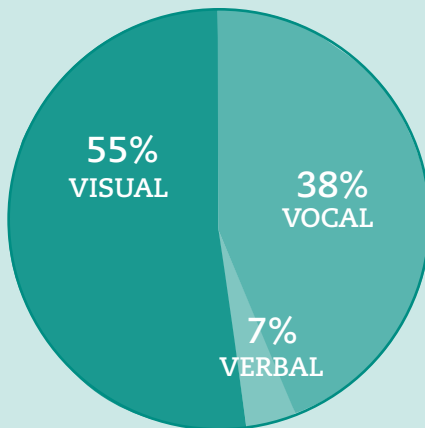




## Three Parts of a Message

When we interact with others, the messages we send are made up of three parts: (1) verbal—the words we speak; (2) vocal—the tone of our voice; and (3) visual—our body language.



**VERBAL:** We express our thoughts with words. Those words can be precise or imprecise, accusing (“You are...”), intense or mild (furious vs. annoyed), vague (“sort of”), pleading or demanding.<sup>2</sup>

Although words are invaluable in articulating our thoughts and ideas, research indicates that in personal interaction, words only contribute 7 percent to the overall message.

**VOCAL:** More important than the words we speak is the tone of voice we use. Our voices are incredibly

versatile. We can emphasize certain words; clip, force, or soften words; speak in a lilting, sing-songy, mimicking, or sneering tone; speak rapidly or slowly; over- or under-articulate, raise or lower the volume; and/or change the pitch. The possibilities are endless.

Tone of voice contributes 38 percent to the overall message.

**VISUAL:** Body language is the final, and most important, part of interpersonal interaction. Again, the possibilities are endless. Consider how these visual cues affect the message: roll eyes, shake, or tilt head, shrug shoulders, frown, purse lips, squint, raise eyebrows, furrow brow, cross arms, glare, sneer, lack of eye contact, rapid blink, glance side to side, point finger, exaggerate arm/hand gestures, tap fingers.

Visual cues contribute 55 percent to the overall message.

All three parts of a message must align and be consistent for the message to be believed. For example, if you say you accept someone, but you say it with a tense voice and crossed arms, chances are he or she won’t believe you. For the message to be clear, all three parts must “say” the same thing.



## Sending a Message

When a person sends a message, it is encoded—packaged—through his or her personality, emotions, attitudes, assumptions, habits, past experiences, and current environment. A person who is stressed will encode a message differently than someone who is relaxed. A passive person will encode a message differently than an aggressive individual. Someone who values frankness will encode a message differently than one who values tact.

An encoded message is presented behaviorally—through words, tone of voice, and body language. The receiver observes this behavior and decodes the message based on his or her own personality, feelings, attitudes, assumptions, habits, past experiences, and current environment. That is why two people listening to the same speaker can receive two entirely different messages.

### The Communication Loop

The process of sending and receiving messages is normally not a one-way street. In person-to-person communication, each individual sends and receives messages simultaneously. As I am talking, I am also observing and decoding your response. As you are observing and decoding my behavior, you are encoding and sending messages with your behavior. Our interaction forms a communication loop.

### Eight Potential Problems

In each communication loop, there are eight potential problems. Miscommunication can occur when either person has difficulty encoding his or her message or decoding the other person's message. It can also occur when either person's behavior does not match the intended encoding, or when either person is faulty in his or her observation of the other person's behavior. In an interaction where each person speaks only one sentence, there are 16 ways in which miscommunication can occur!

1. Person A's encoding
2. Person A's decoding
3. Person A's observation
4. Person A's behavior
5. Person B's decoding
6. Person B's encoding
7. Person B's behavior
8. Person B's observation



## Prime Objective

Why do you talk? Choose all those that apply:

- to demonstrate my superior wit and intelligence
- to get my way
- to vent
- to pass on information
- to qualify for the Ms. Congeniality award
- to conform to social expectations
- to help the plants grow
- to fill air space

Communication goals vary from conversation to conversation. In a business relationship, the goal may be to transmit instructions or directives. At a social gathering, the goal may be to break an awkward silence or to make someone feel welcome. Goals in communication vary, but the prime objective in communication does not.

When **receiving** a message, the prime objective is to understand the message. When **sending** a message, the prime objective is to convey the message clearly.

Some people are afraid to seek understanding because they feel that doing so will signify agreement. Conversely, some people do not feel their messages have been heard until the listener consents to the message. Effective communicators do not make this false association. In every interaction, they make understanding and clarity, not agreement or consent, their prime objective.



## Own It!

An important step to becoming an effective communicator is accepting responsibility for the part of the communication loop that belongs to you. Don't attempt to control the part that doesn't belong to you. When you expect and demand that someone thinks or behaves the way you want, you claim ownership for a part of the loop that is not yours and enter into a power struggle. The net result is conflict and miscommunication.

Healthy communication can only take place when each person accepts responsibility for his or her own part of the loop (see Matt. 12:36-37). Taking responsibility for your part of the loop means becoming aware of how your personality, feelings, attitudes, assumptions, habits, past experiences, and current environment affect the way you encode and decode messages (see p. 17).

It means carefully observing all the parts of the other person's message—verbal, vocal, and visual—and observing your own behavior to seek to be clear and consistent in the messages you send. Being responsible for your part of the loop means that you bear sole responsibility for what you think and say. No matter what the other person says or does, remind yourself, *I choose how I respond. I am responsible for me.*

### “I” Statements

The best way to indicate that you take responsibility for your part of the loop and not for the other person's is to use “I” rather than “you” statements. When you start your thought with “I”—“I think ... I feel ... I see ... I notice ... I assume... I interpret ...”—you demonstrate ownership of your thoughts, feelings, behavior, and interpretations. This decreases the chance that you will come across as judgmental or combative in your speech and increases the other person's receptiveness to your message.



## Adjust Your Attitude

Humans are not mind readers. Nor are we all-knowing. Adjusting our attitudes to be open to learn from others—even those with whom we disagree—is an important step toward effective communication.

An effective communicator is acutely aware of the complexity of the communication loop, her own limitations, and the potentials for miscommunication. She realizes that she is susceptible to misinterpreting the other person's behavior. She is open to the possibility that she might be wrong or that her behavior might be sending an inconsistent message, so she relies on feedback to confirm or correct the way she is decoding and encoding (see p. 17)

For example, Sally observes Fred speaking to her with a raised voice. Instead of assuming that he is angry, she checks out her decoding by asking: “I notice you are speaking with a raised voice. Are you feeling angry?”

“No,” Fred responds in surprise, “My ears are plugged because I’m getting a cold; I didn’t realize I was raising my voice. I’ll speak more quietly.”

If Sally had not asked for Fred’s feedback, she would have drawn the wrong conclusion. If Fred hadn’t heard Sally’s observation, he would have remained oblivious to how other people were interpreting his behavior. Sally changed her decoding, and Fred changed his encoding and behavior as a result of the exchange. They both learned. (See Prov. 27:17.)

1. Vine, W. E., *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1981), 1078.
2. Based on research by Dr. Albert Mehrabian, UCLA, as cited in Bert Decker, *The Art of Communicating* (Meno Park, CA: Crisp Publications, Inc., 1996), 10-11.
3. John Mason, *Don't Wait for Your Ship to Come In ... Swim Out to Meet It!* (Tulsa, OK: Honor Books, 1994), 63.





## Active Listening

Listening is an active process involving more than just the ears. The Chinese character for the verb to listen contains the symbols for ears, eyes, heart, and undivided attention.

Active listening means giving our undivided attention—hearing with our ears, observing carefully with our eyes, and understanding with our hearts.

### Listening Barriers

The average person speaks between 100 and 150 words per minute but thinks up to 600 words per minute. Our minds have a lot of spare time to use while others are talking! Use this time to focus on understanding the speaker's ideas.

Otherwise, you will create listening barriers such as:

**RUNNING AHEAD**—the barrier of thinking about what you are going to say next, or planning a rebuttal.

**WANDERING OFF**—being preoccupied, thinking about personal interests, or daydreaming.

**JUMPING IN**—characterized by interrupting the other person's thoughts to interject your own.

**BRUSHING AWAY**—the barrier of mentally categorizing the speaker's thoughts as unimportant or insignificant without duly considering them or assuming you already understand his or her perspective.

**BLOCKING OUT**—refusing to acknowledge the topic the other person is addressing or selectively filtering the message to block out portions.



## Ineffective Listening Habits

Do you recognize these types of listening patterns?

Assuming Alice can finish all your sentences, assuming she knows what you think and feel. She does not hear when you offer new or different information.

Defensive Dana is distrustful and touchy. She sees your remarks as personal attacks. Dana perceives that you are out to get her, so she is closed to hearing anything you have to say about her behavior.

Ambushing Amanda appears to listen carefully, but only because she is collecting information with which to attack you. She hears your words, but her goal is to use them later as ammunition.

Self-Centered Samantha manages to turn any conversation into an opportunity to showcase her own accomplishments and perspectives. All that matters to Sam is that you know what she thinks.

Solution Sally knows how to fix everything. Before she has even heard you out, she knows what you ought to do.

Denying Darla denies the significance of situations and your right to your feelings. “You shouldn’t feel that way” and “Don’t make such a big deal out of it” are her mottos.





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## LOVE TO LISTEN

Effective communicators work at LISTEN-ing skills:

**LIMIT YOUR LIP:** By talking less you give the other person the opportunity to express his or her thoughts. A philosopher once said, “We have been given two ears and but a single mouth, in order that we may hear more and talk less.”

**IDENTIFY KEY ISSUES:** Effective listeners use their “spare” thinking time to extract the main thought from the speaker’s words and behavior. They ask themselves such questions as How does he feel? What does this mean to her?

**SILENCE DISTRACTIONS:** Listening distractions can be external—ringing cell phones and doorbells, radio, TV, or other conversations—or internal—preoccupation with other thoughts, fatigue, and/or stress. Effective listeners do everything possible to silence the internal and external distractions that hinder their ability to listen.

**TABLE CONCLUSIONS:** Most of us are guilty of making snap judgments, especially when the speaker’s ideas differ from our own. Instead of exchanging ideas, conversations turn into verbal combat with “opponents” trying to claim victory for their point of view. Effective listeners table their conclusions until they understand the speaker’s point of view.

**ECHO AND INQUIRE:** Effective listeners check to make sure they are decoding the speaker’s thoughts and feelings accurately by reflecting their understanding back to the speaker for verification (echo), and by asking questions (inquire). They do not conclude that they understand until the speaker clarifies and verifies the listener’s decoding.

**NEGATE DEFENSIVENESS:** The listener’s goal in this step is to understand the speaker’s perspective—what the speaker thinks and feels and why. The goal is not to defend, give a rebuttal, or counterattack. Effective listeners receive messages nondefensively.