy is a "para-military" organization with various levels of command. However, there is an open door policy maintained within the Chaplaincy because our leaders are in fact shepherds to those under their direction.

The purpose of the command structure is to make sure there are clear channels for communications particularly in times of crisis. Much as fire agencies rely on their system of Incident Command, the Chaplaincy must also have an established structure for moving information within the agency as well as to all the Chaplains involved in any particular incident.

- The chaplain who is first on the scene will be in charge and will be the one to direct any other chaplains, or staff who arrive afterward unless that chaplain relinquishes command to a more senior chaplain.
- In the event of a major incident the Senior Chaplain will most likely be on the scene and will remain in close communication with the Law Enforcement Incident Commander.
- In the regular operation of the Chaplaincy, communications from the field chaplains should be passed up through the Division Supervisors or the Communications Officer to the Senior Staff. This will keep the Division Supervisors aware of the concerns of the field chaplains, as well as identify any needs for prayer and support.