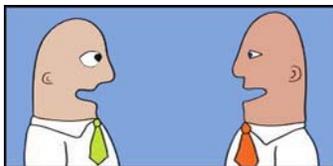


Listen To Your Self-Talk—Improve Your Communication¹

Arnie Dahlke
(January 31, 2011)



Effective communication is a critical ingredient of organizational functioning. An essential component of effective communication is truly listening to and understanding another person—*actively listening*. A major piece of active listening is *empathy*. Empathy means listening to people at an emotional level—being acutely aware of their feelings and their attitudes. You can sharpen this empathy skill by listening to your *self-talk*.

When we meet with people in an organization, our behavior is driven by our *self-talk*. Without realizing it, *we become and do what we tell ourselves*. Our self-talk shapes our views of ourselves, of others, and of the world around us. It profoundly affects our relations with fellow employees, customers, and everyone else with whom we interact.

Being aware of our self-talk is an important step to truly understanding and improving our empathic communication with others. *Listening to our self-talk is a way to fine-tune our empathy*. Following is a strategy for helping you do that.

Listen To Your Self-Talk

Many years ago, teachers of grammar used a visual technique known as “sentence diagramming.” It was a graphic method for identifying components of speech and the proper use of those components in a sentence. The technique consisted of translating a sentence into a diagram containing horizontal, vertical, and diagonal lines. The three most important parts of the sentence, the *subject*, the *verb*, and the *object*, are placed on top of a horizontal line. Vertical lines are then used to separate each part.



The technique consisted of translating a sentence into a diagram containing horizontal, vertical, and diagonal lines. The three most important parts of the sentence, the *subject*, the *verb*, and the *object*, are placed on top of a horizontal line. Vertical lines are then used to separate each part.

For example, “Jack gives speeches” would be diagrammed as shown at the right. Notice that this is a very simple, logical sentence. It has no good, bad, happy, or sad meaning. It is simply a statement of fact without any emotion.



Let’s see what happens when we add some modifiers: “*Young Jack always gives great* speeches. Now we have a sentence with a very positive, feel-good meaning!

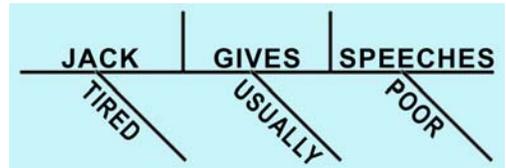


Notice how the diagram reflects the basic structure of the sentence: the main part of the sentence, the “skeletal” part, so to speak, is on top of the horizontal line, while everything below the line “modifies” or adds an emotional loading to the rest of the sentence.

¹ From: <http://arniedahlke.com/timelytips.htm> —Please take a moment to look at Arnie’s site: www.arniedahlke.com

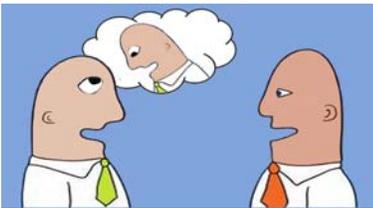
The skeletal part of the sentence could stand by itself and still be understandable: “Jack gives speeches.” The modifiers, below the line, are really unnecessary for basic, factual communication. But they do add emotional flavor—the sentence is richer in meaning with them.

We could completely change the loading of our basic sentence from positive to negative by changing the modifiers: “*Tired Jack usually gives terrible speeches.*” What a difference! Now our basic sentence has an entirely different meaning. In other words, *your choices of modifiers* (such as adjectives, adverbs, and modifying phrases) are indicators of the emotional flavor of your thinking, your feelings, and your attitudes.



Often, without a total awareness of the feelings wrapped up in our communication, we signal our judgments, perceptions, feelings, and intentions to others by the modifiers we choose.

Further, those modifiers are reinforced by the nonverbal part of our communication—our tone of voice, our body posture. I may say very enthusiastically, “Young Jack always gives *great* speeches!” Or I might say with a sarcastic tone of voice, “Tired Jack usually gives *terrible* speeches!”



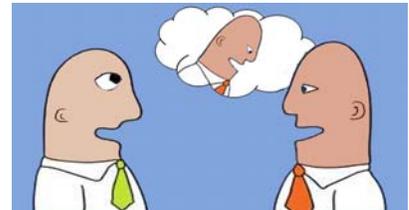
- ✓ Train yourself to listen to your self-talk.
- ✓ Pay attention to the modifiers you use before you speak.
- ✓ Be aware of how your word choices and their accompanying nonverbal movements are shaping your communication to the other person.

You may be surprised to learn how often you have been unaware of the emotional and perceptual forces fueling your communication.

Listen To *Their* Self-Talk

- ✓ Once you have trained yourself to be continuously aware of your own self-talk, you will find yourself becoming more aware of the word and nonverbal choices of others.
- ✓ You will have opened a little window to *their* thinking—you will be able to get a glimpse of the self-talk behind *their* communication.

In short, you will sharpen your skill at listening to them with empathy.



Practice, Practice, And Practice Some More

Many of us are not very experienced at introspection—looking inward at ourselves. It takes focus and a lot of practice. Practice listening to your self-talk every day. Practice being aware of the impact of the modifiers that you use. Not only will you improve the way you communicate, you also will find yourself more actively, more empathically, listening to others.

As I said at the beginning of this Timely Tip, being able to listen to others with empathy is an important step in maintaining good communication in your workplace. The more we are able to listen to and really understand each other—the thoughts, perceptions, and feelings that drive us—the more open and effective will be our communication with one another.

