

Superintendents' Certification Lesson 6

Bridge-building Communication

Learning Objectives:

- To exhibit twenty-first century communication forms and functions.
- To verbalize ingredients of effective communication.
- To be recognized as a successful communicator.

A well-known minister was once asked by an unchurched friend, "Why do churches work so hard building barriers to keep me out rather than bridges to let me in?" He didn't know that members also erect barriers between themselves. And sometimes members seek to promote agreement by saying, "I'll meet you halfway." But is it possible to build a bridge by starting in the middle?

The art and science of building communication bridges begins with understanding the purposes of communication: to impart, make known, reveal clearly, announce, proclaim, manifest, to be readily and clearly understood, to be connected with other people.

The June 2007 Coordinator's Forum focused on learning styles, and the July Forum explored diversity in administration. This month we examine communication techniques from the perspectives of both learning styles and diversity in order to build bridges of communication.

If communication is to be readily and clearly understood, effective communication must flow in two directions and the words and terms must be defined. First, let's explore words.

The Words

Words have power. A wise man said, "A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver" (**Prov. 25:11, NIV**). However, the power comes from how we use words.

Charles L. Dodgson, pen name Lewis Carroll, has Humpty Dumpty saying in a rather scornful tone, "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean, rather more nor less." And then Humpty adds, "When I make a word do a lot of work, I always pay it extra" (*Through the Looking-Glass*, p. 205).

A good leader understands that communication can be priceless when communication senders and receivers are defining words and terms with the same meaning and emphasis. That is when healthy communication occurs. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the German poet, novelist, playwright, courtier, and natural philosopher, once said, "No one would talk much in society, if he knew how often he misunderstood others" (www.quoteworld.org/quotes/5607). Do your receivers understand what you intend to communicate?

Now, let's address the fact that many of the problems that occur in a Sabbath School are the direct result of an ineffective flow of communication that causes otherwise good plans to fail.

Styles in the Communication Cycle

Communication is a cycle in the sense that all four learning style elements need to be present for a complete, successful communication. So it is crucial to remember that we perceive and process information based on our style of learning. Each style has gifts; each style has needs.

Relational, people-centered Sabbath School members are highly aware of their own feelings and the feelings of others. They can sense when someone is sad or upset. They listen well and speak with empathy. These communicators want to keep people happy, so they openly express their genuine interest in other people.

Class members in this category enjoy sharing their feelings. They need to be allowed to do so in a safe environment in which other class members give them genuine feedback presented in love, calmly expressed, and one-on-one when possible. These people may avoid conflict because they easily get their feelings hurt.

To communicate successfully with relational people, be a good listener. Understand their need to figure out what they think as they talk it out. Be sure they feel your commitment. Accept the value of group decisions for some decision-making tasks. Above all, value these people for their loyal friendships and intuitive nature.

Analytical, word-centered Sabbath School members are precise and clear, seldom using exaggeration. They readily admit what and when they don't know. They speak only when they are sure of the facts. They have the ability to ask the right questions and focus on the important data.

For these individuals to communicate successfully, they need logical questions and factual data. They also appreciate clear and concise use of language that is literal, not embellished with emotion. They require plenty of time to plan so they can give due attention to details. They want to be given information in the order of importance.

To communicate successfully with the analytical person, respect the beauty of precision. Be sure to include pertinent data in the decision-making process, and explain the structure. Focus on details. Honor deadlines and timelines. Express your appreciation for having this style of communicators on your team, because they pretty much guarantee that a plan will be tight, logical, and error-free.

Practical, task-centered Sabbath School members go right to the heart of a matter. They simplify! They communicate more with actions than words; however, their words are clear—no ambiguity. They explain things step-by-step.

These individuals need to hear talk about projected and achieved outcomes. They like the problem-solving approach, e.g., the “bottom line” and the practical applications. With them, forget the past; focus on the present and future.

To communicate successfully with the practical person, state the reasons for your choices. Explain clearly how plans would unfold over time. Be straightforward and to the point. Ask questions that test your theories. Move to closure—come to a decision sometimes even without consensus. Don't waste time!

Dynamic, discovery-centered Sabbath School members excel at seeing possibilities and exciting others with their ideas. They clearly verbalize their authenticity, and connect disparate ideas so others can understand. They give genuine praise.

These individuals need to be part of the problem-solving process, because giving them ultimatums sometimes backfires. They want group give-and-take. However, the communication must be fast-paced and filled with challenging ideas. They need visual aids. Make classes, programs, and projects animated and, more important, make them creatively non-predictable.

To communicate successfully with the dynamic person, be open to the value of hunches, gut reactions, and intuitions. Share their enthusiasm. Learn to see beyond the data, to take chances on breakthrough ideas. Engage in free-flowing discussions.

In every class, ministry team, and council there is a mix of the communication styles: people-centered, word-centered, task-centered, and discovery-centered—the relational, analytical, practical, and dynamic!

The Plan

Study the characteristics of each group and learn the communication needs. Give the date and time. Announce that refreshments and fellowship will start a half-hour earlier. At the meeting, note the styles:

- *Relational people* will come early and enjoy visiting.
- *Analytical people* will probably show up a bit early in order to share their research and ideas.
- *Practical people* might come at the last minute, expecting the meeting to start on time and actually accomplish something!
- *Dynamic people* will probably show up late, but he or she will extend the vision beyond what anyone ever dreamed!

So follow the natural cycle of communication that includes all learning styles:

1. Make others comfortable—always a good place for communication to begin. Share perceptions and feelings. Do some listening.
2. Introduce your plan plus the logic behind planning. This step in the natural cycle of communication is needed to bring clarity, assumptions, and data.
3. Use your practical people to explain things step-by-step and show the plan for getting things done.
4. And for your cheerleading, dynamic people, don't end the meeting without challenging everyone to pray about renewing the vision and seeing the possibilities!

The Challenge: Apply the Principles

So I challenge you to span communication gaps by building a communication bridge.

- Think back to a very successful communication you have engaged in, and analyze it in terms of the four communication styles.
- Plan your communication for your next Sabbath School Council meeting based on the communication cycle.