



## OVERVIEW OF KEY COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUES

Ombudsmen refine their communication skills during their initial certification training. Basic elements of communication contained in the National Long-Term Care Ombudsman Resource Center (NORC) Curriculum are highlighted below. While the curriculum primarily focuses on communication with residents, many of the same techniques apply or can be adapted to communication with family members.

In addition to the techniques presented in ombudsman training materials, there are other techniques described below. These techniques were selected due to their usefulness in problem-solving and conflict resolution.

### I Statements<sup>1</sup>

These are statements in which a person “owns” what she says and does not claim to be speaking for others. They are also a way to for a person to express what she wants and needs without blaming another person or making her defensive.

The composition of I-statements can vary. One approach is to use I-statements that have the following components:

- **The action**

In this part of the I-statement, you describe what is happening in an objective way because the other person may not interpret actions in the same way as you.

  - The word “when” can be very helpful.
  - Avoid the use of “you” because it makes people feel they are being accused.
  - Avoid emotive words that are tied to a person’s perception.  
For instance, when you say that someone “barged” into the room, the word “barged” carries a negative overtone and the other person may not perceive her entry into the room in that way. You could express this more neutrally by saying that the other person came into the room suddenly.
  
- **Your response**

The purpose of this part of the I-statement is to convey your feelings because the other person may have no idea how you are feeling.

  - Can use “I feel” or I feel like.”
  
- **Your preferred outcome**

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<sup>1</sup> Conflict Resolution Network. *Conflict Resolution (CR) Trainers’ Manual: 12 Skills*. 2008.  
<http://www.crnhq.org/pages.php?PID=77>

The last part of the I-statement is to define the outcome that you would like without specifying how it has to be done.

**Example:**

**Instead of saying:** “You’re making me so frustrated when you interrupt me,”

**Say:** “When I am not able to finish what I’m saying, I feel frustrated and what I’d like is to be able to communicate my complete thought.”

**Open-ended Questions**

Asking questions allows a person to gain and clarify information and perceptions. A “closed” question is good for gathering very specific information when all you want is a yes or no. However, in problem-solving and conflict resolution asking open-ended questions helps you build understanding and show empathy. These types of questions also encourage people to talk and provide more information –which is always helpful in problem-solving.

Interrogatives that help in asking open-ended questions include:

- How
- Tell me
- What

It is helpful to avoid using “why” because using “why” can appear confrontational and make the respondent feel defensive.

**Example:**

**Instead of saying:** “Why wasn’t your work completed today?”

**Say:** “Help me understand the reasons your work did not get completed today.”

**Reflective Listening**<sup>2</sup>

Reflective listening or responding is the process of restating in our own words the content and/or feeling of what someone has said. It does not mean that you agree with the speaker. By reflecting back to the speaker what you believe you understand, you validate and affirm that person by giving them the experience of being heard and acknowledged. You also provide an opportunity for the speaker to give you feedback about the accuracy of your perceptions, thereby increasing the effectiveness of your overall communication.<sup>3</sup> Reflective listening is one of the most important steps you can take in problem-solving and conflict resolution, because it indicates that you are truly listening and seeking to understand the other person.

**Types of reflective listening:**

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<sup>2</sup> Much of this section is adapted from Rod Windle and Suzanne Warren’s *Collaborative Problem Solving and Dispute Resolution in Special Education*. The National Center on Dispute Resolution in Special Education.

<http://www.directionservice.org/cadre/section4.cfm>

<sup>3</sup> Windle and Warren, *ibid.*

**Paraphrasing.** This is a concise statement of the content of the speaker's message. A paraphrase should be brief, succinct, and focus on the facts or ideas of the message rather than the feeling. The paraphrase should be in your own words instead of just repeating exactly what the speaker has said.

**Reflecting Feeling.** This approach involves identifying the feeling under the speaker's words and then reflecting the feeling back to the speaker in a way that conveys understanding.

**Summarizing.** In this type of reflective listening, you combine paraphrasing and reflecting feeling. You pull together the main ideas and feelings of the speaker to show understanding. This skill is used after a considerable amount of information sharing has gone on and shows that the listener grasps the total meaning of the message. It also helps the speaker gain an integrated picture of what he or she has been saying.<sup>4</sup>

**Example:**

**Situation:** In response to concerns you share about food service the administrator says the following:

"We've had a lot of trouble with our dietary department lately. We can't seem to keep our food services supervisor for more than a few weeks. You have to understand that we're doing the best we can."

To **paraphrase** what the administrator said, you could say:

"Your food services supervisors keep leaving and this is creating problems in the dietary department."

To **reflect feeling**, you could say:

"You're frustrated because the turnover in food services supervisors is affecting the functioning of the dietary department."

To **summarize**, you may say:

"You're frustrated because you're having problems in the dietary department due to the turnover of food services supervisors. You feel that your staff is doing everything they can in the circumstances and hope that I will be patient during this time."

**Power of "we"**

When you say "we" in your conversation, it creates a sense of team and partnership between you and a family member or between a family member and the facility administration and staff. This sends a

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<sup>4</sup> Windle and Warren, *ibid.*

message that it is all of you working together to make sure a resident gets good care – it's not you on one side and staff on the other. This can send an important message and can help break down walls.

**Example:**

**Instead of saying:** “What are you doing to address this issue?”

**Say:** “Can we talk about what we can do to address this issue?”

**Additional Resources**

**The National Long-Term Care Ombudsman Center (NORC) Curriculum**

This curriculum is designed to help states improve their basic training for local long-term care ombudsmen (LTCO). The teaching methods are based on principles of adult learning and grounded in LTCO values such as being resident directed.

<http://www.ltombudsman.org/ombudsman-support/training#Curriculum>

*The curriculum includes the following modules:*

**The Aging Process**

Provides tips for communicating with individuals with various illnesses or limitations such as communicating with someone who has difficulty hearing.

<http://www.ltombudsman.org/sites/default/files/ombudsmen-support/training/The-Aging-Process.pdf>

**Residents' Rights**

Emphasizes talking with the resident, letting the resident guide the ombudsman instead of the ombudsman making decisions and telling the resident what the ombudsman will do for him/her (individual resident) and thinking about the setting for communication (for privacy).

<http://www.ltombudsman.org/sites/default/files/ombudsmen-support/training/Local-ResidentsRights-CurriculumResource.pdf>

**The Problem Solving Process: Investigation and Resolution (two modules)**

Covers listening, establishing the setting for communication (for interviews and for resolution meetings), choosing times for serious conversation, being respectful of other people's time constraints (speaking with staff), different types of questions and the purpose of each, communication tips for building trust, and the “Point, Evidence, Repeat Point” approach which teaches effective communication strategy for resolving problems.

**Investigation Module:** <http://www.ltombudsman.org/sites/default/files/ombudsmen-support/training/Local-Investigation-Curri-cResource-Material.pdf>

**Resolution Module:** <http://www.ltombudsman.org/sites/default/files/ombudsmen-support/training/Local-Resolution-Curriculum-Resource-Material.pdf>

**State Ombudsman Program Certification Manuals**

There are examples of state LTCOP training and certification manuals on the NORC website and the manuals often have chapters or sections devoted to effective communication.

<http://www.ltombudsman.org/ombudsman-support/training#Manuals>