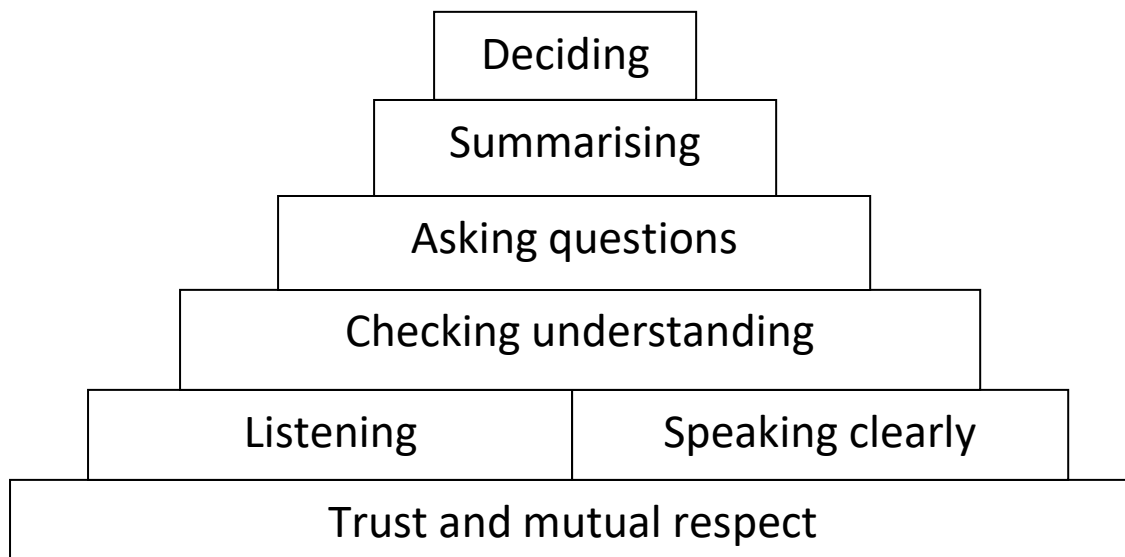


# Key communication skills for committee meetings

The key skills needed for effective communication within committees are demonstrated by the following diagram.



## Listening

Human beings spend on average around 75% of our waking hours engaged in some form of verbal communication. Of 45% is spent listening, compared to only 30% speaking.<sup>1</sup> And yet **people with normal hearing take in on average only 25% of what we hear.** Why do we find it so difficult to listen really well?



this,  
we

One reason is that we think much faster than people speak. While we can speak at a rate of about 125 to 140 words a minute, our brains are capable of understanding words at least five times more quickly. The result is that our minds tend to race ahead, creating meaning before we have properly heard the speaker.

<sup>1</sup> *Listening* – V. Smith, in *A Handbook of Communication Skills* - Hargie (1986)

When we listen, we automatically try to 'fit' what the other person says into our own inner 'maps' of the world. We are constantly *interpreting* what we hear so that it conforms to our pre-existing knowledge, beliefs, values and prejudices.<sup>2</sup>

Another reason we so often miss much of the *content* of what we hear is that we are busy focusing on our *relationship* with the speaker – for example, worrying about being liked, or making comparisons about our relative status.

Good listening, then, is an active skill which we can learn and constantly improve on. In committees, we need to spend much more time listening than speaking.

## Speaking to be understood

Although **listeners** have an important part to play in good communication, it is in the first place the responsibility of **speakers** to make themselves understood. Some speakers make it hard work for their listeners! Think of those people who talk in meetings as if they are addressing a packed auditorium ("I JUST LOVE THE SOUND OF MY OWN VOICE...") Or those who gabble away at length, hardly pausing to take a breath ("I just *have* to get this off my chest...").



So the first thing to do, if you want to be understood, is to **take account of your listeners**. This means watching their reactions, leaving pauses for them to take in what you are saying, asking if they are following you and if they have understood.

Secondly, **use plain language**. Try to use simple, everyday words. Thirdly, break down what you want to say into short, manageable **chunks**. People find it hard to listen for long periods of time, so try to keep it brief.

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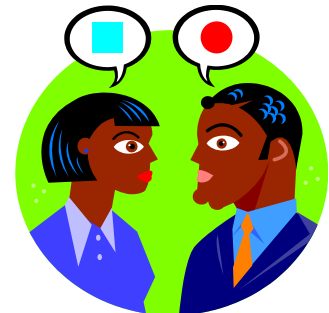
<sup>2</sup> *Mutual Misunderstanding* - T.Taylor (1992)

Fourthly, be aware of the **sound of your voice**. Speak clearly, vary the tone (for example to emphasise points), and don't rush.

And finally, try to **connect with the listeners** by linking what you have to say with them. Most people like stories and real-life images, so try to illustrate abstract ideas with concrete examples.

## Checking understanding

An important way of improving communication is to check understanding before responding. We can do this by **paraphrasing**: repeating, in our own words, what we think they are saying. We act as a mirror for their communication. This allows the other person to correct any misunderstandings, and prevents us from rushing to judgement.



*"So you feel that these youngsters are totally out of control..."*  
*"No, I'm saying that a small number of them are out of control – and they must be challenged..."*

If someone is talking in generalisations, we can check our understanding by **asking for examples**:

*"When you say 'challenged', what do you mean? Could you give me an example?"*

## Summarising

In committee meetings it can be very hard for everyone to keep in their heads everything that has been said, and to separate out less important points from essential ones. **Summarising** is an extremely useful way of enabling the committee to reach a shared understanding. Effective summaries do a number of things:

- They remind the group of the key points that have been made, and ensure that important ideas don't get lost
- They check that everyone has a shared understanding
- They help the group to prioritise and focus
- They provide a platform for proposals and decision-making.

Any member of a committee can usefully offer summaries from time to time – although it is common for the chairperson to do it.

## Asking questions

Asking the right question at the right time is a really useful skill in committee meetings. Different types of question take the other person in different directions. By learning how to choose and use questions, you can have enormous influence over the information that you are given.



**Open questions** encourage others to talk around an issue in an open way (*"How's the project been going?" "How do you feel about this issue?"*)

**Closed questions** seek a yes or no answer. They encourage others to take a position, and help to move the committee towards a clear decision (*"Will the council pay for the work?" "Shall we go ahead with a festival in the summer?"*)

**Direct questions** ask for particular information (*"How much is in this year's budget?"*)

**Clarifying questions** follow on from others' statements, and are used to check if you've understood or to seek more detail (*"So you feel we should not get involved in this dispute?"*).

## Making your case in a meeting

How do you put across an argument and persuade other people to support you? Here's a protocol that might help, for example in meetings or when you presenting your ideas to a committee:

- Make a **clear summary** of your argument, ideally at the start. (*"I think we should look for funding for this project"*)

- **Sell the benefits** (*It's excellent value for money, would show we mean business, and would tackle one of the biggest problems in the community*)
- **Provide evidence** (*Similar projects in 3 other neighbourhoods have all led to sustainable jobs*)
- If necessary, show you **understand objections** (*I know the location isn't perfect*) and have taken them into account (*but that could easily be overcome with good publicity and signs*)
- **Repeat your summary** at the end, ideally with a call to **action** (*I think we should seek funding for this project, and that we ask the Director for her support.*)
- Show you are **open** to discussion and disagreement (*I'd like to hear what others think.*), since people will react against you if they feel you are trying to impose your position on them.

## Reaching decisions in meetings

The **ability to make proposals** is a valuable committee skill. A common difficulty in meetings is having too many proposals: one person makes a proposal, another makes a counter-proposal, another counters the counter-proposal, and so on. Once you have a number of different proposals on the table, a decision cannot be reached without some people being 'defeated', 'rejected' or 'losing face'. The best way to avoid this is to **build on proposals**. So if someone makes a proposal that you do not totally agree with, instead of *countering* the proposal, you should refine or add to it.



Proposal: *"I suggest that we write to the Director complaining about the staff cuts."*

A counter-proposal would be: *"I don't agree with writing complaining letters – they never get you anywhere. I suggest that we meet the Chair of the Board instead."*

Whereas building on the proposal would be: *"I agree that we should complain. Perhaps we should copy it to the Chair of the Board and request a meeting to discuss our concerns..."*

Most agenda items end with some kind of decision. Here are the most common types:

<b>Decision type</b>	<b>Example</b>
To follow a course of action	<i>A working group will prepare an outline programme for the fun-day, with estimated costs</i>
To do nothing	<i>It was decided not to organise any social events this summer</i>
To find out more	<i>Jacqui will contact the Parks Department to find out if we need a licence</i>
To refer to another group	<i>It was decided to ask the Youth Forum if their budget could cover the proposed adventure weekend</i>
To adopt a policy	<i>The committee agreed that all this year's social events should have the theme: 'Bringing young and older people together'</i>
To note for information	<i>It was noted that the 'building communities' grants can now fund social events</i>