

# COMMUNICATION

## *The Art of Teaching*

Communication in teaching describes the interaction at the simplest level between two individuals: the instructor and the student. Additional people can complicate matters. An individual expresses himself/herself, listens to the response, and then interprets the response. Good communication is a learned skill.

### **Easily Recognizable Barriers To Good Communication**

- **Physical Appearance:** Physical appearance, which includes clothing and general appearance can promote effective communication or greatly inhibit effective communication. This can happen with an individual who is just dressed differently. Another example is uneasiness around people with disabilities. Many people have a difficult time feeling comfortable with someone in a wheelchair.
- **Technical Interference:** Technical interference or problems with the method of communication, such as a telephone, computer, or message board, versus direct face-to-face communication. The message can be distorted or even blocked if something breaks down in the communication chain.
- **Psychological:** Psychological barriers include personality conflicts and relationship problems between two or more individuals and can hamper effective communication. Poor responses by either individual in such situations often stem from preoccupation, hostility, defensiveness, or stereotyping. These conflicts can be a result of past experiences or from people having similar personalities.
- **Social:** Social barriers include economic, cultural, and ethnic differences that can all act as barriers to effective communication. Attempting to teach someone from a different social sphere can be difficult.

- **Semantics:** The use of a word or phrase in the same language with more than one definition or usage due to social or cultural differences can cause misunderstandings. Attempting to communicate effectively in different languages compounds the difficulties.
- **Value Differences:** Value differences are a result of different backgrounds and experiences of an individual. These value differences can cause different judgments of correct, good behavior, or politeness. Since value differences are not openly discussed, communication problems can easily occur. One example of this barrier in riding is how different individuals discipline horses and students.
- **Environmental:** This barrier to effective communication concerns the physical surroundings in which communication is occurring. Some things to consider in the environment are the size of the area to be used, the arrangement of students and the ability of the students to see and hear the comfort of the students, weather, and outside distractions and disturbances.

### **Good Communication Begins With the Observation of Nonverbal Body Language**

The instructor may learn many important points about a student by observing the student's unspoken language. Clothing and dress tells a lot about how the students views themselves. What individuals wear reflects self-image, economics, and ethnic background. Is the student properly dressed for riding? Or is the student overdressed? Meanwhile, where and how a student sits or stands during a lesson may indicate whether the student is tired, disinterested, withdrawn from the lesson, or very interested and eager.

- Head movements and facial expressions signal moods and emotions. These actions indicate agreement, interest, boredom, disgust, and disinterest. Some individuals nod affirmatively

or smile simply to indicate agreement with what is being taught, affirmation of an idea, or understanding of the topic.

- Eye contact, how and with whom, indicates the student's interest and level of acceptance of the instructor. Communicating "eye to eye" is a sign of respect and shows a positive desire to communicate. On the other hand, looking elsewhere, often down, may indicate disinterest. Eye contact interpretation is subject to racial and ethnic differences (e.g., in some societies it is considered impolite to make direct eye-to-eye contact).
- Posture and body position shows interest and indicates the level of openness in the conversation. Individuals wishing to speak privately will often stand face to face, close to each other. Turning away either with the head or whole body may show disinterest or even hostility. Meanwhile, an open-shouldered position facing the speaker shows a high level of openness and acceptance.

It is important to note that gestures and touching are culturally taught. What is acceptable can vary from individual to individual. Touching, especially in sympathy, or when a student is frightened, can strongly reinforce an individual's words and speech. Touching can also create fear or cause withdrawal. Since individuals unconsciously react to body language and signals, understanding body language is important for effective communication (Correct interpretation of a response to a touch is critical for instructors who use touch to communicate with students).

### **Some Techniques to Increase Effective Communication**

- Determine the listener. Gear conversation and information to the age and background of the student; speak to the age being taught; use understandable vocabulary and terminology. Creative ways of saying things will help fit the communication to the situation and the student.
- Express the same information in different ways. Using different words will often convey the meaning in a difficult situation. Explain things

differently to different students. Individuals have different learning styles. Presenting material in different ways according to learning style will help everyone learn.

- Summarize big blocks of information or break the information down into smaller sections of information. This is especially helpful for the review at the end of the lesson.
- Present information as clearly as possible. Eliminate nonessential points, words, and phrases. Simplify the information as much as possible so students do not get lost in the instructions. Use key words throughout the lesson. This is very important for young students or students with one or more disabilities.
- Be aware of the students' verbal and nonverbal feedback. This improves the effectiveness of the lesson and communication.
- Focus total attention on the student who is attempting to communicate. Focusing is intense and not always easy to do, but is important when working with horses. To ride a horse and not focus on the horse is to invite disaster. Learn to focus attention on students that are actively listening and on students who are speaking. If the student is small, get down to the student's level to make better eye contact.
- Program administrators need to inform the riding instructor of students with disabilities who may require communication modifications.

Failure to convey this information to the instructor could create a safety hazard. The instructor can talk privately with the student to find out what methods of communication work best for the student.

Communication may improve with awareness and planning and by evaluation of the student's feedback from each lesson. Part of effective communication is speaking well, clearly, easily, and simply. When needed, practice lessons beforehand with a mirror, video camera, or in front of a mock student in order to present the material smoothly and effectively. Always strive to improve communication skills.