

## ***IMPROVING YOUR COMMUNICATION BY USING THE ACKNOWLEDGE, EXPLORE, SUPPORT COMMUNICATION FRAMEWORK***

***Gord Unsworth, CPCC, M.Sc., O.T. Reg., (Ont.)***

### **What makes communication so important?**

Communication is an integral part of daily life, defining how we relate to others and how we create and maintain meaningful connections. Communication is important whether we are at work, at home, or in the community and is central to most of our interactions. Communication comes in many forms, including written, verbal and non-verbal.

Volume, tone and rate of speech also impact how messages are received. Individuals can be avoidant, aggressive, passive, passive-aggressive, or assertive in their communication style. How do you tend to communicate? What are your strengths as a communicator?

### **What are common pitfalls in how we communicate?**

A common tendency when we communicate with others is to fail to accurately and effectively acknowledge our conversation partner's experience by making quick assumptions and missing key details of their 'story.' We can easily become distracted by our own thoughts or focus on our past experiences with the person rather than attending to what is being shared in the present moment. Another human and well-intentioned tendency when someone is sharing distress or a challenge is to try to 'fix' the situation and to quickly slip into problem solving mode. In this state, people tend to give unwanted advice and to stop listening to the other person. In these instances, the sharer can feel discouraged, misunderstood, and ignored.

Overcoming these pitfalls can be achieved by using the Acknowledge, Explore, Support Communication Framework. This framework can be applied to any situation, whether it is to navigate tense moments or simply to enhance day-to-day interactions.

### **Acknowledge, Explore, Support Communication Framework**

When we are speaking with a person and they are sharing a goal, describing a difficult day, or requesting something of us, it is important to strive to acknowledge the person, explore what they are saying to better understand them, and then support what has been discussed.

#### *Acknowledge*

When someone takes the time to share information with us that is important to them, acknowledging them for sharing is crucial. Acknowledgment is to be used for positive, negative or neutral statements.

*Examples of Acknowledge statements include:*

- "Thanks for sharing that with me"

- “This seems really important to you”
- “I’m sorry that today has been difficult for you”
- “Thanks for all of the thought you put into this”

When we acknowledge the person for who they are and what they are sharing, we can positively impact the nature of our conversation.

### *Explore*

Often we can miss details of a story, make assumptions, or act on misconceptions when we speak with others. We only know a ‘part’ of the story. Email and texting are types of communication that are especially vulnerable to such misreading. When engaging in conversation it is therefore important to clarify understanding with the person and seek out additional details. Making time for intentional exploration assists you in getting the ‘right’ details while also validating the person you are speaking with.

*Examples of Explore statements include:*

- “Please tell me more”
- “What have you done in the past?”
- “What else do you want me to know about this?”
- “What else is on your mind?”

Acquiring more details and increasing your knowledge of the person’s perspective will equip you to support the person to move forward.

### *Support*

After a person has been acknowledged and has been able to express what is important to them, we are in a good position to support them to move forward. We have connected with the person by seeking to embrace and understand their experience and can now provide support that affirms their capability and empower them to imagine and create the path ahead.

*Examples of Support statements include:*

- “What is next for you?”
- “How can I support you with this?”
- “You’ve got this”
- “I’m looking forward to discussing this with you more the next time we speak”

When communicating or interacting with others it is important to remember to acknowledge and explore the person’s story before launching into support mode. Often as humans we have a tendency to lean into ‘support mode’ as we have a desire to help others; however, this tendency can result in the speaker feeling misunderstood or disempowered. By engaging in the Acknowledge, Explore, Support Communication Framework, the whole person and situation will be embraced, which will help all communication partners involved to connect in a meaningful and supportive way.

**What are your next steps?**

- Connect with a friend, family member or colleague to discuss this article and how you want to improve your communication?
- Organize a team meeting to discuss communication and how to improve?
- Receive or organize additional training in communication or managing conflict?

This article was inspired by my work in mental health. In particular “R” and “M” taught me more life lessons than any classroom has. This article is dedicated to them both in memoriam.