

# Well Rounded Communicator - Are You One ?

By Virginia Reeves

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Virginia Reeves  
virginia@rainbowopportunities.ws

Rainbow Opportunities <http://www.rainbowopportunities.ws>

## WELL ROUNDED COMMUNICATOR - ARE YOU ONE ?

What does it take to be a good speaker and a good listener? It's not hard to be either. The skills are ones we've used all our lives. Here's what I consider to be the primary ones.

### ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS.

What is the problem? You don't have to probe deeply to get the answer. Just get the basics and then as time permits or the issue proves to be more complex, you can take further action. Start simply.

Ask, how might you solve it?

Get the other person(s) involved immediately.

Don't automatically do it yourself.

There is a tendency to take on a task to save time and effort.

Get a partnership going by encouraging involvement.

Are there alternatives to solving it? Many of us take the tried and true route instead of participating in a bit of brainstorming. Combine different possibilities to see if another approach might work better.

Who should take responsibility for putting the solution into action?

Is it going to be an individual resolution or is teamwork involved?

If the latter, who does what and when and why?

What deadline for completion or resolution is appropriate? If there is no set point, there is nothing to aim for. If one person depends on another for a step in the process, then accountability is necessary.

Will the other parties involved buy into these parameters? Find out before you start the project.

How can I help? You've provided the guidelines and support by helping the other person make decisions. Now back that up with your offer to help. Ideally that will be more in the realm of background help but you could be an integral part of the solution. Do your part and you'll earn more respect and gain trust.

## ARE YOU TRULY ACCESSIBLE?

Listen openly and actively by focusing on the issue, not the presentation style or quality or the personality. Yes, those are elements - but they are secondary to the main message being sent.

Be careful what you think the other person wants as a response from you. Their expectation may be quite different than what you are prepared to give.

- They may want you to just be a listener.
- They may request that you act as a sounding board or role play as the part of devil's advocate.
- Or you may be needed as an integral part of the discussion and end result.
- Listen carefully for clues, especially to the first statements you hear.
- A torrent of words or brevity or silence are indicators to what is wanted from you.

Are you allowing distractions to undermine your focus. Are you reading something else? Do you continue with whatever task you were involved in? Do you let someone else interrupt in person or by phone?

## BE OBSERVANT.

Demeanor can give you clues as to what a message is. Do they appear to be reticent or more outgoing. Is there a tension that may indicate frustration, aggression, or fear. Perhaps the joy is bubbling over in their smile or in the twinkle of their eyes. Your overt response or more subtle body signals will indicate your response to what you are hearing and seeing.

Try to make sure you are either "mirroring" the other person (within reason and when appropriate - a hard choice at times) or when necessary, diffusing a situation by presenting either an opposing or at least subdued posturing. We've heard so much about body language over the years and it's true - over 50% of how we react to a message is based upon non-verbal language. Pay attention.

Tone of voice can tell you so much more than words alone. It is often the giveaway to the emotions that someone is trying to suppress.

## THE ACTUAL PRESENTATION OF THE MESSAGE

What kind of expressions are used? Are the words more simplistic and to-the-point for easy understanding. Or does the speaker draw upon more eloquent use of the language by painting word pictures. If the purpose is to illustrate a point that's terrific but if it's done primarily to show off, well.... The use of jargon or cliches can be fine in some instances but a total irritant in others.

What's left unsaid? This can be more important than what was actually spoken. It could indicate:

- a lack of knowledge or understanding
- fear of reprisal or being put-down
- hesitancy to share openly what the speaker really thinks or believes due to emotional content
- or it could be as simple as just plain forgetting because too much else is going on.

It's a good idea to watch for body language clues, tone of voice, and types of sentence structure used to see if anything else needs to be "read between the lines" or asked outright.

Is the message organized and thorough? Is it too brief or too long?

Or, did the person seem scattered or unsure. Any of these can indicate lack of understanding of what was needed or point to a personality trait.

Be careful of jumping to the wrong conclusion. Ask questions rather than assume.

## YOUR RESPONSE

This is sometimes more critical than what was spoken. We are constantly being assessed and tested by others whether we like the idea or not. Contrary to what you may think, you do have prejudices and biases, no matter how hard you may try not to. It's human nature. Rarely can anyone be totally open-minded, non-judgemental, caring, interested, focused, and understanding. I think there are two basic levels of response that are used the most.

You can empathize or sympathize with someone and validate their message or concern by the words and actions you feed back to them. Or, you can ignore them and their concerns and minimize their stature and need for support.

Sometimes your actions, or lack of action, do speak louder than words. Think back on several experiences, both good and bad, and see if these two points pretty well sum it up.

## LISTENING SKILLS

I heard or read somewhere that when you really listen to someone, three things happen. They learn to think better. They learn to express themselves in a better manner. And they learn that you care. There's an old saying that we were given two ears and one mouth so we'd listen twice as much. Sage advice.

There are occasions when it's much more important to listen from the heart. From the mind is the right way for most decision making (but not all) but don't forget that you have a special place to come from to indicate you care.

Silence can be golden.

- A person may open up to you if you allow them the time and space to do so.
- In negotiations, many people practice this art because you generally end up gaining more than you could have ever received by bargaining.
- Better offers or solutions are many times the result of some pondering time - the facts and emotions are given a chance to mesh and then sort themselves out into a more fair or better proposal or final product.

Try not to jump ahead of the speaker presuming you know where the message is going. It might go there, it might veer off into another direction that you miss because you were so busy coming up with your response. You might miss a great anecdote or story. You might miss the whole point because you aren't really listening. Ask - how does it make me feel what I ask a question or request feedback and discover my point was missed.

I was once told that when you listen to somebody else, whether you like it or not, what they say becomes part of you. It can get lodged in your memory bank to be relished or dredged up, depending on the value and emotion you place upon the words. It could make a big positive difference in your life. I've made small comments that I don't remember at all but the other person says they treasure. Unfortunately, I know there are comments I've made that are remembered without fondness too. No perfection here.

## CLOSING THOUGHTS

- Remember to tailor your words as if you are always talking to an individual, regardless of the amount of people you might be addressing.
- Care about how others will receive and react to your message.

- When you communicate, indicate your own interest in the topic.
- Be a good listener so others will return the favor.
- Watch for those non-verbal signals.
- When you speak, offer something of value or help.

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