

Communication Problems and How to Correct Them

By Tim W. Hrastar



The cost of miscommunication moves along a continuum from simple misunderstandings, to the creation of hard-feelings, to total devastation. It can cost you money in having to re-do work, and can even cost you a case, a client, or a reputation.

Many communication problems emanate from people making assumptions—the speaker as well as the listener. We base what we hear on our previous knowledge and perceptions, and we try and match that to what the speaker says, and what we believe to be true. People expect us to make sense of what they say and fill in the correct meaning, even when they are not precise—and people don't realize they are not precise. Just because you have something in your mind that you want to get across, doesn't mean you actually communicated it.

People also don't expect to be asked what they mean, even if we don't understand—they assume they were clear in what they said. When we ask people to be more precise about what they mean, they sometimes get annoyed and defensive; hence sometimes we just don't bother asking. They take it for granted that we will understand them and depend on us to fill in what they haven't said themselves—they just assume we will understand it exactly the same way they do. Many times this results in having to do work over again—costly in time, money, and bad feelings.

Misunderstanding is normal because talk is routinely vague and ambiguous—it happens when the speaker creates one context, while the listener creates another. People can't read minds, but as a speaker we expect them to read ours, and as a listener our interpretations can be rooted in our misunderstanding.

Although both parties have a responsibility when communicating with each other, it's ultimately the responsibility of the listener to make sure the correct communication has occurred—don't walk away until you are completely satisfied you understand the message correctly.

Getting to Shared Context

Context is the; who, what, where, when, why, and how of any situation—it is the foundation of our experience in the world. Because context always comes from us—it is our context, and therefore our understanding, which may be different from the one the speaker intends us to have.

To understand each other it takes shared context. This means having the same basis for interpreting people's talk that they intend us to have. There are five ways we create shared context. The first is the use of formulations. This is when we label, or sum up the talk providing a framework for dialogue. When we formulate talk we actually step outside the conversation and tell people what they should understand us to be saying. "Now, I want to talk about this..." or, "What I mean is this..."

The second thing we do is ask questions to seek clarification. Questions give us an opportunity to check interpretations. Any situation where we are discouraged from asking questions invites misunderstanding.

Paraphrasing is the third way we share context with people. This gives us an opportunity to hear how you make sense of what they are saying. For example; "So what you are saying is..." This gives the other person an opportunity to clarify your paraphrased statement. "No, what I mean is this..." This is a great way to check perceptions. After all as the saying goes, 'there are no facts in the world—just perceptions.'



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The fourth method for sharing context is through the use of examples. It's a good way to move from the general to the specific. Using an example we know they will relate to helps form a clearer image in their mind of what we are talking about. "For example, it's like this..." "Oh yeah, now I understand what you mean."

And finally, we use stories for sharing context. When you tell someone a story it makes your ideas concrete. People remember stories. "Let me tell you a story to illustrate what I mean." Stories are effective for understanding and remembering concepts as well as details.

We use these five shared context techniques all the time—we just need to use them more often to be better understood, and reduce the instances of miscommunication.

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