from conflict to co-operation

a handy illustrated guide for community enterprises

2 | Communication skills

Foreword

In order to achieve their goals and be sustainable, community enterprises need to know how to work as a team – communicating effectively, making good decisions, dealing with the inevitable conflicts and coping with growth and change. '**from conflict to co-operation**' – a series of handy illustrated guides – is invaluable. It includes useful hints and tips as well as signposting to further resources.

The accessible and entertaining content is based on co-operative working concepts and has been written with community enterprises in mind, but it will be useful for any group trying to work together to achieve common goals.

The author, Kate Whittle, has over twenty-five years experience working in and with co-operatives and community enterprises of all kinds, both in the UK and overseas. Angela Martin, the illustrator, is a well-known cartoonist – with experience of illustrating a range of communication and group dynamics guides and handbooks.

I'm sure you will find these booklets a useful and fun resource – enjoy reading them, put their recommendations into practice and harvest the fruits of good teamwork!

Gillian Bober,
President of the East of England Co-operative Society

Wise men talk because they have **something to say; fools,** because they have **to say something**

Plato

Introduction

This is the second Booklet in the series '**from conflict to co-operation**'. The series aims to help community enterprises not only deal with conflict when it arises (Booklet 1), but also avoid unnecessary conflict by:

• improving communication (Booklet 2)

• improving meetings and decision-making (Booklet 3)

• managing change caused by organisational growth and development (Booklet 4)

• clarifying the role of the Committee (Booklet 5)

Good communication skills are important in all areas of life, but in a community enterprise it is vital that everyone knows how to communicate effectively, since the success of the enterprise relies on the shared skills, experience and knowledge of all the members.

Communication skills are important in day to day working with colleagues, during meetings, in writing progress reports for stakeholders and when promoting and selling the activities of the enterprise. They can help to ensure that information shared is concise, accurate and timely.

In this booklet, the second in the series "Working Out Conflict", we start by outlining some basic communication concepts. We then look at steps we can take to improve communication, including avoiding misunderstandings that arise from assumptions based on cultural or gender differences. We discuss the importance of being assertive for good communication, and how the enterprise benefits from maximum participation by members.
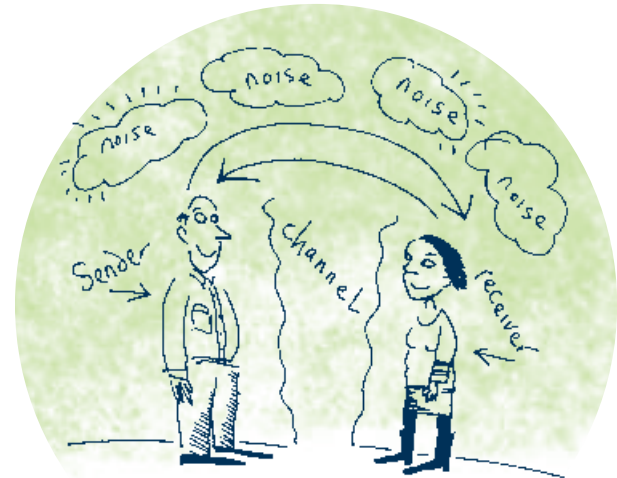
Who speaks sows, who listens reaps

Argentine proverb

What is communication and what's really happening when we communicate?

Communication can be described as a 2-way process of sending and receiving messages. Messages are sent and received through a channel. The channel could be the air between us, a page of a book, a newspaper, magazine, letter or report, loudspeakers, a phone earpiece or a computer screen. Noise can occur in the sender, in the receiver or in the channel. By "noise" we mean anything that could be an obstacle to the transfer of the sender's intended meaning.

I know that you **believe** you understand what you **think** I said, but I'm not sure you realize that what you **heard** is not what I **meant**

Robert McCloskey

In the sender or receiver (i.e. the people) the 'noise' might be:

- **differences in language, education, age, gender, culture or personality**
- **assumptions**
- **prejudice**
- **lack of awareness of different needs**
- **medication, drugs or alcohol**

and more – could you add to this list?

In the channel, examples of 'noise' could include:

- **actual physical noise**
- **poor page layout**
- **typeface too small**
- **poor screen design**
- **printer ink cartridge running out**
- **illegible handwriting**
- **volume too low/too high**

So the essence of being a good communicator is to reduce 'noise', wherever it occurs – in the sender, in the receiver or in the channel.

Reducing "noise" in the Sender

If you have the job of sharing information, whether speaking during a meeting, sending an email, writing a report or participating in a telephone conference, the issues are the same. Remember that in order for as many people as possible to hear what you want to say, you need to think about what possible "noise" there might be which could prevent your listeners or readers from hearing or understanding what you mean.

In order to do this, think about the message you are sending. It should be **structured, clear, concise** and **congruent**. You should take responsibility for your message by using "I" or "My".

If you are speaking to a large group, check that everyone can hear you. Many public buildings have induction loop systems for people with hearing impairments. If you are organising a public meeting to promote your activities choose a venue with good facilities and consider hiring a signer.

A good way of reducing misunderstandings is to let your audience know that you welcome questions, comments and feedback. If you are giving instructions to a small group, you might want to ask them to repeat what you have told them in their own words. Written instructions can be useful back-up but only give them out after you have finished, otherwise people will try to read them while you are speaking and they won't be listening. In a written document, if you use acronyms or jargon, provide a glossary.

Structured: try to think about what you want to say, so that your message has a logical beginning, middle and end. Some people say:

- **tell them what you are going to tell them,**
- **tell them,**
- **then tell them what you told them!**

Clear and concise: avoid any ambiguity and keep the message as short as possible.

Congruent: know your audience and choose language, examples and illustrations appropriate for them. Also your body language should correspond with your message - for example, be careful not to smile inappropriately if your message is a serious one.

Reducing "noise" in the Receiver

Noise can also exist in the Receiver (i.e. the listener or reader). Many people, perhaps especially the talkative, find it difficult to listen. The Greek philosopher Epictetus said *"We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak"* – or as a talkative young community entrepreneur once said: *"big mouth needs big ears".*

To ensure that you have understood, it's helpful to ask questions or, if appropriate, repeat what you have heard back to the speaker in your own words to check you have heard it correctly. You should say if you can't hear properly, or ask for written notes, a glossary or an explanation of acronyms.

Reducing "noise" in the Channel

The channel is the means by which the message is transmitted. There are a variety of different ways in which "noise" in the channel can prevent the message being understood.

We talk about physical arrangements for meetings in the next booklet. However, it is worth mentioning here that physical discomfort – e.g. heat, cold, draughts, thirst, hunger, uncomfortable chairs – can all affect concentration and so constitute "noise".

If you need to pass on information verbally, choose a place and time where you will not be interrupted or drowned out by external noise, and arrange seating so that everyone can see and hear you. If you are delivering training remember that most people's attention span is not more than 20 minutes, so intersperse presentations with time for questions and activities.

When the channel is paper or an electronic document, pay attention to layout. Good design with plenty of white space and a clear typeface helps to minimise noise. Diagrams, illustrations and cartoons can sometimes convey your meaning more effectively than words.

The internet is a tool that can be used by everyone – whatever their ability or disability – to access information so it's important to use recognised standards for website design so that, for example, people with impaired eyesight can use screen readers to access the information. W3C is an organisation which has developed these standards for websites.

W3C is an organisation devoted to making the benefits of the Web available to all people, whatever their hardware, software, network infrastructure, native language, culture, geographical location, or physical or mental ability. For more information, see the Signposting page.

Ears have walls

In order to save on transport costs and reduce carbon footprints, some Community Enterprises arrange meetings via telephone, or "teleconferences". To communicate clearly in this setting people need to identify themselves, speak in turn and not all speak at once. The facilitator or chair of the teleconference controls who speaks by inviting contributions and ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to speak. For a link to a guide for effective teleconferencing see the Signposting page.

Active listening exercise

Active listening can help us to identify what is really happening when we are apparently listening to another person. For example, many people are accustomed to thinking about their response to the speaker before that person has finished speaking, so they are not giving them their full attention.

Active listening can make listening more effective and thereby eliminate noise.

Active Listening Exercise

In pairs (a speaker and a listener) take it in turns to speak for 2 minutes on any topic. The listener should practice active listening. The rules for active listening are:

1. **Pay 100% attention** to the speaker.

2. **Do not speak**, except for statements mirroring what the other person has just said, with the aim of checking that you have understood.

3. **Use body language** to indicate that you are listening. Examples are given later in the booklet.

4. **Make eye contact** (but not to the extent that it feels unnatural).

After 2 minutes, swap roles.

Finally, feed back by sharing how it felt. For the speaker it may have felt uncomfortable speaking for 2 minutes without being interrupted. It rarely happens in day to day life. For the listener this might be a revelation.

This exercise can be used in a communication training session, in a difficult meeting to ensure that everyone feels they have been heard or by a third party facilitating a situation of tension or conflict in the workplace.

Obstacles to communication (noise) created by cultural or gender differences

Cultural

The expression "cultural" has several different meanings, we are using it here to mean a set of shared attitudes, values, goals and practices characterizing a group of people.

Different cultural backgrounds can create significant noise in communications – being aware of them is the first step to diminishing their power as obstacles to effective communication. We cannot expect to be aware of all the aspects of other cultures that might become obstacles to communications, but we can ensure that everyone in the Community Enterprise is aware that such differences can impact on communication.

Examples of noise created by cultural differences include: **gestures** – a thumb and index finger making a circle means OK in the USA, money in Japan and is an insult in Brazil; **eye contact** can be offensive in some cultures but indicates reliability and honesty in the UK; **personal space** – in some Latin America countries, people may touch your arm as they are speaking, as part of the communication process, not as a sign of intimacy.

Rice University in Houston, Texas provides an excellent online tutorial aimed at improving cross cultural communication, see the Signposting page.

Gender

Gender differences in communication styles can become obstacles to effective communication. Deborah Tannen (see Signposting page) says that men and women typically use different conversational rituals and styles – and that when these are not recognised for what they are, misunderstandings can arise.

Women's conversational rituals include apologising, or adopting a self-deprecating tone in order to maintain equality or offer reassurance. Women are often told not to apologise, it is seen as putting oneself down, though for many women (and some men) saying 'I'm sorry' isn't meant as an apology, it's a ritual way of restoring balance to a conversation, an expression of understanding or caring about the other person's feelings.
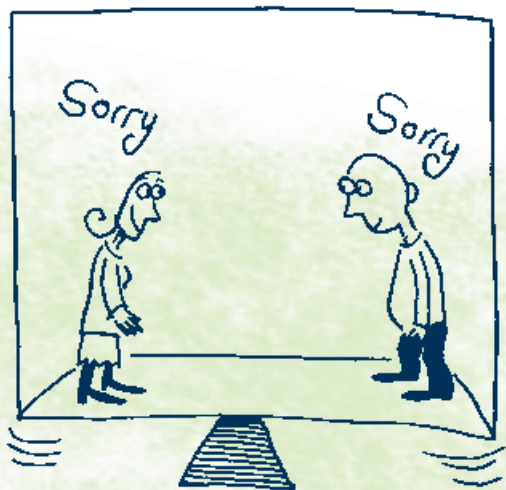
When an apology is offered as an acknowledgement that something has gone wrong (maybe it's not clear who is at fault) it is often the first step in a two step routine whereby saying "I'm sorry" means taking half the blame, and

Women are talking – we **do not understand.**
They **speak** in a language we **cannot comprehend**

David Byrne, Women vs Men (Bolero, 1989)

expecting the other person to take the other half. Admitting fault can be experienced as taking a one-down position, so when both share the blame it is a mutual face-saving device – a courteous way of not leaving the apologizer in the one-down position. However, if one person doesn't understand the ritual, and accepts the apology, the other will be left feeling resentful and frustrated. Like all conversational rituals, ritual apologies tend to work when both parties share assumptions about their use.

Conversational styles common amongst men include banter, joking, teasing and playful put-downs. Men will try not to end up in a "one-down" position in any conversation, which can sometimes be experienced as hostility.

Deborah Tannen makes the point that no one style or ritual is better. Problems will arise when styles differ and when rituals are not recognised. She does not suggest that women or men change their conversational styles or rituals, only that we recognise them and become more flexible.

Assertiveness

As we saw in Booklet 1, assertiveness means knowing your own mind and standing up for yourself, without imposing your views and opinions on others. It is more likely to lead to effective communications since it is another way of minimising "noise".

Body language

It's important to be aware of what messages your body is conveying. This awareness is part of being assertive.

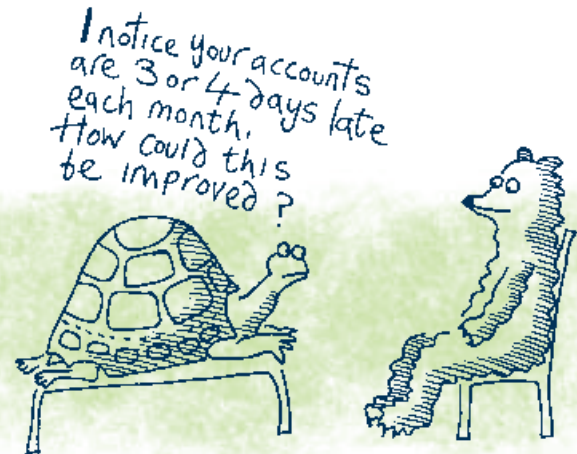|	DO ✔
Breathing	■ deepen your breathing and calm yourself prior to a confrontation
Posture	■ have an upright posture ■ make sure you are at the same level (i.e. both standing or both sitting)
Eyes	■ keep your gaze relaxed ■ maintain eye contact*
Mouth and Voice	■ relax your jaw ■ smile if it is appropriate to do so ■ speak clearly and slowly so you can be heard ■ watch the tone, inflection and volume of your voice
Gestures	■ use gestures that help you express what you want to say ■ make sure your body language is congruent with your words

* but note what was said earlier about eye contact in different cultures.

DON'T ✗

■ forget to breathe!

■ slouch
■ stand too near or too far away from the other person

■ avoid looking at the person you're speaking to

■ whine, shout or mumble
■ convey sarcasm through the tone of your voice

■ cover your mouth with your hand
■ play with hair or jewellery
■ put your hands on your hips or fold your arms
■ shift from one foot to the other

Giving criticism assertively

Being assertive can really help us in difficult situations such as giving or receiving criticism. Talking to a colleague about their unsatisfactory work is difficult, many of us shy away from it or let it build up until we make a remark which is angry or resentful. It's better to deal with the situation assertively. The first step is to check that your goal is clear in giving the criticism. It is not just an end in itself. The aim is to change some aspect of the way your colleague carries out their job. Let's take the example of a colleague whose job it is to bring you monthly accounts. He is never on time with them and you have to keep chasing him up. The aim is to get him to change his behaviour and to bring you the accounts on time.

I notice your accounts are 3 or 4 days late each month. How could this be improved?

1. **Rights:** You have some rights in this situation. You have the right to expect people to perform their work adequately. They have rights too. They have the right to expect you to behave in a way which doesn't put them down, attack them or make them look small. Their mistakes do not give you the right to behave aggressively.

2. **Be specific** about the change you want. Raise the problem at the time. Try not to let it build up. Choose a suitable time and place away from other colleagues: "Ted, I'd like to talk to you about the accounts".

3. **Talk about behaviour you can see.** Express your criticism in a factual form: "I notice your accounts are three or four days late each month". Don't make personal statements which could be seen as an attack such as "You're so sloppy" or "your attitude is too laid back …"

4. **Make sure you are speaking for yourself by using "I".** In this way you are speaking about your own feelings and perceptions, you are not attributing blame, you are being direct and honest and you will build better relationships with the other person.

5. **Get a response to your criticism.** This is about getting agreement. Ted might not agree. Use phrases such as "Do you agree?" or "Have you noticed this?" or "Is that the way you see it?" or "Why is this happening?"

6. **Ask for suggestions** to bring about the change you want. "How could you improve this situation? What changes can you/we make?"

7. **Summarize** the suggestions to be carried out: "So, we're agreed that in future you'll…"

Following these steps means you're more likely to get the change you want. You have been assertive and it's more likely that you'll get a response which isn't aggressive or passive from your colleague.

Receiving criticism

When receiving criticism it helps to behave in an assertive way as well. The following steps will enable you to take criticism without allowing it to become a personal attack and your response will be more considered and will help repair or maintain a good relationship with the other person. The first step is to work out whether the criticism is justified. It might be justified, unjustified or just a put-down. You may need to think for a minute before you reply.

■ If it's justified

For instance, you have arrived late too often. Whatever it is, you know it's true and it does apply to you. It helps to use negative assertion. Negative assertion means acknowledging the truth in what your critic is saying:

"Yes, I have been late quite a few times recently".
In doing this, you'll feel less defensive and more accepting of yourself.

■ If it's unjustified

You've received some criticism which is completely untrue. You could say "That's really not true" or "I don't accept that". But say it with conviction, without apologising. Make sure your body language expresses certainty, not doubt.

■ If you're not sure

There might be some truth in it, but it's an exaggeration. You could ask for more information: "You say I'm always late. Could you clarify when I have been late?" If the person is vague or incorrect, you might say "Well, I have been late twice this month (acknowledging the truth), but it's not true to say I'm always late."

Put-downs

If you're feeling put down by a remark, the assertive way to deal with it is to say that you feel put down, and what your reaction to it is. For example, you've been told in a jokey way that you have no sense of humour. You might say: "I find what you say hurtful" and add "I'd like you to stop".

Sometimes you only realise afterwards that something was a put-down. It's assertive to confront the person later in the same way as above. *A useful reference on everything to do with assertiveness is Anne Dickson's "A Woman In Your Own Right", Quartet 1982.*

My Rights

I have the right to be treated with respect as an intelligent, capable and equal human being

I have the right to express my feelings

I have the right to express my opinions and values

I have the right to say "yes" or "no" for myself

I have the right to make mistakes

I have the right to change my mind

I have the right to say I don't understand

I have the right to ask for what I want

I have the right to decline responsibility for other people's problems

And I know that other people have these rights too!

Re-framing

Re-framing is a way of restating what someone has said in order that the other party hears the message more clearly. It involves removing 'noise' (such as tone of voice, choice of words or mixed messages) from a communication. Re-framing can be used by mediators or colleagues to defuse charged emotions, to eliminate blame, accusations or insults or to identify common interests or common ground.

An example might be:

"If you carry on ignoring my instructions, you'll be sorry"

could be re-framed by a colleague as:

"you feel that agreed instructions should be followed by everybody"

or

"this lazybones has been late every day this week, I'm fed up with having to cope on my own"

could be re-framed by a colleague:

"You are upset that your colleague has been late every morning this week, leaving you to open up the shop on your own"

Re-framing is constructive when the goal is to empower the parties in a conflict, helping them to move towards a mutually acceptable solution. However, it is manipulative when the goal is to entrap the other person in your logic, exercising your power without respect for theirs. *For more details see the Signposting section.*

Participation

High levels of participation in a Community Enterprise can bring great advantages, since the enterprise will benefit from the wealth of skills, knowledge and experience of its members and clients. Encouraging participation can also bring problems – it's sometimes easier just to decide what to do yourself without going to the trouble of consulting others. However going it alone can end in tears, as others may question your right to decide for them. If you adopt some of the techniques suggested here, you can reap the benefits while avoiding the pitfalls and the Community Enterprise will grow as a result. High levels of participation will improve decision-making, increase motivation and improve team working and information sharing.

Participation means to take part, to be consulted or to be involved at some level in decision-making, goal-setting and planning. It can happen at various levels, and it is important that everyone understands in what way they are able to participate. It may be that clients or customers are consulted, which means that they will be asked their views, but will not take part in the ultimate decision-making.

Participation does not mean everyone getting involved in every decision – you'd never get any work done! It's better to devolve decision-making to sub-groups or individuals, who are then accountable to the manager (if there is one) or committee. Those sub-groups and individuals should be aware of the limits of their decision-making authority and how they will be held accountable, and should then be left to get on with it. There are some decisions which do need the agreement of everyone – decisions which affect everyone, for example, or those involving large sums of money or the effects of which will impact on the organisation for years to come.

We always hear about the rights of democracy, but the major responsibility of it is participation Wynton Marsalis

The Chair (or Facilitator) has an important role in ensuring everyone has an opportunity to participate in meetings. They should make it plain that everyone's contribution is welcome and should avoid stating their position before others have made their contribution. Participation can be encouraged in meetings by good planning and the use of a variety of tools. Some useful tools include:

- cotton bud/matchstick debate – everyone has a number of cotton buds or matchsticks and must place a cotton bud in the centre every time they speak. Once the cotton buds are used up, they may not speak again

- a spoons debate works in the same way – everyone has a bunch of spoons and must place a spoon down on the table in front of them every time they speak – you can then see who has spoken most/least and reflect on that after the meeting

- people raise their hand when they wish to speak, the chair watches out for the order in which people raise their hand and ensures that people get to speak in turn

- the famous talking stick/conch shell – you may only speak whilst you are holding it!

There are more ideas for increasing participation in meetings in a useful pamphlet by Seeds for Change – see the Signposting page.

During a strategic planning process, the opinions of everyone involved in the community enterprise could be collected through a questionnaire, analysed and organised by the management committee, then discussed during a strategy event – perhaps an away day for the whole team. Such an event should be led by an experienced facilitator and can result in everyone feeling engaged and motivated, generating excellent feedback for the development of the strategic plan for the next few years.

Evaluation of meetings can supply an opportunity for people to discuss how they feel about participation and raise everyone's awareness. Again, there are a range of tools available. One approach is to take a sheet of flip chart paper and draw a dartboard format, divided into sectors such as: decision-making/interest/organisation/refreshments or whatever it is you wish to evaluate. Nearest the middle of the dartboard is the highest score, while nearer the circumference is a lower score. Everyone puts a mark according to how satisfied they were with each element of the meeting.

For more techniques for evaluating meetings, see the Signposting page and the next booklet in this series, "Meetings and Decision Making".

Summary

Booklet Two outlined some basic communication concepts and looked at steps we can take to improve communication, including avoiding misunderstandings arising from cultural or gender differences. We discussed the importance of assertive behaviour for good communication and highlighted how the enterprise will benefit from maximum participation by members.

Booklet 3:

Meetings and Decision Making describes ways in which we can make our meetings more effective. Effective meetings are reasonably short and enjoyable, good decisions are taken and everyone comes away clear who's going to do what. We also look at a range of different decision-making methods and the implications of their use.

Signposting

Websites

to download a pdf copy of this booklet: **www.fromconflict2co-operation.uk.coop**

- W3C: **www.w3.org**
- Guide for telephone conferencing etiquette: **rentabridge.com/etiquette.htm**
- Further information on cultural difference and communication: **culture101.rice.edu**
- Further information on gender difference and communication: **www.georgetown.edu/faculty/tannend**
- Participation tools by Seeds for Change **trapese.clearerchannel.org/resources/**
- Meeting evaluation form **www.cooperantics.co.uk**
- Further information on re-framing **changingminds.org**

Books

- Deborah Tannen "Talking from 9 to 5: women and men at work – language, sex and power". Virago Press 1994
- Anne Dickson "A Woman In Your Own Right". Quartet 1982

www.uk.coop

Making Local Food Work (MLFW) is a Big Lottery funded partnership of seven organisations: Co-operatives UK, Campaign to Protect Rural England, Country Markets, FARMA, The Plunkett Foundation, Sustain and the Soil Association. MLFW is rooted in the belief that the needs of consumers, producers and the land are interdependent, and that community enterprise can renew and strengthen these links to the lasting benefit of all.

Community enterprises can be organised in a variety of ways – from an informal group getting together to purchase food in bulk, to a professional trading organisation – but they all involve people working together to achieve a common goal. Examples include farmers' markets, community owned pubs and shops, community energy projects and car pools. The way in which activities are organised and decisions made is called governance, and the group of people who come together to organise activity and make longer term decisions is called the Governing Body – or Management Committee or Board of Directors – according to the type of organisation.

CO-OPERATIVES UK

Co-operatives UK is the national trade body that campaigns for co-operation and works to promote, develop and unite co-operative enterprises. Co-operatives UK aims to bring together all those with a passion and interest in co-operative action.