

# "Feed Back" to Achieve Understanding

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Misunderstanding often arises when a speaker and a listener assume accurate communication has occurred without confirming that it has. Unfortunately, what is said & what is heard are not always the same. One tool to help ensure good communication is for the listener to "feed back" their understanding to the speaker. The following are suggestions of when and how to do this.

## ■ When to use "feed back" to ensure understanding:



- When you **sense** you do not fully understand what a speaker is saying, don't ignore those feelings. Listen to your questioning "inner voice" and **seek clarification**. Don't worry about appearing foolish for asking. Others probably feel the same way.
- When you hear a **general statement** that **implies assumptions**, make sure you agree upon those assumptions in order to understand the intent of what is being said.
- If a **specific example** is used that might **imply a broader category**, confirm other examples in order to make sure you understand the concept being communicated.
- In meetings, **summarize agreements**, especially action items, before adjourning.

## ■ The Paraphrasing Technique.

Paraphrasing to understand is not merely repeating what the other person said using different words. Paraphrasing reveals the listener's understanding of the speaker's comments and allows the speaker to determine if their message was clearly understood. Paraphrasing increases the accuracy of what is communicated and conveys the listeners interest in what is being said.

### • Example of merely repeating:

**Speaker:** Jim should never have become a teacher.

**Listener:** You mean, teaching isn't the right job for him?

**Speaker:** Exactly! Teaching is not the right job for him.

### • Example of clarifying intent:

**Speaker:** Jim should never have become a teacher.

**Listener:** You mean, that he doesn't like children?

**Speaker:** No, I mean he has such expensive taste, he can't earn enough as a teacher.

**Listener:** Oh, I see. You think he should be in a field that has higher salaries?

**Speaker:** Exactly! Teaching is not the right job for him.



## ■ Doing a Perception Check:

When a speaker expresses feelings, it is often useful to make sure you have "decoded" their expressions accurately. A perception check conveys the message, "I want to understand your feelings - is this (description of feeling) the way you feel?" A Perception Check does not express disapproval or approval. It merely conveys, "This is how I understand your feelings. Am I accurate?"

**Example:** "I think I understand how you feel. Am I right that you are disappointed that your recommendation wasn't discussed more?"

**Example:** "I'm not sure what you mean. Were you personally hurt by that comment or did you just feel it was an inappropriate remark?"



# Examples of Using “Feed Back” Techniques

## General Statement -- Clarify Assumptions

**Speaker:** I'd certainly like to have a copy of this report.

**Listener:** Do you think the report information is interesting? If so, maybe we should provide other association members with copies.

**Speaker:** I don't know about that. I just like the report layout and want a copy for my files.

*Or the response may be—(& you won't know unless you give “feed back”)*

**Speaker:** Yes. That's a great idea. I think others will appreciate it. In fact, we might want to have a presentation on the subject.

## Specific Statement -- May Imply A Broader Category, Clarify Before Assuming

**Speaker:** Can you bring 25 pencils to the meeting?

**Listener:** Do you want something members to write with? If so, I can bring pens.

**Speaker:** Great. Anything that will write will do.

*Or the response may be—(& you won't know unless you give “feed back”)*

**Speaker:** No. We need pencils to fill out computerized forms. If you don't have any, I will pick some up on the way to the meeting.

## Perception Check

**Comment:** You make me so mad when you do that!

**Response:** I'm not sure what you mean. Does my reading from your agenda bother you? Or are you annoyed because I forgot mine.

**Comment:** No, I'm happy to share my agenda with you. But I wish you wouldn't read it out loud. That distracts me from the meeting.

*Or the response may be—(& you won't know this unless you clarify.)*

**Fred:** Yes I am. When you forget your agenda and have to use mine, I feel like I am responsible for bringing copies for you.

## Summarize Agreements

**Chairperson:** So we agree that Fred will bring refreshments to the August meeting?

**Fred:** Yes I will. And Linda has agreed to help as well.

*Or the response may be—(& you won't know this unless you summarize agreements)*

**Fred:** I'm sorry, I thought I only volunteered to bring refreshments sometime in the future. I will be on vacation during the August meeting. We need someone else to volunteer for that one.

# An Exercise to Practice “Feed Back” Skills

1. Divide into groups of three people.
2. Person #1 makes a statement; Person #2 paraphrases it; Person #3 observes & comments.
3. Do this at least three times so each person gets a chance to play each role.

Information for this ToolTip has been modified from the *Community Leader's Guide* and & used by permission from the Institute for Extended Learning, Community Colleges of Spokane & Cooperative Extension, Washington State University.