

Communication Skills: Using the Five “Why’s” to Create Specific, Descriptive Verbal Messages

Description

Too often people fall into a shorthand way of speaking: “That’s an excellent idea!” “Eeew, that’s gross!” Comments like these are easy to make and are often accepted without question, but what do they mean? What makes an idea “excellent”? When something is described as “Gross!” the word conveys the speaker’s feelings but the lack of information might be inadequate for listeners. However, when individuals speak specifically and descriptively, they present their thoughts and feelings with enough detail that listeners are more likely to receive the information they want or need.

Learners

This lesson motivates learners to consider their word choices and to select words that are descriptive and specific:

- 1) to thoroughly present the thoughts and feelings of the speaker
- 2) to convey sufficient information to listeners
- 3) to provide necessary detail to make decisions about future courses of action

Equipment

This exercise can be conducted without equipment; however, if the purpose of the assignment is to extend the range of students’ descriptive vocabularies regarding food products or a class project, props should be available to respond to and compare their descriptions with other students’ descriptions. If the purpose is to enhance student awareness of their word choices, a stimulus statement needs to be made available.

Facilitator

The practice session serves to make students aware of varying levels of generalization or specificity that are conveyed through word choices. Typically called the “Ladder of Abstraction (Hayakawa, 1941)”, the following example shows how varying degrees of specificity can change the information that is conveyed through a message:

Example of Ladder of Abstraction

Statement 1: Those potatoes are yucky!

Statement 2: The color of these potatoes is strange.

Statement 3: These potatoes are green.

Statement 4: They've been stored in the light.

Statement 5: According to page 10 of our textbook, potatoes turn green when exposed to light. They are not very attractive and the green part tastes bitter, but they are still safe to eat.

A series of statements that range from general to specific such as is the case with the example represents what is called the “ladder of abstraction.” At one end of the series, in this case, Statement 1, the sentence is too vague or general to be meaningful; at the other end of the series, Statement 5 is detailed and specific, but might offer more information than is needed. Often a statement that is somewhere between provides the needed information. In the case of this series, the third statement, “These potatoes are green,” might provide enough information to listeners who are knowledgeable about potatoes.

How can the most informative level of specificity be determined? By asking “why” after each statement until a statement provides the necessary information at the most helpful level of specificity. The title of this lesson, “The five whys...” means that by the time the fifth “why” is asked, the needed information as provided by the degree of detail will have been provided. In the example, there is only room for four whys. The fifth why would come after the last statement. What would be a likely response to the fifth why? An additional consideration might be to determine other responses besides asking “why?” Asking for an example is another way to encourage a speaker to be more specific, or to provide more details.

Instructions

The best way to introduce the concept of specificity and description is to begin with a general statement that has meaning to students. If the exercise is conducted in conjunction with a class project, the general statement should be related to the class project. “The strawberries taste different.” Or “The plants look great.” If the purpose is to raise student awareness regarding their word choices, any series of general statements will serve as practice.

Organize students into pairs. One student states the most general message. The partner asks “why?” The student restates the message with more detail. The partner asks “why?” The conversation should continue until the student is unable to supply any more detail or until the partner has asked “why?” five times. The pair discusses which of the statements would provide the needed information. The partners change roles and repeat the exercise with a different statement.

Examples of general statements to use for practice:

“It was a great movie.”

“_____ is a flashy car!”

“What a day I’ve just had!”

“_____ is my favorite food.”

“He/she is a cool dude.”

“_____ is my best class.”

“The weekend was a drag.”

“The test was hard.”

“It was a so-so football game.”

The 5-why exercise can be practiced with or applied to a variety of situations. Students can practice giving instructions to each other with the check being whether the recipient of the instructions carries them out exactly as the giver intends. The exercise can be used as practice for listening skills (See “Communication Skills: Listening.”) The lesson can also be used in conjunction with units related to problem solving (See “Communication Skills: Problem Solving Paris” or “Communication Skills: Solving Problems in Groups and Teams.”)

It is not only important that students practice achieving the necessary level of abstraction or specificity in a given situation, it is also important that the receiver of the message be persistent about asking “why” or generating other methods for helping the sender of the message achieve the necessary level of specificity to achieve mutual understanding.

References and Resources

Gibb, J. (1961). “Defensive communication.” *The Journal of Communication*, 11, 141-

148. (The article discusses a variety of approaches to presenting verbal messages that contribute to a supportive interaction. Also discussed are verbal messages that result in defensiveness.)

Hayakawa, S. I. & Hayakawa, A. R. (1990). *Language in thought and action*. (5th ed). New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich. (S. I. Hayakawa, to whom the ladder of abstraction is attributed, discusses other semantic considerations in this more recent edition of his noted exploration of semantics.)

A Google search using “ladder of abstraction” will result in the ladder of abstraction as it relates to a variety of professions and applications.