

Communicating in a Diverse World **©copyright by Robert (Bob) W. Lucas**

While there should be no undue attention drawn to someone because of their age or any other physical or mental attribute, it is important that everyone is aware of the needs of people with whom they are talking or interacting. Such cognition can help reduce frustration and increase effectiveness of communication.

As the population of the world ages, the chances increase that people with whom you communicate will have special needs in order to send and receive messages effectively. The following are two of the categories of people present in virtually any learning or workplace environment, along with some tips for effective communication.

People with Hearing Impairments

Delivering your messages to someone who has a hearing impairment in the workplace can be challenging and frustrating for both of you; however, as people grow older, they often sustain partial or complete hearing losses. For this reason, there is a likelihood that you may have to interact with someone who has trouble hearing what you say. Learners, co-workers, employees, customers and others who have hearing impairments often have special needs, but they also have certain abilities. Do not assume that because someone is hearing impaired that they are helpless. In interactions with such people, here are some things you can do to more effectively assist learning:

- Provide written information and instructions to supplement what you say, where appropriate and possible;
- Use pictures, objects, diagrams, or other such items to communicate more clearly;
- To get their attention, use nonverbal cues (e.g. waving or gesturing). Use facial expressions and gestures to emphasize key words or convey thoughts;
- Face the person directly and keep things from in front of your mouth when speaking;
- Enunciate your words and speak slowly to allow them to see your mouth form the words;
- Use short sentences and words;
- Check for understanding frequently through use of open-ended questions to which they must provide descriptive answers;
- Communicate in a well-lighted room when possible;
- Avoid backlighting that might cause them to be unable to see you clearly;
- Reduce background noise, if possible.

People with Vision Impairments

According to the National Eye Institute in Bethesda, Maryland (USA), there are approximately 3.5 to 5 million Americans with low vision, almost 1 million who are “legally blind” and another 220,000 who are totally blind. According to Lighthouse International, an advocate group for people with sight impairment, there are an

estimated 161 people worldwide with some form of sight impairment or loss. This means that if you stay involved with others, your chances of encountering someone with a vision impairment is pretty good. Just as with persons with hearing impairments, visually impaired people may need special assistance, but are not helpless. Depending on your situation, you can personally do things to assist people with vision disabilities. One thing to be aware of is that depending on the type of impairment, the person may have limited vision that can be maximized by certain actions on your part. Here are some strategies to use:

- Talk to a visually impaired person the same as you would anyone else;
- You do not have to raise your voice for the person to hear you better; the person is VISUALLY impaired. Additionally, do not feel embarrassed or change your vocabulary around them. It is okay to say things like, “Do you SEE my point?” or “Do you get the picture?”;
- Speak directly to the participant and not to their interpreter (if they have one);
- If the person uses a guide dog, do not pet, feed, or otherwise distract the animal without the owner’s awareness and permission. A guide dog is specially trained to perform specific functions and if you interfere, you could cause the dog to become confused and injury to the person could result;
- Speak to the person as he or she enters the room or approach so the person knows your location. Also, introduce others who are present or at least inform the visually impaired person of their presence;
- Ask how much sight he or she has and how you can best assist, if appropriate;
- Find ways to paraphrase or repeat information if necessary, without sounding condescending or impatient;
- Give very specific information and directions (e.g. “A chair is approximately ten feet ahead on your left”);
- If you are seating the person, face him or her away from bright lights that can obscure any limited vision he or she may have;
- When guiding someone who is blind, offer your arm. Do not take the person’s arm without permission since this could startle him or her or throw the person off balance. Let the person take your elbow and walk slightly behind you. Verbally communicate and guide them carefully;
- When helping a blind person to a chair, guide his or her hand to the back of the chair. Also, inform the person if the chair has arms to prevent him or her from being injured or overturning the chair by sitting on an arm;
- Leave doors that are nearby and will be used either completely closed or open. Partially open doors pose a danger to the sight impaired;
- Provide written materials with larger fonts, if necessary. Also, ensure that any computer monitors being used are adjusted to facilitate better viewing (e.g. contrast and color set appropriately and font size adjusted). Generally, someone who is sight impaired and uses a computer regularly can usually handle his or her own adjustments.

While these strategies will not resolve all communication breakdowns, they can help better prepare everyone involved for a potentially positive interaction.

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