MODULE 2: **COMMUNICATION**

STUDENT'S MANUAL

Objectives:

- To learn about the importance of **communication skills to improve our teleworking experience.**
- To know exactly what the **communication process** is and what the key elements of it are.
- To look at adapting the **type of communication** being used to **the channel** being used.
- To reflect and work on different **ways of listening.**
- To understand what **empathy** is and the benefits it can bring.
- To be familiar with different **communication styles**, and with the advantages of **assertiveness.**
- To understand what *feedback* is in communication and its importance in teleworking.

Contents:

- Introduction
- The communication process
- Expressing yourself
- Knowing how to listen
- Empathy
- Communication styles
- Feedback

- **INTRODUCTION**

Being a competent communicator means having the knowledge, skills and appropriate attitude **to effectively exchange ideas, and discuss different concepts and emotions with others**. When we communicate **we normally do it with a purpose in mind**, which implies a certain response or action from the other person. In other words, we always communicate for a purpose.

Communication is the basis of all our relationships and is an essential building block for a lot of other skills as well. If we can't communicate effectively, it makes it difficult for us to work in a team or in a community environment. It also makes it difficult for us to sell anything, persuade or convince other people or even to resolve conflicts via negotiation. These are more advanced techniques that require good communication skills first in order to develop them.

Communication also helps us to get to know the world around us, to organise our thoughts, express our ideas and our feelings. It helps us to understand other people's ideas and how they feel. In our professional careers, good communication skills help us to sell ourselves better, to become more visible, to expand our network of contacts (what we call networking), and even to negotiate our working conditions. Depending on how effective our communication skills are they can either open or close doors for us.

Communication is therefore a **key skill for optimum professional performance**, in particular when it involves co-ordinating with other people, be it inside your own firm or with external customers or suppliers. **To be successful at teleworking it is essential that we are proficient in the use of digital media and be able to adapt our language to the specific communication channel being used.**

Communicating effectively involves using various processes at once: being able to empathically listen, to process information being received, to adequately manage the resources available to us at that time, and to make optimal use of our verbal and non-verbal resources.

We will study the **communication process** and its main elements. We will also talk about basic skills such as **listening** and **empathy**, **communication styles** (in particular assertiveness) and the **feedback** process.

- **THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS**

The communication process **involves several different elements.** These are listed below**:**

- **ISSUER**: the person who issues the message or information**.**
- **RECEIVER:** the person who receives the message or information.
- **CODE:** The method the sender uses to give the message. For example: in English & in Chinese etc, it is essential to adapt our language to the listener to ensure both sides understand each other.
- **CHANNEL:** The method the sender chooses to transmit, and the receiver captures the information. Some examples of different types of channels are: natural methods (via air, light), or using technological methods (via telephone, mobile, internet, etc.).
- **MESSAGE:** The information the sender transmits.
- **CONTEXT:** The circumstances in which the communication is made allowing the message to be understood. For example: the timing, geographical, social or cultural reasons for the communication.
- *FEEDBACK:* Communication is a two-way thing. i.e. it is essential that the receiver shows some sign that he has understood and that he/she has listened because otherwise it will not be communication but rather just information.

In order to be effective we must focus on the context in which we are communicating, the best channel to carry out this type of communication, to be flexible and adapt ourselves to the people we are dealing with and ensure we get feedback.

When we are teleworking we need to pay special attention to the channel we are using and adapt our communication skills to that channel. Ensuring we get **feedback** is very important, hence we must make sure that the person or people we are dealing with understand the message and its significance. We must take into account any potential communication barriers that may exist so that we can deal with them and ensure that our messages are being communicated appropriately. Examples of such barriers could be difficulties in using some technical resources, background noise, poor internet connection, hearing problems, distractions, cultural environment, ...

2.1. The communication process in teleworking

- It is important to remember that **when communicating the sender must be flexible and adapt to really reach the receiver**. Sometimes, as emitters, we tend to select some of the context. It is important to try to select the best possible time and place for the type of communication we intend to make. For example, when communicating sad news, it is better to find a quiet place and moment.
- Always remember to check the **feedback**. i.e. that the receiver has understood the meaning of the message. And likewise, when you are the receiver, let the sender know that you understand (or not) what is being communicated to you. This is especially important in remote/virtual communication.
- **The code you use in your communication should be understandable to the recipient.** If it is not, the recipient will not comprehend what you want to convey. Keep this in mind and reflect on what kind of words you will use: technical vocabulary, formal or informal words, academic language...

- **EXPRESSING YOURSELF**

As you will know by now, we do not use just one way to communicate with others. There are **3 types of communication**:

- **Verbal communication** is the message itself i.e. what we say
- **Non-verbal communication** is how we portray that message, in terms of gestures, image, how we use our space, signs
- **Linguistic Communication** is related to the use of our voice: intonation, pauses, latency, volume, rhythm ...

Non-verbal communication and linguistic communication compliment each other and reinforce our verbal communication, which is in fact the least important of all. Even when someone gives an incongruent speech, non-verbal communication (including linguistic communication) prevails, so we actually pay attention to the speech. As a general rule, as communicators we invest much more time on the content of our message and less on the way we want to communicate it. We forget to prepare ourselves adequately by practising how exactly we are going to say it.

It is important to bear in mind that when we are teleworking, we lose some of the great advantages of non-verbal and linguistic communication when we can't always resort to face to face communication. Therefore we must be particularly careful to tailor our messages to the specific context to ensure they reach the recipient.

According to the Austrian theorist and psychologist, Paul Watzlawick (1921-2007), who is one of the main authors of the Theory of Communication, when we communicate we must consider several issues:

- **It is impossible not to communicate.** Although we do not want to or are not aware that, when we are with someone, whether we talk or not, we are always communicating, transmitting something.

- **All communication has a content aspect and a relationship aspect.** This is essentially referring to the emotional components between the two people (or more) who are participating in the communication.

It is key that we consciously work on our role as communicators to ensure we get the message across that we intended to.. It is important that we do this both from the perspective of what we want to convey to the listener, and also from the relationship we have or want to have with the other person (management of emotions).

3.1. How to effectively express yourself?

Some general tips on how to make your communication more effective:

- **Every time you have an important conversation, take your time to prepare it.** This will make you feel more confident when the time comes and you will be more likely to achieve what you set out to do. You should reflect on what you want to gain from the conversation, what your main arguments are, what misgivings you may have, in what context you will have the conversation, what the other person is like (what is important from his/her perspective, what does he/she expect from us ...), etc. .
- **We are responsible for our own communications**, to get the right message to our receivers. This involves making an effort to **be careful with every detail**.
- When you have to write an important document, always **keep it simple and direct.** This will make your communication much more effective. You should focus on your objectives when writing your message and the type of receiver(s) that will benefit from your communication
- Be prepared to **redirect the conversation** when necessary. For example, if you think that the conversation is getting sidetracked and is deviating from you achieving your goal.
- When you communicate with another person you should aim to **keep your words and gestures in harmony.** When there is a difference between the two something called cognitive dissonance occurs. This means that our recipient will notice that there is "something wrong" and may even lose confidence in us and in our message.
- **Look straight into the other person's eyes** as this shows you are sincere and open. If you notice that this happens to make the other person uncomfortable then just adjust and make the eye contact less intense.
- Use your non-verbal language to **show interest.**

- **Use hand gestures whilst talking.** Your hands can support your message and make the recipient pay attention for longer periods of time.
- **Mirror some of your interlocutor's non-verbal language**. This makes it easier to establish a rapport.
- Maximise your use of all the tools **available to you to communicate** with others.

However, non-verbal communication is not always possible in our interaction with others. We can lose a lot of important information when using the telephone or email, among others.

Tips for better email/written communications include:

- Assess whether the written means of communication is the most appropriate means for certain critical or strategic situations, considering the limitation of writing.
- Good spelling is essential as it speaks a lot about us.
- Do not use this type of communication as the only valid one; it is important to analyse each case and decide which means is the most suitable.
- Use simple and concrete vocabulary to make comprehension easier.
- Keep a professional tone throughout, especially since the content may be shared with others.
- Use a greeting appropriate to the relationship you have with the other person.
- When the conversation is important, back up your written messages with a phone call to ensure the correct feedback (if viable).
- If you use abbreviations, ensure the other parties understand them. For example: FYI, for your information.
- Revise the tone after writing the texts to avoid misunderstandings. If the subject is important for you, you should consider asking another person to read over your work to check for possible misinterpretations or errors. Take your time writing, especially if it is important.
- The writing of the email´s "subject" is also important for two reasons: to introduce the content, and to be more productive in the organization of the general mailbox of the email you are sending.
- Pay attention to the "reply" and "reply to all" options, and use them appropriately depending on the message. It is just as important to avoid spam, as it is to consider all the people involved who need to be in copy.
- Beware of excessive use of capital letters, as it is not perceived as polite.

Tips for improving telephone communications include:

- Use simple and short sentences to ensure the message is understood and, above all, remembered.
- This communication method is especially sensitive to distractions. For this reason, it is important to repeat and reformulate the most important ideas you are trying to get across.
- Avoid using a monotonous tone of voice to keep the listener´s attention during the whole conversation.
- Use the "telephone smile". It has been proven that we have a more cordial tone of voice when we smile.
- Use appropriate greetings and farewells, to avoid abruptness.
- Avoid outside noise and talking at the same time as your listener.
- When we leave a message in the mailbox or on an answering machine it is important to say who we are, briefly explain the reason for our call and leave a means of contact for the person to call us back on (our telephone number and/or email).

3.2. Effective communication in teleworking

Working on your communication will help your teleworking in the following ways:

- It will **facilitate your relationships** with your team members and clients, even when there is no direct contact.
- **It ensures your messages reach the receivers correctly.**
- It will help boost your skills to **negotiate**, and you will be better able to **sell** your ideas, products and services.

- It shows just **how important both verbal and non verbal communication** are now that we live and work in virtual environments, where we rarely see one another face to face.

4. KNOWING HOW TO LISTEN

Listening is a basic skill within communication. There are different levels of listening:

- **BIOLOGICAL LISTENING;** i.e. hearing. We can simply hear because we have a body organ dedicated to this function. It does not imply willingness on our part.
- **PRETEND LISTENING;** For example: I am listening to you but I haven't a clue what you are talking about. Does this sound familiar to you? We act as if we are listening, but we are actually not listening and just thinking about our own things! This can be very annoying for the speaker.
- **SELECTIVE LISTENING;** i.e. we are taking note of some of what the speaker is telling us. This is a very common type of listening when we are in a class, listening to only some of what the teacher is saying. What happens if we miss out on the key points the teacher is making?
- **ACTIVE LISTENING;** Is focusing on and confirming what our interlocutor is saying to us. This is almost listening 100%.
- **EMPATHIC LISTENING**; i.e., we enter into the speaker's frame of mind and we understand what he is telling us, both intellectually and emotionally. We are even capable of summarizing, paraphrasing and reformulating what he/she is telling us.

We obviously can't use levels 4 and 5 type of listening all of the time as they involve considerably more time, attention and effort. We should be aware however that **in relevant matters and/or with important people, the most effective listeners are ACTIVE and EMPATHETIC**

We should bear in mind that when we are teleworking and using communication tools with others we may have difficulties ourselves in either listening, and/or maintaining our attention, and likewise the other party may have to make a special effort to focus on our communication.

4.1. How to work on our listening?

- Bear in mind that listening requires **a conscious and deliberate effort**.
- L**isten before speaking.** Find out as much information from the other person to adapt our message to meet their needs effectively.
- **Avoid interrupting** the other person, unless it's strictly necessary.
- Be **patient.**
- Make an effort to **listen beyond the words**, listen for the emotions and feelings that the other person is transmitting.
- **Encourage others to provide more detail** if necessary for you to gain a better understanding.
- **Paraphrase**: Repeat from time to time what you have just heard so that the receiver feels that you are paying attention and are interested.
- Respect **pauses**.

4.2. Listening in teleworking

When teleworking, listening becomes a key skill to communicating effectively. Listening is even more important when both parties are physically present as other channels can present their own set of difficulties.

- Be sure about what the other person is trying to communicate to you. Pay **particular attention to the non-verbal elements (tone of voice, volume being used,..).**
- **If you have not understood something let your interlocutor know**.

- **Ensure that the channel being used is the most appropriate one** and that there will be no interference.

- It will also be important for **the other person to keep in mind that you are there**, listening to him, following what he is saying and that he looks for ways (such as paraphrasing) to confirm you are listening.

5. Empathy

Empathy is a very important aspect of emotional intelligence. It is the skill that allows us to know how others feel, what they are thinking, to understand their intentions, to predict their behaviours and to understand their emotions

Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright, 2004

You have probably heard the popular saying 'put yourself in his shoes' to see how he feels. Well this is essentially what having empathy means. Have you ever wondered what was behind what a person just told you or how they behaved? How did he/she feel? What was he/she thinking? Who or what could be influencing him/her to say that or act that way? Asking ourselves these questions will help us to better understand the cause of his/her actions, to interpret his/her message correctly, avoiding making any potential assumptions that can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts. This is what we would call "cognitive" empathy, although it is sometimes called "affective" empathy i.e. the ability that some people have to feel another person's emotions, to capture what exactly they are feeling at that moment, both positive feelings (e.g. joy) and negative feelings (e.g. fear).

Whilst affective empathy is usually considered biological, cognitive empathy is not. It is considered something that you were not born with but rather, like other skills, it is something that can be acquired and continually improved. When you are communicating with another person empathy will enable you to get closer to them, to make both sides feel better and to have a better understanding of each other. Having empathy allows you to have good relationships and allows you to understand certain problems and helps to resolve conflicts.

5.1. How to work on your empathy?

- Try to understand the person from "their" perspective and not "yours"; **focus on the other person** when communicating.

- Start conversations by **focusing on the other person**; avoid the conversation being too much about you. Show genuine interest in them!

- **Watch the other person's non-verbal language** as this will help you understand the whole message.

- **Understand and be tolerant of the differences that we have with other people**. Being more tolerant means having a more positive attitude to differences, and having more patience.

- Play around with **different perceptions**, putting yourself in different situations with that same person to gain an understanding in a real situation about what has happened, how you feel, what you see, and how the other person feels and what he/she sees.

5.2. Empathy in teleworking

Due to the fact that teleworking means working remotely, sometimes we do not see each other i.e. we have a virtual channel between us:

- **Knowing how to listen is the first** step in developing empathy.

- We occasionally cannot see the other person or if we can see them it's not the same as being with them in the same location.. We therefore have to **pay special attention to the linguistic elements** (intonation, volume, etc.).

- When you are not sure that you have understood the whole message from the other person, **make an effort to ensure you get feedback to confirm what you have understood.**

- Remember that empathy **brings us closer to others** in a deeper way, allowing us to adapt our communication to what they need or what motivates them. This will make our communication much more effective.

- Having empathy **facilitates teamwork**, promotes respect, tolerance, solidarity and cooperation.

- **COMMUNICATION STYLES**

Our ability to influence others largely depends on our attitudes and our style of **communication or behavioural style**. There are 3 basic communication styles:

- **Passive or inhibited style:** The person does not express what he/she feels, wants or thinks. They take other people's aims or objectives into account but not their own.
- **Aggressive style**: The person expresses what he feels, wants or thinks, regardless of whether it offends or violates the other person's rights. This communication styles weakens relationships.
- **Assertive style:** The person expresses what he feels, wants or thinks, but also takes into account what the other person feels, wants or thinks. This type of communication style makes good interpersonal relationships.

Assertive language means **expressing ourselves honestly, directly, clearly and saying exactly what we think or feel, whilst being respectful towards others.** Using positive language will also allow us to generate positive emotions and reactions in others, which will be encouraging for both sides.

Some things we can do to be more assertive are: call people by their own name, explain the reasons for our opinions or decisions or invite people to make their own comments or contributions.

A professional who is a skillful communicator should intentionally and consciously set themselves up to learn to communicate with assertive language. Ideally the person should be assertive both in their work environment as well as in their personal environment. This increases the probability of successfully achieving their objectives and reaching consensus with others. It also avoids the potential negative emotional issues (which passive or aggressive communication styles often cause) and makes for even better relationships.

6.1. How to work on your assertiveness?

- Before communicating, always carefully reflect on what the **best way is to convey your ideas and opinions** in such a way that you show respect for yourself and others.
- **Prepare your message,** be direct and concise and work on your own emotions ahead of time. This will allow you to feel more confident when you are later with the other person, and will help avoid reverting to aggressiveness…
- **Make it clear you disagree** if a situation or opinion offends you. Try to use positive and friendly language to remedy the situation.
- **Don't blame others**. Sometimes we are actually part of the problem or conflict that has arisen, so taking your share of responsibility and showing a proactive attitude to resolve it will be fundamental.
- **Speak from your own perspective 'I'.** Focus on what you think, how the situation makes you feel, what you want ... without blaming others. This will earn you the respect of your co-workers and show you are a true leader with personal responsibility.

6.2. Assertiveness in teleworking

Working on our assertiveness will help us in teleworking because:

- **It improves our communication style and makes it more effective**. It shows respect for others, who will then in turn be more willing to actively listen to us.
- Reinforcing our rights, when appropriate, helps to **develop our self-esteem**.
- Being effective communicators means we are also more effective at **achieving our objectives**, both at an individual and a team level.
- It helps us to **request things from others**, when necessary, to achieve our goals.
- **It reinforces our verbal communication** on the occasions when we can't use non-verbal communication (something very common in the virtual workplace).
- It helps us to **maintain healthy interpersonal relationships in both team working and community scenarios**, both in virtual and face to face situations.

- **FEEDBACK**

In communication, **feedback is any response or reaction that the receiver sends to the sender of a message.**

There is also another type of feedback which is important to take into account and work on. According to experts in psychology, feedback is an interpersonal communication tool that allows us to show our interlocutors the effect that their behaviors cause in us. In the business world and in teamwork in particular, this type of feedback is key to achieving good performance and good results. **If we do not get regular feedback on what we do from others, it's difficult to know what we are doing well and what we need to strengthen, or what we are doing wrong and what we need to improve on.**

In the context of teleworking **how to give feedback** takes on an even more relevant role as the teams are generally working from different locations.

7.1. *How to give good feedback?*

- **It should be balanced and constructive**, i.e. it should include both positive feedback and areas of their performance which need worked on.

- Feedback should be given **at an appropriate time** as sometimes it can lead to conflict and ruin a relationship if not done appropriately.

- **It should be specific and exact** to ensure the message is understood and an adequate response is obtained from the person being addressed. Try not to give feedback on more than two or three development points at the same time. Also, be specific about the situations in which the event occurred (error or success).

- The feedback **should be useful and logical**. The objective of giving the feedback should be clear, as well as what is expected in future situations from the person receiving the feedback.

- **It should be given at an appropriate time** while trying to ensure both people are in receptive moods. The time and the place are very important, however, we should also try to ensure it takes place soon after the error or success occurred.

- **The most appropriate channel should be used to give feedback**. For example, if there are sensitive issues that require face-to-face communication where written texts or emails etc. can seem cold (depending on the objective).

- **We must keep to the facts (objective and observable) and stay away from using subjective opinions.**

- **If the feedback is negative, we must always refer to the task, what the outcome has been, and ensure it is given in private**.

- **If the feedback is positive we should try to give it to the person in public**. That way it serves as recognition in front of peers and will help to motivate the person even more.

- We should use our **assertiveness** to promote **business like and polite communication**.

7.2. Feedback in teleworking

Unfortunately, when we work in remote teams, we don't have as many opportunities to provide regular and spontaneous feedback as we would like. When working remotely we sometimes forget that we are part of a larger team or community, and tend to lose the sense of the importance of having good co-ordination across the team. Each of the team members should be aware of what they are contributing to within the overall team objectives. This means:

- We will have **to intentionally look for moments to ask for and give feedback**.

- We have to **pay particular attention to the limitations of the virtual media** to make it more effective as well as remembering the points mentioned previously on providing good feedback.

- Remember to apply **all the key points on effective communication in teleworking** (knowing how to express ourselves clearly, being assertive, knowing how to listen, and having empathy), so that the feedback we give is also effective.