



Stage 1 - LEADERSHIP FOR ORGANISATIONS

Module 8 – GROUP COMMUNICATION SKILLS

The Leadership Academy is a learning and action programme for mayors, senior officials and elected representatives of local government.

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1 MODULE OVERVIEW

1.1 BACKGROUND

- The art of leadership depends to a large extent on individual personal capacity to communicate well. Communications is a 2-way process. It is not only about delivering messages in the most effective way; it is also about listening and being able to understand what the other person is really saying.
- The most common ground for the exercise of communication is the working environment. Working in groups in fact represents one of the most significant forms of interaction in society at large, and in organisations specifically. Team work implies making plans, reviewing activities or coming to agreed decisions based on all available information and good judgement, overcoming potential disagreement that might arise among team members. This is an essential part of managing change, for which leadership is critical.

1.2 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- To understand the drivers of effective communication.
- To experience the importance of the group as a 'multiplier' of ideas and prospectives.
- To learn and experience tools for different group interaction methods.

1.3 LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Participants become aware of how to communicate more effectively and strengthen personal listening abilities
- Participants understand the strengths and risks of different strategies that can be employed in approaching an argument.
- Participants learn how to use the strategy for a given situation that would maximise chances of success.

1.4 DURATION

- 210 minutes

2 MODULE STRUCTURE

2.1 INTERACTIVE INTRODUCTION

- Participants work in pairs, talking to each other in turns (3 min. each), about any topic of their choice;
- Participants are introduced to the concept and practice of active listening and to the importance to pay attention not only to words but also to tone of voice and body language;
- Participants gather back in their couples and try to do the same exercise applying the principles of active listening.

2.2 GROUP EXERCISE 1 – ROLE PLAY

- Participants are introduced to the concept of group dynamics and their relevance to foster the achievement of a goal or to contribute to its failure;
- Participants are divided in groups (of 11 persons, according to the number of participants, of which 9 are characters of the role play and 2 are observers) and prepare a role play, according to instructions received;
- Observer participants are asked to take notes on:
 - Which character dominated the discussion? Which one was less impacting?

- What were the declared goals and possible hidden goals of each character?
- In what ways was the interaction itself encouraged / impeded?
- To what degree was the discussion successful to reach an agreement?

2.3 INDIVIDUAL EXERCISE – ASSERTIVENESS

- Participants are asked to work individually on the assertiveness self-assessment.

2.4 GROUP EXERCISE 2

- Participants are introduced to the different strategies for managing conflict within a group;
- Participants are asked to identify strengths and weakness of each strategy, working in small groups (3-4 people).

2.5 GROUP EXERCISE 3

- Participants work in small groups to fill in Section 5.3 tables, imagining examples in which the use of a certain strategy might be useful/successful. They can draw examples from their work experience or invent realistic situations where each strategy might apply.

3 WORKING DEFINITIONS

3.1 COMMUNICATION

For the purpose of LAP 'communication' is intended as a 2-way process, not only about delivering messages in the most effective way (see Assertiveness) but also about being able to understand what the other person is really saying (see Active Listening).

3.2 ACTIVE LISTENING

According to the definition given by Carl Rogers, active listening implies a capacity of the listener to

test constantly his/her ability to see the world in the way the speaker sees it. This is usually done by reflecting in the listener's own words what the speaker seems to mean by his/her words and actions. The response to the listener's hypothesis this will tell whether or not the speaker feels understood.

3.3 ASSERTIVENESS

The term "assertiveness" describes a form of communication of own needs and feelings in a way that is direct and respectful of others.

4 KEY CONCEPTS

4.1 ACTIVE LISTENING

Communication skills are essential for LAP purposes, as leadership implies necessarily a level of interaction within organisations. The basis of communication is listening.

“Active listening” is a way of listening and responding to another person that improves mutual understanding by overcoming communication roadblocks.

On the reasons behind active listening and what it is about. “Because understanding another person is actually far more difficult than it at first seems, it is important to test constantly your ability to see the world in the way the speaker sees it. You can do this by reflecting in your own words what the speaker seems to mean by his words and actions. His response to this will tell you whether or not he feels understood. A good rule of thumb is to assume that you never really understand until you can communicate this understanding to the others satisfaction”.¹

This implies that it is important for a good listener never to suppose to have understood what the speaker is saying, or feeling, without having checked this first and directly with the speaker him/herself.

A useful tool in this sense is paraphrasing. Through paraphrasing, the listener repeats shortly what he thinks he has understood from the speaker. The steps of the paraphrasing process are, briefly:

- Letting the speaker finish what he/she wanted to say.
- Restating with own words what was understood from the speaker’s words.
- If the speaker confirms understanding, it is then possible to continue the conversation, with the added value that the speaker feels understood.

- If the speaker indicates that his/words have been misinterpreted, there opens up the chance for the speaker to better specify or clarify what he/she meant.

Paraphrasing is very useful for facts, statements. However, in communication there is always also an emotional layer, that defines the ‘flavour’ of that communication and is important to codify the state of mind of the speaker on a certain topic. An attentive listener would pick emotional traits in the story the speaker is telling. He/she could then also ‘rephrase’ the emotion he/she felt in the speaker.

E.g. L: *“So it seems this episode made you very upset”*

Here the speaker would have a chance to clarify better or to explore further his/her feelings.

Possible answers:

S: “Yes, I was indeed very upset!”

S: “No, not really. I guess this whole thing scared me rather than upsetting me”

S: “Uhm, I never thought of this as an upsetting event. However, now that you mention it, I think that I was a bit upset”.

In few words, active listening implies first of all a constant check among the two people communicating.

There might be further tools to be added to this basic instrument of active listening. Here, some of them are summarized according to later developments of the practice of active listening into working environments²:

- Basic Acknowledgment of the other

Includes verbal, visual / non-verbal signs and vocal sounds; these let the speaker know that the listener is actually listening with interest and respect. They include head-nodding, leaning

¹ Rogers, C. R. and Farson, R. E. (1987). Active Listening, Excerpt from Communicating in Business Today, R.G. Newman, M.A. Danzinger, M. Cohen (eds), D.C. Heath & Company, 1987

² Wisinski, J. (1993). Resolving Conflicts on the Job, American Management Association

forward or backward, making eye contact, saying things like “Yes”, “I hear you”, “So..”, “I see”, “Tell me more”, to encourage the speaker to carry on and ensure presence.

- Questions

Asking questions is important for a good understanding as it is easy to misunderstand or neglect details that are important for the speaker.

An active listener is asking questions in order to:

- Know more, to gain a better understanding of the speaker's point of view.*
- Know more, to discover things that the speaker considers 'obvious' (in his/her point of view) and thus does not state.*

In these situations, open-ended questions provide the listener with further details to better understand the speaker. It also allows the speaker to open up, as well as to further explore his/her thoughts and feelings.

4.2 ASSERTIVENESS

“Assertiveness” is a form of communication of own needs and feelings in a way that is at the same time direct and respectful of others’.

Assertiveness is closely linked to good self awareness (ref. Module 5) and is a very valuable skill to develop for leadership purposes.

Before describing how it is possible to enhance own assertiveness styles, it is important to have an overview of ways of communicating that fail in being direct and clear, or in respecting other people’s needs and feelings. These are:

- Passive communication: a person using this style often does so to avoid criticism and/or conflict. It’s a style that implies pleasing others, but this is done at the costs of the speakers’ own needs and feelings, that are not valued primarily by the speaker him/herself in first instance.
- Aggressive communication: a person communicating aggressively can seem a good communicator (listeners might fear

the speaker and tend to obey him/her). However, this style of communication is based on the predominance of one on others, not considering needs and feelings beyond the own. In the long term, such style is not effective (especially for what concerns leadership purposes) as it does not allow to build trust.

- Passive-Aggressive communication: people using this style tend to use a pleasing or relaxed tone or manners, while actually acting aggressively ‘under the surface’. It ultimately means that one is not willing to settle for what has been decided/agreed upon, or for what others need or ask for, but without declaring it. There is usually a lack of self-awareness about own needs and feeling in this case. This often implies damaging others, often without being aware about it.

Becoming assertive in communication requires first of all a good degree of self-awareness about own needs and feelings. When aware about events, circumstances, people awake in oneself, one can communicate this assertively to others, using a simple formula:

1. Describing what the other person has done *“When you ...”*. Here it is important to describe facts, not interpretations of what the other person did. For instance *“When you raised the tone of your voice in answering to my question”* rather than *“When you attacked me for no reason at all!”*
2. Describing the effect that this had on self *“I felt...”*. A brief explanation of the details can be added. It is important to state own feelings and not to accuse the other person of these feelings. For instance *“I felt really scared”* rather than *“You made me feel very scared”*.
3. Asking for a different approach in a next potential communication (if the feeling was not pleasant) *“Next time I would appreciate if ...”*. Here it is important to recognise own real needs and not to ask for a “compensation”. For instance, continuing the example from above *“I would appreciate if you could keep your tone of voice lower, I am easily*

impressed” rather than “I would appreciate that you stop attacking me and thus never raise your tone with me again!”

Or thanking the other person if the feeling was pleasant:

“When you took your time to explain to me a think you had already explained, I felt understood in my difficulty. It was a very nice feeling, thank you”.

4.3 REACHING AGREEMENT

Argument is a common human experience. It can arise in one-to-one discussions, team meetings, performance appraisals, community meetings, negotiations etc. – indeed wherever there is human interaction.

In many cases, argument can be constructive. It can force out the ideas of both sides so that participants in a discussion can come to a more fruitful decision. It can encourage the creativity that may be necessary to find new solutions to common problems.

There are many kinds of arguments that might arise during team working within an organisation. They can be, for example:

- About deciding priorities for a budget;
- Between a member of staff and his/her manager about an aspect of performance;
- About differences within the team on prioritisation
- Etc.

Dealing with conflict and building consensus can be done according to different strategies:

4.3.1 Strategies for Consensus Building³

Assertiveness:	Focus on own needs, desired outcomes and agenda.
Cooperativeness:	Focus on both own and others’ needs and mutual relationships.
Competing:	Win-lose power struggle.
Collaborating:	Expand range of options; achieve win-win outcome.
Compromising:	Achieve outcome acceptable to all; protect relationships.
Avoiding:	Withdraw from the situation; maintain neutrality.
Accommodating:	Accede to the other party’s interests; maintain harmony.
Losing	Ensure both parties lose to avoid situation getting worse.

These strategies are like leadership styles. However, some strategies are poorly equipped to deal with certain kinds of conflicts. For example, a competing strategy may be damaging in cases where teamwork is essential. An accommodating strategy may be ineffective if a clear sense of direction is required. It is therefore important to use the right strategy in the light of the specific context. Leadership is about being comfortable with using not just a ‘favourite’ strategy, but to be confident with and able to use a range of strategies.

It is important to recognise the appropriate context when deciding to use a specific strategy. For example, a competing strategy can increase stress; even if it seems the most appropriate to solve the problem at hand, it might not be wise to

³Elaborated from the Thomas-Kilman model, Thomas, K.V. and Kilman, R.H. (1977). Developing a forced choice measure of conflict-handling behavior

use it if high levels of stress are already widespread within the team.

If trying to generate a collective sense of purpose in a team, avoiding underlying tensions might prove counterproductive. If seeking to achieve high standards in a team's performance, an accommodating strategy will be least desirable as it might imply the need to accept the attitudes of those that are content with the mediocre.

Different organisations can encourage – whether intentionally or unintentionally – different strategies for solving disagreement.

This predominance of specific strategies within an organisation can lead to specific behaviours becoming common-place⁴:

Avoiding	Avoid mistakes; minimise responsibility	'Impoverished'
Accommodating	Prioritise hopes over reality, plans over achievements	'Security and comfort'
Losing	Bloody-mindedness but for a valid reason	Delay and possible loss of confidence

STRATEGY	BEHAVIOUR	CULTURAL OUTCOME
Competing	Rules and punishments; pay for performance	'Produce or perish'
Collaborating	High levels of commitment; preference for win-win solutions	'Achieve through team-work'
Compromising	Balance interests of organisation and staff	'Aim for the acceptable'

⁴ This draws on the theory underlying the Blake-Mouton Management Grid, developed in the 1950s by mathematician and psychologist Jane Mouton and psychologist Robert Blake

5 EXERCISES

5.1 EXERCISE 1- GROUP EXERCISE 1- ROLE PLAY

5.1.1 Topics for discussion

- The Local Authority is determined to improve performance and will begin to take action to remove poorly performing staff and significantly improve performance among the rest.
- The Local Authority wants to launch a major initiative to engage local people and organisations in the work of the Local Authority; it will shift 5% of next year's budget for this purpose.
- The Local Authority wants to start an inter-municipal cooperation project with 3 neighbouring Local Authorities to share the fire service.

5.1.2 Role Cards

The following 9 role cards must be printed or copied by hand and distributed among participants in such way that each participant will receive only one card. Participants should not know of the roles of other participants.

Take notice of the special nature of following tasks:

- There are 4 information-supporting tasks: to give information, to find information, to put a question, to explain something or define it more exactly, to sum up.
- There are 3 tasks with affirmative functions: to encourage other members, to harmonize group activity and to be a guiding force.
- There are 3 individual roles: blocking and bragging.

5.1.4 Individual roles

(Please cut them out and distribute them among group members; participants should not know the roles of the others)

1. Your function -- to give an information. You may give some facts (even if you will have to fabricate them), express your convictions and propose any ideas that occur to you.

2. Your function -- to find information. Ask for it. You may put questions about the group. Ask them to express their suggestions and proposals; try to obtain the ideas from them.

3. Your function -- to explain and specify, to define information more exactly. You may clarify a matter by interpreting someone's words, adding examples to illustrate a problem; you might repeat the ideas of others in your own words.

4. Your function -- to sum up. You may do it at any time (don't wait for the end). Try to collect together similar ideas. Indicate the points of agreement and disagreement, or try to offer a way to achieve consensus by proposing a way forward in line with the ideas of others.

5. Your function -- to encourage other members. Behave benevolently, demonstrate your warm-heartedness and respect for everyone. Show that you accept their contribution and appreciate it.

6. Your function -- to harmonize contradictions, reconciling them. Point to the areas that do not provoke controversy. Reduce tension by giving the group an opportunity to analyse differences of opinion.

7. Your function -- to co-ordinate group activity, to be a guiding force. Make certain that everyone who wanted to speak has been given such an opportunity. For instance, tell: "Let us listen to so-and-so... He or she wanted to tell us about something". You may also express your opinion about how the interaction might be improved.

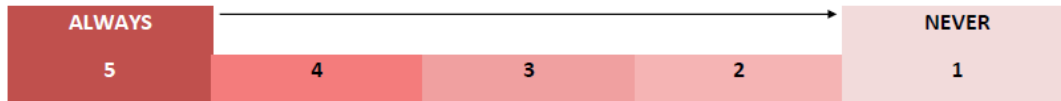
8. Your function -- to block group activity. Show that you have different views. When the group gets close to reaching an agreement, announce your contrary opinion. You may slow down the working process by recollecting some details which were agreed before or by taking an unreasonable position.

9. Your function -- to boast. Allege that you know everything about a subject, and that you already have taken every possible measure. Express your good will and seek consent to be at the head of something; do everything that will emphasise your personal significance.

5.2 EXERCISE 2 – INDIVIDUAL EXERCISE – ASSERTIVENESS SELF-ASSESSMENT

Before learning how to develop your assertiveness, it is important to take a few moments to get some idea of where you are right now. Answer the questions below honestly. They will help you gain some insights about your current level of assertiveness.

Assign a number to each item using this scale:



I ask others to do things without feeling guilty or anxious.	
When someone asks me to do something that I don't want to do, I say "no" without feeling guilty or anxious.	
I am comfortable when speaking to a large group of people.	
I confidently express my honest opinions to authority figures (such as my boss).	
When I experience powerful feelings (anger, frustration, disappointment etc.), I verbalise them easily.	
When I express anger, I do so without blaming others for "making me mad".	
I am comfortable speaking in a group situation.	
If I disagree with the majority opinion in a meeting, I can "stick to my guns" without feeling uncomfortable or being abrasive.	
When I make a mistake, I will acknowledge it.	
I tell others when their behaviour creates a problem for me.	
Meeting new people in social situations is something I do with ease and comfort.	
When discussing my beliefs, I do so without labelling the opinions of others as "crazy", "stupid", "ridiculous", "irrational".	
I assume that most people are competent and trustworthy.	
When considering doing something I have never done before, I feel confident I can learn to do it.	
I believe my needs are as important as those of others and I am entitled to have my needs satisfied.	

Your Score

- If your total is 60 or higher, you have a consistently assertive approach and probably handle most situations well. You may receive some ideas from this session to further improve your skills and effectiveness.
- If your total is 45-60, you have a fairly assertive approach. There are some situations in which you may be naturally assertive, but this session will help you increase your assertiveness through practice.
- If your total is 30-45, you seem to be assertive in some situations but your natural response is either non-assertive or aggressive. Using the suggestions in this session to change some perceptions; practising new behaviours should allow you to handle things much more assertively in the future.
- If your total is 15-30, there might be some attitudes that can be improved to enhance your assertiveness. If you follow the road outlined in this session, practice and allow yourself time to grow and change, you can become much more comfortable in situations where asserting yourself is important.

5.3 EXERCISE 3- GROUP EXERCISE 3- STRATEGIES TO REACH AGREEMENT

There are various strategies that can be used to tackle an issue or reach agreement with other persons. However, there are specific situations when one of the strategies will be the approach that is more likely to succeed. However, there are risks in any approach that will need to be managed.

5.3.1 Collaborating (I win, you win)

Good teamwork and cooperation will help everyone achieve their objectives while maintaining a good sense of teamwork. Working through differences can lead to creative solutions that satisfy both parties.

SITUATIONS	RISKS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where there is a high level of trust • When you want to share responsibility • When you want others to have ownership of solutions • When you want to shift peoples' thinking • When you need to sort out hostility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The process takes time and energy • Some people may take advantage of other people's trust and openness
EXAMPLE	

5.3.2 Compromising (you bend, I bend)

This means winning something while losing something at the same time in order to achieve a satisfactory outcome for both parties. This allows each party to save something of their original position.

SITUATIONS	RISKS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When people of similar status are both committed to a satisfactory outcome • When time can be saved by reaching agreement on intermediate issues • When the objectives are important 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Important values and longer term objectives may be sacrificed • May fail if initial demands are excessive • Can generate cynicism
EXAMPLE	

5.3.3 Accommodating (I lose, you win)

This approach may be helpful in achieving a goal that is especially important. It can avoid serious confrontation that might damage relationships by downplaying conflict.

SITUATIONS	RISKS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When an issue is not as important to you as to the other person • When you realise that you are wrong or cannot win • When it is a good time to let others learn by mistake 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your ideas do not get the attention they may deserve • Credibility and influence can be lost

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When it is the right time to build credit for the future • When harmony is very important • When what the parties have in common is much more significant than their differences
EXAMPLE

5.3.4 Competing (I win, you lose)

This may be important when the objectives are very important and when a deterioration in the relationships may be a price worth paying.

SITUATIONS	RISKS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When you know that you are right • When time is short and a decision is needed • When one party is using bullying tactics that cannot be allowed to succeed • When it is important to stand up for peoples' rights or values 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can escalate conflict • Can provoke retaliation • Might lose support elsewhere
EXAMPLE	

5.3.5 Avoiding (neither win nor lose)

This may be necessary when the time or place is not right for resolving the issue. This approach avoids conflict by withdrawing, side-stepping or postponing.

SITUATIONS	RISKS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When the conflict is small and relationships are at stake • When time to de-escalate conflict is necessary • When more important issues are demanding attention • When you see that you have no power or opportunity for getting your concerns met • When you are too emotionally involved in the issue and others could do a better job of tackling it • When more information is needed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Important decisions may be made 'by default' • Postponing may make matters worse
EXAMPLE	

5.3.6 Losing (I lose, you lose)

This can help to prevent a conflict becoming worse, especially when the two parties are uneven.

SITUATIONS	RISKS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When the prospect of one party winning the argument could lead to more serious conflict subsequently 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can lead to a loss of confidence in the process Delays, rather than resolves, the issue
<p>EXAMPLE</p>	

6 REFERENCES

- Rogers, C. R. and Farson, R. E. (1987). Active Listening, Excerpt from *Communicating in Business Today*, R.G. Newman, M.A. Danzinger, M. Cohen (eds), D.C. Heath & Company, 1987
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