

3

Communicating clearly

Situation

PSF is an international company operating worldwide. It has recently started a new project which will introduce a single standardised software package across its organisation, replacing the different softwares used by countries at the moment. Rachel is the project leader with Lucas and Gabriella in her team, supported by Eric, who is an external consultant.

The project team is making good progress. It now has a meeting to discuss customer support. Eric, the external consultant, is explaining to Rachel and her team via video conference his ideas of how customer support could be organised in the future.



Rachel



Lucas



Gabriella



Eric

A Introduction

DISCUSS

Look at the complaints which people often make about communication during meetings.

- a *During large telephone meetings, I'm never sure who's speaking.*
- b *It's difficult to know what people really think.*
- c *Those who can speak better English dominate more.*
- d *The technology is bad. You can't even hear what people are saying.*
- e *People multi-task – doing emails – during telephone meetings and don't pay attention.*

- 1 Which of these problems have you experienced?
- 2 Which do you think are most significant?
- 3 Which apply to a particular meeting situation?
- 4 What other problems have you experienced?

VIEW (0.40–1.48)

Watch Bob talking about virtual (telephone and video-based) meetings.

- 1 He says that communicating virtually puts 'pressure on communication'. What examples does he give?
- 2 What general advice does he give for effective communication?

REFLECT

Look at the tips below for communicating in meetings. Brainstorm more tips of your own.

Telephone conference calls

Announce your name before speaking.
Use the mute button on the phone when not speaking.

All meetings

Summarise and confirm any decisions explicitly to ensure people understand.
Speak slowly and clearly.

Video conferences

Keep strong eye contact with your camera to show engagement.
Keep your body language positive, especially if you are visible to the other participants.

B Customer support: communicating the message

VIEW (1.49–3.38)

Eric is meeting the rest of the team via a video conference link to present the new customer support system.

- 1 What does Eric present as the structure and main advantage of the new support system for dealing with customers' questions and problems?
- 2 What do Gabriella and Rachel see as a problem with what Eric says?

REFLECT

How many of your tips on virtual communication does the team use during the discussion? How effectively do you think the team communicates?

C What happened?

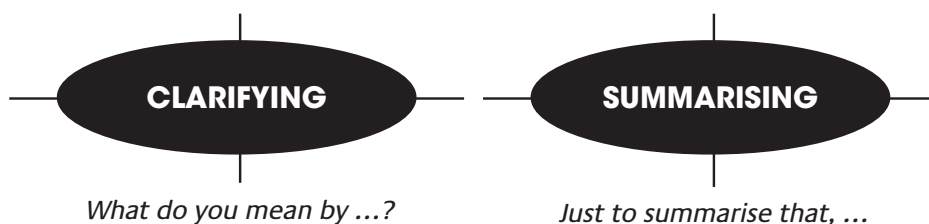
VIEW (3.39–5.10)

Listen to Bob's comments on the discussion and compare his opinions to yours.

- 1 What does he say is 'typical' about the way Gabriella responds in the meeting?
- 2 What does he say is 'common but also dangerous' about the way people may communicate in a video conference?

REFLECT

Bob talks about the need in this environment to spend more time 'clarifying and summarising' rather than assuming, like Gabriella does, that you know what people have said. Which phrases can you use as a listener to clarify and to summarise?



PRACTICE

Prepare a three-minute presentation to update others on what you did at work over the last month. Use the following structure:

- Main activities of the month
- Important challenges
- Challenges solved and challenges still open

Then, in small groups, give your short presentations. You should all sit back to back as you do this, to simulate a telephone conference call.

As the speaker:

- Try to speak slowly and clearly, keep messages short and simple.
- Summarise for your audience to help understanding.
- Give opportunities for the audience to clarify what you said.

As the audience:

- Clarify from time to time what the speaker is saying.

When the presentation is over, discuss how effectively presenter and audience communicated. Then change roles and repeat the exercise.

D Customer support: clarifying the message

DISCUSS

Getting your ideas across can be challenging when communicating across cultures. We can use certain techniques to make it easier for audiences to listen to and understand.

- 1 Look at the list of communication techniques below which can help you get your message across. Place the expressions in the box under the correct headings (a–d).

I'm delighted to say that ... I know this is very important for you, isn't it?

I'll just explain that a bit further. You'll be happy to know that ...

I'd like to emphasise that ... Would anyone like to add anything before I move on?

But I'll stop there. Does anyone have any comments or more questions? I realise that ...

- a Highlight key information – clarify and summarise

.....

- b Focus on positives – people stop listening if they hear things they don't like

.....

- c Show knowledge of others – people listen better if they feel understood by the speaker

.....

- d Giving the audience the chance to comment or clarify – dialogue is better than monologue

.....

- 2 Can you add more expressions of your own under each heading above? What other techniques and phrases can you use to help to get your message across effectively?

VIEW (5.11–6.24)

Now watch as Eric tries to get the meeting back on track by changing his approach.

- 1 Which of the above techniques does he use to try and communicate his message more effectively?
- 2 Look at the script and underline the phrases which Eric uses for each technique.
- 3 Can you find other techniques which he uses to make his message clear?

REFLECT

How far do you think Eric's techniques can be used – in all cultures or only in some cultural contexts? Why?

E Reflections

DISCUSS

You're going to watch Eric reflecting on his experiences of this virtual meeting and what he has learned. What do you think Eric will see as his most important learning points during his reflection?

VIEW (6.25–7.51)

Now listen to Eric's reflections after the meeting on what he has learned. Compare his learning points to yours.

- 1 What does Eric say you should never do?
- 2 What does Eric say he could have done to avoid misunderstanding?
- 3 At the end of his reflection, Eric identifies two basic reasons behind the communication problems in the meeting. What are they?

REFLECT

What do you think are the most important lessons we can learn about communicating virtually from Eric's experiences during the meeting?

F Conclusions

VIEW (7.52–9.46)

Watch Bob reflecting on what we can learn about communicating virtually from this meeting. Compare your learning points to his.

Main learning points

REFLECT

How useful do you think it could be for teams to discuss openly the challenges of team communication?

- 1 Agree together a list of 'rules' for meetings: how to communicate, what not to do, etc.
- 2 Are there any rules that are particularly important for virtual meetings?

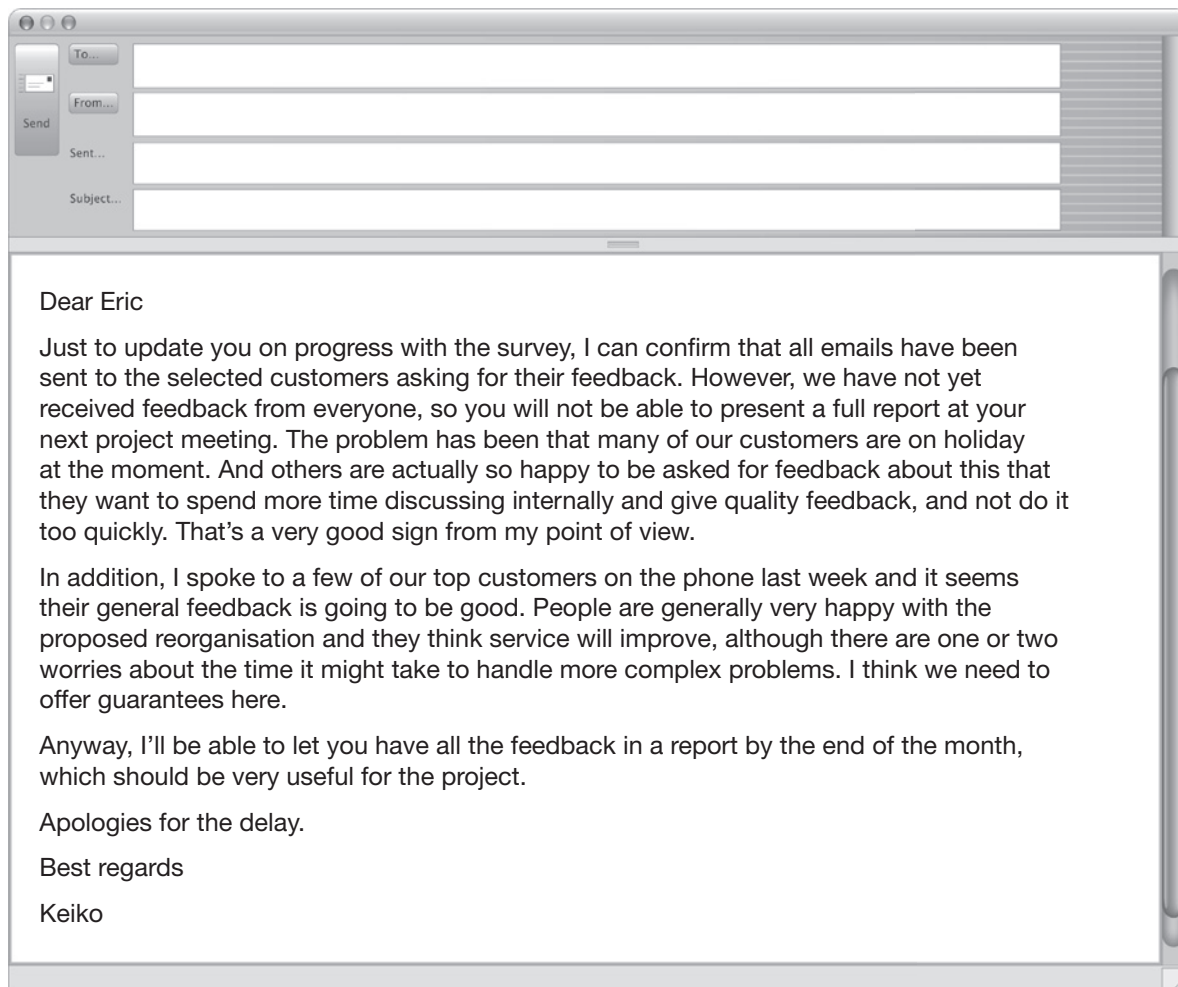
PRACTICE

You are Eric. You have to prepare a short briefing (maximum three minutes) that you will present to Rachel by telephone. Read through the situation below, which will help you to prepare your message. Try to integrate the clear communication principles you have just studied. When you are ready, find a partner and role play a telephone call with Rachel (stand back to back), give your briefing and handle any questions. After the call, discuss how effective the briefing was (was it clear, positive and professional?) and then change roles.

Situation

You have been given the task to set up a customer survey to get some first feedback on the proposed new customer service system. Rachel feels it is very important to involve customers during this design phase. You have to call Rachel and give her a briefing on the results.

As you were busy, you decided to delegate this work to a colleague, Keiko, who has written an email (see below) informing you that there will be a delay in collecting the customer feedback. This delay is not good news. Rachel wanted to have this customer feedback urgently to help the project, but her main concern is to know that customers are positive about the new service organisation.



The image shows a screenshot of an email client window. The window has a header bar with a 'Send' button and a 'Sent...' label. Below the header, there are fields for 'To...', 'From...', 'Sent...', and 'Subject...'. The main body of the email contains the following text:

Dear Eric

Just to update you on progress with the survey, I can confirm that all emails have been sent to the selected customers asking for their feedback. However, we have not yet received feedback from everyone, so you will not be able to present a full report at your next project meeting. The problem has been that many of our customers are on holiday at the moment. And others are actually so happy to be asked for feedback about this that they want to spend more time discussing internally and give quality feedback, and not do it too quickly. That's a very good sign from my point of view.

In addition, I spoke to a few of our top customers on the phone last week and it seems their general feedback is going to be good. People are generally very happy with the proposed reorganisation and they think service will improve, although there are one or two worries about the time it might take to handle more complex problems. I think we need to offer guarantees here.

Anyway, I'll be able to let you have all the feedback in a report by the end of the month, which should be very useful for the project.

Apologies for the delay.

Best regards

Keiko