

Who's on First

A Session Starter on Interpersonal Communication

With an introduction to Interpersonal Conflict by Dr. Frank Wagner

Leader's Guide



Film Synopsis

WHO'S ON FIRST, featuring Abbot and Costello, is the only comedy routine in the Baseball Hall of Fame. A "normal conversation" between Abbott and Costello about the starting lineup of the St.Louis Wolves baseball team becomes a classic case of reciprocal misunderstanding and demonstrates some of the inherent problems in effective communication.

Rationale

The first few minutes of a workshop session are critical to the participants. It is during this “ice-breaking’ period that the participants make such important decisions as: “Do I like the presenter?”; “Will this workshop be interesting?”; “Will I learn anything worthwhile from this workshop?” Once these evaluations have been made, strong forces will subsequently operate to make them come true, whether they are positive or negative. It is, of course, to the advantage of all present if these initial impressions are positive ones.

The film sequence, WHO’S ON FIRST, will do a remarkable job of starting a workshop off in a positive manner. When questioned recently by the Los Angeles Times on how humor has changed in our society over the last thirty years, Steve Allen replied, in part, “Certain things people laugh at today, they probably laughed at a million years ago. Young people laugh at Groucho Marx, Laurel & Hardy, W.C. Fields, and Charlie Chaplin just as I did.”

Fostering the conditions necessary for meaningful learning in the area of interpersonal communication is by no means easy. Most participants in communication workshops feel they are good communicators. They approach the workshop with the assumption they can communicate. The workshop is seen primarily as an opportunity to learn new techniques, or to polish up old ones, in order to enhance already effective communication skills. A unique benefit of using WHO’S ON FIRST as your session starter is the opportunity it provides for the audience to enjoy such loveable characters as Abbott and Costello, and yet, at the same time, deal with the potentially tough and threatening issue of their own competence as communicators. By identifying with the experiences of the characters they see on the screen, people will open themselves up to deeper, more meaningful, learning in the time available in the workshop, And, we bet they’ll have fun doing it!

HOW TO USE THIS FILM

1. Begin the session with a brief lecture on interpersonal communication. (See Below.)
2. Provide guidance, or things to look for, while watching the film.
3. Show the film.
4. Allow the audience to discuss their general understanding of interpersonal communication through Abbott and Costello's confrontation. (See "discussion Questions Following Film.")
5. Once participants have had an opportunity to present their own preconceptions about communication, introduce the goals of the workshop (e.g. fostering greater sensitivity to the causes of miscommunication; developing practical models to explain the processes underlying interpersonal communication; practicing effective strategies for managing communication processes; etc.) Then proceed with the workshop.

INTRODUCTION TO INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Interpersonal communication, the process whereby understanding is achieved between people, is extremely important for every human being. As social creatures, we have a genuine need to understand those around us and to have them, in turn, understand us. Achieving mutual understanding requires skill in both effective listening and effective communication.

The well-known semanticist and California State Senator, S.I. Hayakawa, once said: "Agreement is brought about by changing people's minds – other people's." We frequently approach the communication process with a win-lose mind set. As communicators, our goal becomes one of explaining ourselves clearly to an attentive listener. But how does one ensure that the listener is attentive? In effective communication, the speaker may have to focus on the listener's ability, and willingness, to listen rather than his/her own ability to articulate an intended message.

It goes without saying that communication is part of every activity in which a manager engages. And interpersonal communication is, of course, vitally important to any organization. The level and quality of communication in an organization contributes substantially to the achievement, or nonachievement, of organizational goals. Also, the character of the face-to-face communication determines the human quality of the organization. The proper management of interpersonal communication offers an opportunity for organizations to become more human by enhancing the quality of contact between people.

*This introduction serves only as an illustration of one way the subject of communication can be introduced. The leader, of course, may introduce the topic in any manner he/she wishes.

THINGS TO LOOK FOR

Before showing the film, it is important to give the audience a general framework and orientation for watching it. Without a proper introduction, the participants will tend to passively watch the film in their traditional role as a movie audience. The purpose of the introduction is to turn the workshop participants into active analysts of the film. In the introduction, the instructor may want to talk about one or more of the following facets of communication: the unintended aspects of communicated messages (the arc of distortion); how communication is made up of verbal and nonverbal components; the causes of ambiguous or mixed messages; semantics, where identical words have different meaning in different settings for different people.

It is vitally important to give the audience direction in their viewing of the film. The film is better utilized if the viewer is actively rather than passively, watching it. Before showing the film, the leader can introduce it in a manner something like this:

"To introduce you more fully to the topic of interpersonal communication, let's look at a classic film sequence from the past. While the film unfolds, watch closely the actual behavior and apparent strategies used by the principal characters. While watching the film, ask yourself the following questions:

1. What led up to the misunderstanding seen in the film?
2. Why did this lack of communication occur?
3. What communication and listening skills could Abbott and Costello have used to overcome the misunderstanding?"

At the most basic level, the first question is intended to highlight the point that people approach communication situations with a more or less customary set of assumptions about how to communicate. Abbott and Costello are no exceptions. The second question is intended to dig under the surface and explore the causes of miscommunication. The third question is intended to point out some of the skills involved in communicating effectively.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOLLOWING THE FILM

The leader may begin the discussion by asking, once more, the three questions asked prior to viewing the film. Or, the leader may choose to ask the more specific questions which follow. These specific questions may be asked immediately after the film is shown, or asked during the remainder of the workshop.

The misunderstanding and frustration depicted in the film is typical of face-to-face communication. Abbott and Costello serve as excellent role models for some of the common problems in the communication process. Abbott is the communicator (the sender of the message). In the film the message centers on the names of the players in the various positions on the St. Louis Wolves baseball team. Costello, on the other hand, is primarily a listener (the receiver of the message).

Questions About Abbott

1. How did Abbott, as the sender, contribute to the misunderstanding? Why?
2. What did Abbott do when he started to run into trouble with Costello's understanding of what he was trying to say? (e.g. he spoke louder, persisted in explaining, pointed his finger, told him to listen, tried to calm Costello down, shouted, used the phrase, "I'm telling you... etc.)
3. How often have we attempted to communicate like Abbott? Under what circumstances are we most likely to act like Abbott? (e.g. under stress or threat)
4. How can we act differently in situations where we are having trouble communicating? What are the risks? What are the payoffs? What skills can we employ to make the communication more effective?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOLLOWING THE FILM

Questions About Costello

1. How did Costello, as the receiver, contribute to the resulting misunderstanding? Why?
2. What did Costello do throughout the conversation? (e.g. tried to understand, repeated what Abbott said, asked questions, pointed his finger, shouted, showed his frustration nonverbally, at one point stated, "I don't even know what I'm talking about," concluded with "I don't care," etc.)
3. What were Costello's reasons for acting the way he did?
4. How have we acted when we've had trouble making sense of a conversation? Any differently?
5. How could Costello have acted to create a better outcome of his interaction with Abbott?

Line-up of St. Louis Wolves

Pitcher – Tomorrow
Catcher – Today
First Base – Who
Second Base – What
Third Base – I don't know
Short Stop – I don't care
Center Field – Because
Left Field – Why
Right Field - ?

Abbott (appearing in a baseball uniform)
Costello (appearing as a peanut and popcorn vendor)

Biographical Sketch

Dr. Frank Wagner received an MBA and Ph.D. from the University of California, Los Angeles, where he also served as a Post Doctoral Scholar for two years. Currently, Dr. Wagner teaches Organizational Behavior in the graduate program in business at Loyola Marymount University. He has published in various academic sources, such as the Academy of Management Journal and Psychological Reports. In the business community, he serves as a Senior Consultant with Human Systems Development, Inc. He is very active in management development in business and industry, and has been distinguished as the Teacher of the Year at Loyola Marymount University. Organizations in which Dr. Wagner has worked include: IBM, Southern California Edison, IACE (Mexico City), REPCO, and the Executive Program at the Graduate School of Management, UCLA.

Related Materials

Perception: The Tragedy of the Friendly Breakfast

This session starter gives the audience a brief look at the different ways people view the world around them. In the film, a fatal shot ruins an otherwise friendly breakfast, and three eyewitnesses offer three different perceptions of the tragedy.

Dealing With People

With this program, your people will learn the basics skills of good customer service. They'll learn that effective customer service is effective ONLY when the customer thinks it is! They'll learn that job satisfaction is an important by-product of giving good service. They'll be motivated to do a little bit extra when dealing with people.

Case Studies In Communication

A program presenting dramatized cases demonstrating common barriers to effective communication: (1) The way we see ourselves; (2) The way we see others. By understanding how our perceptions can become distorted we can improve our communication skills and facilitate communication in our organization.

Non-Verbal Communication

Non-verbal language, if we are aware of it, may tell us what people think before they say a single word. This program will help your audiences become more aware of the non-verbal messages others send and more conscious of their own. The program presents an easy and simple way to put non-verbal communication to work. By using this program, your audience will be able to communicate more effectively.